
EFL Students' Difficulties on Using Subject-Verb Agreement

Amara Aulia Putri

English Education Study Program, Department of Language and Art
University of Bengkulu

putriamara468@gmail.com

Erni Sukesi

English Education Study Program, Department of Language and Art
University of Bengkulu

ernidarsono1915@gmail.com

Zahrida

English Education Study Program, Department of Language and Art
University of Bengkulu

zahrida@yahoo.com

Corresponding email: putriamara468@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the common subject-verb agreement difficulties that students encounter in the English Education Study Program at the University of Bengkulu. This study adopted a qualitative methodology. The population was the sixth semester of the 2022/2023 a English Education Study Program. The sample of this study was 33 students consisting of 11 males and 22 females. Data collection was done through validated and reliable tests consisting of 30 items representing 6 subject-verb agreements; full verbs, linking verbs, modals, auxiliary be, auxiliary have, and auxiliary do. Furthermore, this study used simple statistics (percentage and average) to analyze the data. In accordance to the study's findings, the majority of learners have struggles using subject-verb agreements. Found 540 obstacles in the test. The students' own difficulties were difficulties using Full Verbs (18%), Linking Verbs (21.5%), Modals (23%), Auxiliary be (16.5%), Auxiliary have (14%), and Auxiliary do (7%). Modal becomes the dominant difficulty for students. It was possible that students have difficulty understanding patterns in modals and did not know the term modals themselves. Moreover, students also could not identify the subject and verb in the sentence, lacked vocabulary, did not practice often, and did not recheck wrong answers. This result suggests that an appropriate method is still needed to improve understanding with subject-verb agreement.

Keywords: Students' difficulties, subject-verb agreement

Introduction

Grammar is an essential part of learning English. Rifiyanti & Dewi (2022) argue that grammar in English is concerned with the structuring of words and sentences to

produce a meaning. This will apply to all learned language competencies, including reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Students must in order comprehend and apply English in order to improve the skills (Febriyanti, 2019). Grammar is also known as structure. Different languages have different structures. Language learners may struggle to understand the systems of the target language due to variations in grammar (Setiyadi, 2020). For instance, language learners who possess a mother tongue without tenses may find it difficult to master tenses in a new language. Most Indonesians find English difficult since the Indonesian language lacks tenses, which English does. Many non-English speaking nations teach English as the main foreign language, and in many of these nations, studying and evaluating English grammar is seen as a significant component of English education (Pandapatan, 2020).

One of grammar's rules is the subject-verb agreement rule. This is essential knowledge for everyone studying English. The subject and verb must concur in order for there to be subject-verb agreement. Yule (2006) defines the subject of a sentence as the first noun or pronoun identifying who or what is performing an activity conveyed by the verb. Then refers a verb that indicates something about the sentence's subject and expresses actions, occurrences, or states of being (Hudson, 1999). Agreement implies suitability or compatibility. In English, the term "subject-verb agreement" define to a subject and verb combine to make a statement accurate. A subject-verb agreement, defined by Susfenti (2020), is an agreement among the subject and the verb. Similar to this, following Henry's definition of subject-verb agreement (2017), subjects and verbs must constantly concur on the number. A verb can change its form not only to express time, but also to indicate the number of subjects it possesses.

Additionally, when the plural/singular idea is utilized, the subject-verb agreement relates to the unity of subject and verb. Singular subject indicates that the verb is singular. Then, if plural subject indicates that the verb is plural (Azar, 2002). Thus, it is necessary to master the singular/plural, master the subject, and master the verbs in order to form a good subject-verb agreement. It implies that the subject determines how the verb takes on a different form in a phrase. A subject-verb agreement requires that the subject and the verb concur. As stated by Kurniawan and Seprizanna (2016), depending on whether the subject is singular or plural, a verb will either be singular or plural.

Grammar is given an abundance of significance in the University of Bengkulu's Department of English Education. It is therefore taught throughout the course of three semesters in parts (Bengkulu University, 2019). These five classes are: Structure 1, Structure 2, Structure 3, Morphology, and Syntax. Students take more advanced grammar courses each semester to develop their grammatical skills. To declare a major, students must pass each of the five grammar courses. Before enrolling in the next Structure class (Structure 1-3), students must pass the prior session with at least a score of D. At the finish of the course, students must have a TOEFL score of 400.

However, based on the results of observations, researchers discovered students who made grammar errors. Students are still confused when identifying subjects and verbs in a sentence and they frequently make tenses blunders. Students make mistakes even when they comprehend modals and singular/plural forms. This fact is supported by the final grades of each course and the interviews with lecturers. From the results of the interviews, the students' grammatical abilities are still poor, despite having been provided with the content being taught. At the university level, students frequently make grammar mistakes because they lack vocabulary and do not grasp patterns (Alahmadi, 2019; Mahdalena, Rosdiana, & Qamariah, 2020). Therefore, researchers recruited sixth-semester English education students as a sample in this study.

Recently, students with good vocabulary and sentence patterns might use subject-verb rules to produce coherent sentences. Moreover, subject-verb agreement is a concept that applies the plural/singular concepts to the agreement among the subject and the verb. Meanwhile, students in Indonesia are not cautious while utilizing subject-verb agreements, and some students do not recognize patterns in sentence construction; this problem inhibits students' performance in developing the usage of subject-verb agreements (Tampubolon, 2020; Kurniawan & Firdaus, 2020). In other words, issues with subject-verb agreement are created by students. Some students continue to use subject-verb agreements carelessly, struggle to understand the patterns in subject-verb agreements, and have not practiced establishing the correct agreement patterns (Stapa & Izahar, 2010).

Several previous studies have discussed the subject verb agreement such as the study by Hidayatullah, Syahrial, Hati (2017) with the title "Subject-Verb Agreement Errors Made by Sixth Semester English Education Students". The results showed that students were still low in understanding the use of subject-verb

suitability, its errors were omission (49 %), addition (25 %) and misinformation (26 %). Another result shows that there were 2 possible causes of subject-verb agreement errors in this research. They were interlingual errors (2 %) and intralingual & developmental errors (98 %). Meanwhile, the study Alahmadi (2019) entitled "A study of grammatical errors of subject verb agreement in writing made by Saudi learners". The grammatical errors related to subject-verb agreement in writing were identified and classified into three main categories according to their consistency

This research is a continuation of previous research. Where this study focuses on finding students' difficulties in using subject-verb agreements based on Eastwood's theory (2002). There are 6 forms of verb agreement recorded by Eastwood (2002); Full verbs, Linking verbs, Modals, Auxiliary be, Auxiliary have, and Auxiliary do. Therefore, the main goal of this study is to determine students' subject-verb agreement and dominance difficulties.

Researchers curious in conducting research on subject-verb agreements based on the sentence above the following were the study's research questions: 1) What are the students' difficulties on using of the subject-verb agreement by the 6th semester students of English Education Study Program at Bengkulu University? 2) What is the most dominant difficulty on using the subject verb agreement by the 6th semester students of English Education Study Program at Bengkulu University? Therefore, the objective of this study were 1) To reveal students' difficulties on using of the subject-verb agreement by the 6th semester students of English Education Study Program at Bengkulu University. 2) To find out the most dominant difficulty in using the subject verb agreement by the 6th semester students of English Education Study Program at Bengkulu University.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative design. One way to study qualitative research is to consider using research, which can be accurate or constant, depending on the expert and the context and objectives of the project (Leavy, 2014). The use of the qualitative method allowed researchers to better describe the study's data. Students in the sixth semester of Bengkulu University's English Education Study Program were analyzed, and the results were given along with the prevailing difficulty in subject-verb agreement.

Students of Bengkulu University's sixth-semester English Education Study Program for the 2023 academic year made up the population for this study.

According to the attendance list for the 2022–2023 academic year, there were 110 students enrolled in the sixth semester, divided among three classes (class A had 33 students, class B had 39, and class C had 38). Cluster sampling, which falls under the category of probability sampling, was the sample method employed in this study. Based on the results of observations made by the researchers, this class has the highest average score in the Grammar 1, 2, and 3 courses as well as the syntax and morphology course. Therefore it was better to take all of the subjects if the subject was less than 100. But if there are more than 100 subjects, the researcher can take 10% - 15% or 20% - 25% or more (Arikunto, 2010). Among 33 students was representative the sample.

The subject-verb agreement test was the instrument to be used for this research. This test consists of 30 multiple-choice questions. This test was modified from Cliffs TOEFL by Pyle and Page (2005). There were two portions on this test: multiple choice and multiple choice with error recognition. On the basis of subject-verb agreement, this test has been divided into six categories. Before using the instrument on the actual sample in this investigation, researchers tested it on a sample. Validity, reliability, difficulty level of the questions, and timeliness of the tryout results were all considered by the researcher. The researchers monitored the test process, which lasted 25 minutes. Microsoft Excel was used to calculate the data.

For validity, reliability, and difficulty level, researchers use statistics with the formula from Ananda & Fadhli (2018). The researcher used the product moment with r table (0.497) statistical correlation calculation with a 5% level of significance for verifying the instrument. That means 30 of the questions have been validity. Consequently, r count = 0.730 and r table = 0.497 for reliability. The test instrument is deemed dependable when the r counts exceed the r table. After that, for the level of difficulty the researcher used the criteria from Arikunto (2010): Hard, Medium, and Easy. Therefore, the difficulty level of the questions was obtained with 6 questions in the easy category, 14 questions in the medium category, and 10 questions in the hard category.

After gathering student responses, the researchers evaluated every single one by verifying, classifying, and interpreting all of the information (Leavy 2014). The initial stage in data analysis was checking all of the students' responses to the subject-verb agreement test. To analyze student test results, the wrong response was assigned a 0 and the correct answer was assigned a 1. The second step was to explain and

calculate the student's test results. The final stage was to sort all of the data into several groups. The researcher employs the theories of Eastwood (2002) and Freeman and Murcia (1999) in classifying the categories of challenges.

The researchers used the percentage of formula from Sugiyono (2013) to count the amount of percentages for each category as follows:

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

Where:

P = Percentage

F = Frequency of each category

N = Number of obstacles

Findings and Discussion

Findings

This section has been divided into two sections. First, it revealed the outcomes of students' difficulties with the subject-verb agreement. Second, it found the dominant difficulty with the subject-verb agreement. A large percentage of sixth semester learners had inadequate subject-verb agreement skills, as was found after examining the data. The data results are as follows

Table 1. The Results of Students Test

Range	Criteria	Frequency	Percentage (%)
80 – 100	Excellent	-	-
66 – 79	Good	-	-
56 – 65	Fair	5	15%
40 – 55	Low	26	79%
< 30 – 39	Failed	2	6%

Based on the data in the table above, 79% of students have low ability, 15% have fair ability, and 6% have failed ability. Therefore, it can be said that most students have difficulties with subject-verb agreement. The data results are as follows:

Students' Difficulties on Using Subject-Verb Agreement

The data were gathered and analyzed to identify six kinds of subject-verb agreement difficulties. There are full verb difficulty, linking verb difficulty, modal

difficulty, auxiliary be difficulty, auxiliary have difficulty, and auxiliary do difficulty. In this research, the researchers discovered 540 obstacles. The following table provides comprehensive details on a variety for subject-verb agreement difficulties:

Table 2. Students' Difficulties on Using Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-Verb Agreement	Number of items	Frequency of error	Percentage of error (%)
Full Verbs	5	97	18%
Linking Verbs	5	116	21.5%
Modals	5	122	23%
Auxiliary be	5	89	16.5%
Auxiliary have	5	77	14%
Auxiliary do	5	39	7%
Total	30	540	100%

Based on the table above, 18% of students have difficulty with full verbs, 21.5% have difficulty with linking verbs, 23% have difficulty with modals, 16.5% have difficulty with Auxiliary be, 14% have difficulty with Auxiliary have, and 7% have difficulty with Auxiliary do. Furthermore, 540 obstacles were discovered in the present study. In other words, students remain to make errors in subject-verb agreement, implying that they are still struggling with subject-verb agreement.

Dominant Difficulty on Using Subject-Verb Agreement

Based to table 2, the majority of students make errors in Modals, with an error frequency of 122 and an average of 23%. It indicates that this frequency was higher than the other subject-verb agreement frequencies. It seems obvious that comprehending Modals Auxiliary was most difficult component in applying subject-verb agreement.

Students made lots of errors in Modal Auxiliary. That means students have the most difficulty with Modal Auxiliaries. It was possible that students did not understand the pattern of modals and the rules for modal forms. As was known modal has many forms. The possibility of differences in sentence patterns in Indonesian and English sentences caused students to get confused when using English sentences. Based to the findings of the testing, students' difficulties might be attributed to a lack of knowledge regarding modals and modal patterns. Furthermore, the significance of vocabulary mastery can assist students in examining and identifying the subject and verb in a phrase. Error can be reduced in this manner.

Discussion

Based on the test findings, a lot of students had difficulties answering the subject-verb agreement question. The research findings were discussed in this article. Researchers determine and calculate the average a percentage for each difficulty. In accordance with the test findings, 79% of sixth semester students have poor subject-verb agreement abilities. The researcher recruited 33 sixth-semester students from the University of Bengkulu's English Education Study Program. Then, the researchers found that 540 obstacles with 18% of students had difficulty in full verbs, 21.5% of students had difficulty in linking verbs, 23% of students had difficulty in modals, 16.5% of students had difficulty in auxiliary be, 14% of students had difficulty in auxiliary have, and 7% of students had difficulty in auxiliary do. In this study, all difficulties based on the 6 aspects of using Subject-Verb Agreement based on Eastwood (2002) were found. Students made lots of errors in modals.

Initially, it was known that the most dominant difficulty in using subject-verb agreement was Modals with 23%. Students made lots of errors in Modal Auxiliary. That means students have the most difficulty with Modal Auxiliaries. It was possible that students did not understand the pattern of modals and the rules for modal forms. As was known modal has many forms. This finding is supported by Freeman's (1999) theory that modal difficulties occur in EFL students because modals have many forms. Students do not have sufficient knowledge to distinguish them. Three basic rules according to Freeman's theory (1999) to begin, never use the s/es ending. Second, whether present or past, a modal auxiliary always employed the base form of the primary verb or auxiliary after a modal auxiliary. The last, modal auxiliary, is used with the negative, not, which always comes after the modal auxiliary, even if other auxiliary be or have is present. It means that the concept of learning modals structure is applied to subjects in the third person singular.

Otherwise, this finding contrasted with Eastwood's theory (2002) where modals are simple patterns and tend to be easy for students to understand. It can be seen that the pattern of modals is subject + modal + verb 1. Modals can be used for expressing necessity. It can be used for expressing preference. It can be used as a guide showing abilities. However, this study found that the modal Auxiliaries offered the most difficulties in subject-verb agreement. That means most likely students did not understand modals and did not know patterns in modals.

Afterwards, students' difficulties with linking verbs indicated that there was a possibility that students did not understand the concept of linking verbs. Basically, there are three forms of linking verbs: the verb of being, the verb of being, and the verb of sensation. Researchers only used the linking verb *be*. In nominal sentences are sentences that use *To Be*. A lot of errors have been discovered in linking verbs. Because the subject was a pronoun, students had difficulty identifying it in the phrase. Hence, to get the right verb was also difficult because it has to be adjusted to *be*. This finding was similar to the findings of Mahdalena (2020), the difficulty in "*be*" verbs was because students did not master indefinite pronouns, collective nouns, and compound subjects as subjects in sentences. Rifiyanti & Dewi finding (2022) were also similar to these findings, students did not master the singular/plural concept of "*be*" verbs, changing the subject to an indefinite pronoun, collective noun, and compound subject was used as a distraction. Thus, it made students difficult to use "*be*" as a main verb.

Next, students' difficulties with full verbs indicate that there was a possibility that students did not understand the determination of the ending *-s/es* in verbs. The subject and verb matched in subject-verb agreement concept. A singular verb follows a singular subject; a plural subject follows a plural verb. If a verb is single in full verbs, the suffix *-s/es* has been added to the verb; if a verb is plural, there is no suffix. The results of the difficulty of full verbs were indeed unsatisfactory. This finding was supported by the findings of Rifiyanti & Dewi (2022) who stated that students did not understand the concept of singular and plural forms in the present tense, and an error occurred at the *-s/es* verb ending. The reason why mistakes can occur was that students did not read the material and did not want to practice. Hence, students find it difficult if students encounter sentences that have the verb ending *-s/es*.

Subsequently, the possibility of students' difficulties in auxiliary *be*. It's the same with linking verbs, students make lots of errors in auxiliary *be*. The errors found in auxiliary *be* quite a lot. Students have difficulty determining *to be* (*am, is, are*) as a verb in a sentence if the subject changes. It indicates that students have difficulty in auxiliary *be*. This finding was similar with the Pandapatan (2020), that difficulties in using *Be Verbs* were caused by limited vocabulary and not understanding the pattern of the *Be Verbs* themselves. Even that it was cause difficulties in understanding the *Be Verbs* in the subject agreement.

Likewise, this finding was supported by Mahdalena's previous research (2020), due to their inability to distinguish among subject and verb in a phrase, students continued to make plenty of errors in Be Verbs. Additionally, students continued to demonstrate poor comprehension of singular and plural forms. Moreover, students lack vocabulary mastery and did not practice when they were no longer on campus. This finding agrees with Febriyanti (2019), because they did not practice of subject-verb agreement questions and did not double-check their incorrect responses, they did not comprehend of subject-verb agreement. As a result, this contributes to the students' poor subject-verb agreement abilities.

Then, the possibility of student difficulties in auxiliary have. The errors found in the use of has or have are quite small. Thus, it allowed students' difficulties in using has or have not much. This finding is similar to the findings of Rifiyanti & Dewi (2022) students experience difficulties in using has or have with the main verb. Students were unable to recognize the concept of the form of the assisting verb that has agreed with both the singular and plural subject. Based on the results of interview students, the reason students were unable that students vocabulary was limited. Thus, it was made difficult to using have or has as a main verb.

The last finding was the possibility of student difficulties in auxiliary do. The errors found in auxiliary do were few. That means the difficulty of using do or does was slight. Students can choose the appropriate verb with ease. This demonstrated that the students' comprehension of the material was in substantial agreement with Auxiliary Do. The verb do/does was already recognized in a phrase as the form of the contract between the subject and the auxiliary do. In addition, even if students properly complete the multiple-choice questions, the singular/plural form is not difficult to comprehend.

Furthermore, based on the theory from Eastwood (2002) the pattern in Auxiliary Do is easy to understand because the auxiliary verb "do" can be used to emphasize feelings or the verb in front of it. This finding also aligns with Elis' theory (1986) that the difference in how to use Do and Does lies in the subject matter. I, You, They, and We were employed in the first, second, and third person plural forms of the verb do. While the third person singular subject and noun, namely He, She, It, use Does. Besides, does was also used in sentences that use people's names.

33 sixth-semester Bengkulu University English Education Study Program students were found to have difficulties with Full Verbs, Linking Verbs, Modals, Auxiliary be,

Auxiliary have, and Auxiliary do after classifying student grades. Additionally, there was a possibility that students lack vocabulary, did not understand singular/plural concepts, cannot identify subjects and verbs in sentences, lack knowledge of subject-verb agreement patterns, did not practice, and did not double-check wrong answers.

Conclusion

It would be reasonable to draw the conclusion that learners at the University of Bengkulu encountered difficulties with subject-verb agreements during the sixth semester of the English Education Study Program based on the data and a discussion. A significant amount of learners still struggle to identify the patterns in subject-verb agreement. Then, the researcher found 540 obstacles. These difficulties were found in Full Verbs (18%), Liaison Verbs (21.5%), Modals (23%), Auxiliary be (16.5%), Auxiliary have (14%), and Auxiliary do (7%).

Moreover, from the test results it can be seen that the dominant difficulty was in modals with an error frequency (122) with an average of 23%. Almost every sixth-semester student of Bengkulu University's English Education has not been able to answer questions correctly because students did not understand patterns in modals and did not understand material about modals. The existence of different patterns in English sentences and Indonesian sentences made it difficult for Indonesian students to write sentences in a foreign language. Furthermore, the reason was that students were unable to identify subjects and verbs, have limited vocabulary, did not practice, and did not check wrong answers.

Limitation

The study's limitations include the fact that it is unknown what subject-verb agreement difficulties students have. The English Education Study Program students at the University of Bengkulu's sixth semester were the focus of the researcher's study, which was solely focused on the analysis of student difficulties and the most prevalent difficulty.

Suggestions

Considering the findings, the following recommendations should prove helpful to lecturers, students, and other researchers; 1) Lecturers must be able to create more effective teaching strategies for the subject-verb agreement material. Additionally, Lecturers are obliged to assist and encourage students as they learn, particularly when it comes to subject-verb agreements; 2) Students must be given high motivation in learning English, especially in mastering grammar, students master patterns in subject-verb agreements such as full verbs, linking verbs, modals, and auxiliary (be, have, do) so that it is easier to apply them in sentences. Furthermore, students must understand the difference between the plural and the singular as a basis for agreement and students must increase their vocabulary; 3) For future research, this study is concentrated on how students use subject-verb agreements. Other features were not described in the study's findings. Therefore, it is advisable to explain the subject-verb agreement in another way. The researcher hopes that further researchers can develop this research by conducting research on subject-verb agreements in other ways because subject-verb agreements can help students to understand and determine subject-verb agreements.

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