

A STUDY OF GRAMMATICAL ERRORS OF SUBJECT VERB AGREEMENT IN WRITING MADE BY SAUDI LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigates and classifies grammatical errors with subject-verb agreement in writing made by Saudi students in the foundation year at Taibah University. The students were enrolled in an English language course where they were studying English as a core module. The class was divided into two modules: reading and writing, and listening and speaking. The data was collected throughout the second semester, where students (intermediate-upper intermediate level), were asked to write eight different paragraphs on eight different topics taken from the reading and writing book. The grammatical errors related to subject-verb agreement in writing were identified and classified into three main categories according to their consistency. These errors are mainly categorised as: (a) subject-verb agreement errors with singular subjects (b) subject-verb agreement errors with plural subjects, and (c) subject-verb agreement errors where the main verb or auxiliary verb is compounded with or separated from the subject. The study found that subject-verb agreement errors with singular subjects appear to be more frequent and the most committed among these three categories in students' writing.*

KEYWORDS: grammatical errors, Saudi learners, subject-verb agreement-writing skills.

INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of grammar has become one of the most significant areas in language learning. Grammatical errors of learners' language have also become the centre of attention in the field of second language acquisition, (Braid, 1999). More precisely, in the context of (ESL) 'English as a second language', the acquisition of grammar has become an issue in the field, as many studies have been conducted in order to investigate errors in learners' production of the new language, as well as the link between those errors and the standards of English language learning and teaching, which has been expansively examined.

As a matter of fact, errors committed by (ESL/EFL) 'English as a foreign language' learners show the true state of second language learners' proficiency in the new language they are learning at a particular point of time. Moreover, these errors also reveal what the second language (L2) learners do not know and what they have acquired in the new language system (Stapa and Izahar, 2010).

However, since the 1970s, research has been conducted in bulk in the field of L2 acquisition in general, and L2 acquisition of grammar in particular. A vast range of

research has considered a number of L2 structures produced by the learners. The primary focus of these studies has been on the areas of difficulty and the areas of ease in the L2 that learners acquire. Also, research has attempted to provide an explanation of how and why grammatical structures are learnt, and how complex the grammatical structure of the L2 is to learners.

The term ‘grammar’ is always assigned with different levels of language structure, such as syntax, semantics, phonology and morphology. It is defined by Braidı (1999) as ‘a description of the structure of a language and the way in which linguistic units such as words and phrases are combined to produce sentences in the language. It usually takes into account the meaning and the functions these sentences have in the overall system of the language’ (p. 2).

One of these grammatical rules that fits under the domain of syntax in the language system, and which is considered an area of difficulty to L2 learners, is the rule of subject-verb agreement. The term ‘subject-verb agreement’ (SVA) refers to the rules of grammar in English where the subject usually agrees or matches with the verb (or verbs) used in a sentence. In reference to this grammatical rule, subject-verb agreement means that the subject and the verb must agree in case and in number in the same sentence. When a singular noun is used as a subject, a verb that is conjugated to match singular nouns must be used; when a plural noun is used as a subject, a verb that is conjugated to match plural nouns must be used as well.

The present study is an attempt to investigate this specific kind of error that Saudi learners commit in writing, with some implications for (ELT) ‘English language teachers’ and practitioners. This research was conducted with specific purposes of finding out the difficulties in the use of SVA in writing with a broad scope of the following:

- To examine the different types of errors that Saudi learners make in their academic writing, in particular to errors of subject-verb agreement.
- To provide some remedial action that can be taken in order to overcome the learners’ difficulties in applying this rule, as well as to provide some useful suggestions to improve learners’ writing performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the educational system of Saudi Arabia, English is taught as a compulsory subject from the elementary stage and right through the end of high school. Moreover, Saudi students have to enter a foundation year at university and study academic English language as a core module in this initial academic year. Although the English language is given priority among other subjects throughout the different stages in the education system, students’ English language proficiency is still an area of concern (Alharbi, 2015). Saudi learners are assessed differently through each educational level, although the four skills ‘reading, writing, listening, and speaking’ are assessed equally through

examinations; productive skills, such as speaking and writing, are considered challenging for learners to attempt to perform and produce.

Learners' achievement and performance are assessed through productive skills, such as writing and speaking. However, learners' work is usually assessed by how correct the grammar they use is, for example, without accurate grammar and correct sentence structure, as at all levels, including beginner, where basic grammar and sentence structure is still a challenge to produce, these two skills can be difficult to assessed or evaluated. In EFL contexts, many studies have been conducted in order to find out the grammatical problems that L2 learners have in their academic writing. Warden, Chen and Reynolds (2000) discussed common errors that students in Taiwan committed as they wrote business texts, such as application letters, letters of inquiry, and response letters, and they found out that grammatical errors with verbs, nouns and subject-verb agreement were among these errors.

Moreover, Saadiyah and Kaladevi (2009) in their investigation of students' written work found out that errors with subject-verb agreement were among the common mistakes made. They state that investigating grammatical errors will help not only Malaysian teachers but also ESL teachers to recognise the importance of errors as one of the challenging areas in their teaching practice.

Also, Stapa and Izahar (2010) conducted a study analysing the writing of students whose first language was not English at the postgraduate level, and the findings reveal that learners still face difficulties in subject-verb agreement rules. Learners were found to make mistakes in all five categories of subject-verb agreement, namely: the agreement of person, the agreement of number, the agreement of subject, the agreement of coordinated subject, and the agreement of notion and proximity. This supported the study by Surina and Kamaruzaman (2009) who state that the majority of the students in Malaysia have problems with their subject-verb agreement in their writing. They mention that:

In English language, grammar rules are very important and have to be mastered by all ESL learners. In the topic of subject-verb agreement, the subject must agree with the verb. A singular subject is followed by a singular verb, and a plural subject takes a plural verb. This rule only applies in the simple present tense. On the other hand, in the simple past tense, the main verbs, 'was' and 'were' need reconsideration. This is the general rule for subject-verb agreement, which is also represented by its sub-rules. As a result, based on the observation, it is obvious that students made mistakes in both general and sub-general rules of subject verb agreement in their writing. (Surina & Kamaruzaman, 2009, p. 190)

On the other hand, other scholars have looked at different types of errors in EFL learners' writing and paid particular attention to the acquisition of grammatical rules and errors related to the influence of the mother tongue on students' English language proficiency. For instance, Karim, Fathemaz, and Hakim (2015) focused on the different sources of errors with subject-verb agreement as a result of the 'native or first language'

(L1) among Bangladeshi undergraduate students and found out that major grammatical errors were in the writing, including the use of incorrect verbs and errors with subject-verb agreement, which led to miscommunication and failure to convey meaning in the L2 (which was English in the case of this study).

However, linguists and researchers in the field of second language acquisition value learner errors and consider these errors as part of the natural process of learning a second language (Harmer, 2007). According to Ellis (1997), 'errors reflect gaps in a learner's knowledge; they occur because the learner does not know what is correct' (p. 35). From this perspective, many studies have been conducted further analysing learners' errors in general, and grammatical structures in particular. For instance, Khan (2005) analysed errors in the written work of 30 students and revealed that most of these errors were related to applying grammar correctly. Similar to this work, Azimah (2005) investigated students' errors using the error analysis approach and found out that L2 learners committed grammatical errors in academic writing and that the majority of these errors were related to tenses and prepositions rather than subject-verb agreement. Further to the same type of work, Vahdatinejad (2008) stated that most EFL students' errors were related to grammatical tenses, word choice and prepositions.

According to Stapa and Izahar (2010), 'social situations and the learner's value and attitudes may influence learner-errors; in fact, subject-verb agreement area is very important to express ideas especially in writing, where non-verbal communication is absent; the students really need to master this rule in order to write effectively' (p. 5). Thus, learners' grammatical errors are very important to investigate for both language learning and teaching. In fact, learners have to master English grammatical rules effectively and accurately in order to produce an error-free piece of writing (Stapa and Izahar, 2010), which of course, is quite challenging for L2 learners. Therefore, Ellis (1997) has precisely proposed that it is important to identify learners' errors because they not only help learners, but also teachers, to deal with these errors. Thus, it is vital to identify learners' errors and examine these errors closely in order to assist students in their language proficiency. Once the problems are identified, it is easier for practitioners to provide guidelines and find solutions in order to overcome this challenge. Mutema and Mariko (2012) stated that learners' errors should be highlighted, identified and analysed in order to seek solutions based on the nature of these specific learners' errors.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted with specific purposes to examine the types of errors that undergraduate students in the foundation year at Tiabah University make in their English academic writing and, more precisely, to examine grammatical errors related to subject-verb agreement. In order to analyse learners' errors, the approach employed was error analysis, which was developed from Pit Corder's theoretical framework. Corder (1967) states that error analysis assumes that learners' errors are significant and that errors occur when learners process the information they have learnt into the production of the target language. Indeed, Corder (1981) confirmed that the major

source of these errors is due to the changes in understanding of grammar systems that a learner must construct when they learn a new language. Thus, in the field of second language acquisition, error analysis is considered to be a primary method used to investigate the errors that appear in the learners' language, to determine whether those errors are systematic and to explain their causes, if possible. Although accuracy is only one aspect of the learners' language, it is still an important factor that administrates one's language proficiency. However, in the process of L2 acquisition, learners commit errors as a result of finding equivalent rules that are close to the target language, and learners advance gradually using the new rules until they produce accurate or nearly equivalent structures of the target language.(Corder, 1981)

Therefore, the selection of the error analysis method for this research is suitable and valid for investigating and analysing errors made by the participants in this study. The process typically follows Corder's error analysis procedure (Corder, 1974; as cited by Stapav & Izahar, 2010):

- I. A corpus of language is selected. The medium and the homogeneity of the participant is decided, which involves deciding on the size of the sample (L1 background, which is Arabic in the case of this study; stage of language development; and learners' ages).
- II. The errors in the corpus are identified. Corder (1974) points out "the need to differentiate lapses from errors (i.e., 'unexpected sentences that are due to processing limitations rather than lack of L2 language competence'). He also points out that the sentences can be overtly idiosyncratic (i.e., sentences which are incorrectly formed in terms of target language rule assumptions) and covertly idiosyncratic (i.e., sentences that are grammatically incorrect).
- III. The errors are classified. This involves matching grammatical descriptions to each error.
- IV. The errors are explained. In later stage in this research, an attempt is made to identify the linguistic cause of the errors.
- V. The errors are evaluated. This stage involves counting and attempting to assess the seriousness of each error in order to make correct teaching decisions". (Stapa and Izahar, 2010, p. 7-8)
- VI.

These steps of the error analysis procedure were employed in order to intensively analyse the data and present samples of Saudi learners' errors in term of grammatical errors related to subject-verb agreement.

The participants of the study were undergraduate students in the foundation year at Tiabah University. A total of 25 first-year female students participated in the research. All students were in intermediate to upper-intermediate levels of the English language, which was determined by the placement test that students took at the beginning of the academic year and before starting the academic English language course. All students were homogenous in terms of their education, ethnicity, L1 and age. However, as the study is an analytical one, two stages were designed in order to collect the data:

1. The first stage involved the identification and explanation of subject-verb agreement rules to students using different exercises throughout the course.
2. In the second stage, learners were given eight different topics (very much relevant to their culture and background) over two months on which they were asked to write a new essay. Each essay was about 15 to 20 sentences in length. The topics of the essays, which were chosen from the coursebook unit themes, were: sport, food, cleanliness, Arabic culture, effect of colours, change, marketing and lifestyle. Each one of these topics was related to a different unit of the course books. The course books were *Q: Skills for Success, Intermediate*, published by Oxford University Press.

Before asking the participants to write their essays, they were informed that the results used in this study would not be included in the writing portfolio assessment scores and will not be graded or impact their language achievement scores for the current year, but that the results can be used to benefit the institution in terms of learning English grammar and the teaching practice. The participants were asked to write the essays in eight different sessions over two months, as stated earlier. Participants were asked to write each essay within 50 minutes, which was the official class time. All essays were later collected. One topic was marked every week, then analysed and errors were later classified into three categories. The errors were categorised according to their consistency and frequency as follows:

- I. Subject-verb agreement errors with singular subjects.
- II. Subject-verb agreement errors with plural subjects.
- III. . Subject-verb agreement errors where the main verb or auxiliary verb is compounded with or separated from the subject.

Furthermore, all of the categories of errors included the general rule of subject-verb agreement. The frequency of errors was then calculated and compared among students with the average number of their frequency and the percentage of each type of errors.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After collecting the data and analysing errors from students' essays, the majority of errors were based on three different classifications of subject-verb agreement, which are organised as follows:

Subject-verb agreement errors with singular subjects

Figure 1 indicates the findings of the number of errors found in the students' writing. In total, 72% of the errors produced by learners were in the verbs not agreeing with the singular subject.

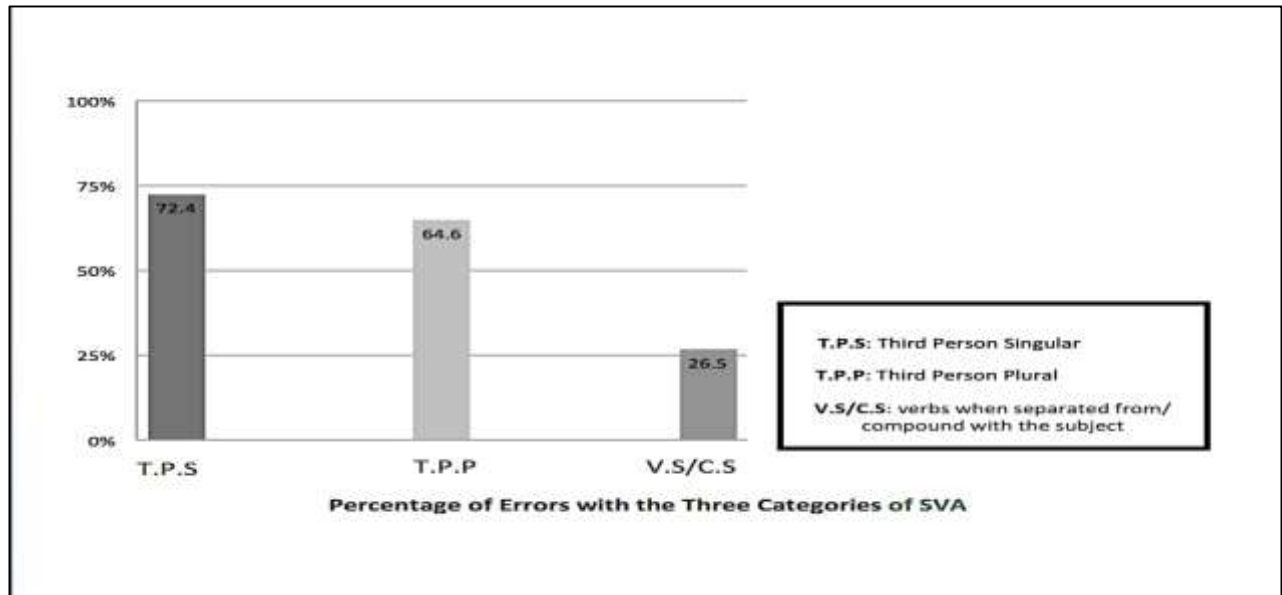


Figure 1. Percentage of errors with the categories of SVA

In fact, errors with the singular subject-verb agreement were noticeably committed in the first three topics given to students, which were sport, food and cleanliness, respectively.

It is worth mentioning some examples of these errors in order to further illustrate this type of error with the singular subject-verb agreement and how it affects students' writing, as this type of error was evident in the essays of most students. Some of these examples include:

- 1- A teacher **give** lessons every day.
- 2- Mother **have** many problems in life, also, **take** care of her children.
- 3- No body **care** of their health.

From these instances, it is clear that students did not pay attention to the verb, which should agree with the singular subject in these sentences. Although students' sentences contain some extent of correct grammar, the students still could not use the subject-verb agreement rule correctly, which indicates insufficient language competence. This type of error could be interpreted as 'incomplete application of rules [which] arises when the learners fail to fully develop a certain structure required to produce acceptable sentences' (Richards, 1971, p. 72). However, although some students did not use 's' or 'es' with verbs to match the singular subjects, they succeeded in using some correct third-person pronouns or possessive adjectives like 'her', 'his' and 'it', as in the second example 'the mother take care of **her** children'—the student failed to use the correct verb but used the third-person pronouns accurately.

Some other errors were found in the students' writing in all eight of the different topics given. Without exception, these errors were related to the third-person singular subjects in putative agreement with the verb. Some of these errors appeared in more complex and longer sentences that students wrote, such as:

- 1- She usually **run** in the morning, before she **go** to the university, as it is the only time she can go.
- 2- Generally speaking, when a girl **study** hard, she will pass exams.
- 3- One **need** to have different life styles, in order not to get bored.

It is possible that students were not aware of these grammatical errors with singular subjects, although they had studied this rule in earlier levels of school. The same students were given feedback on their writing after each class, which may possibly explain the lower number of SVA singular errors in the last few topics, as students had formed some sufficient knowledge about this particular rule. As shown in Figure 2, some correct use of the rules of subject-verb agreement was also detected.

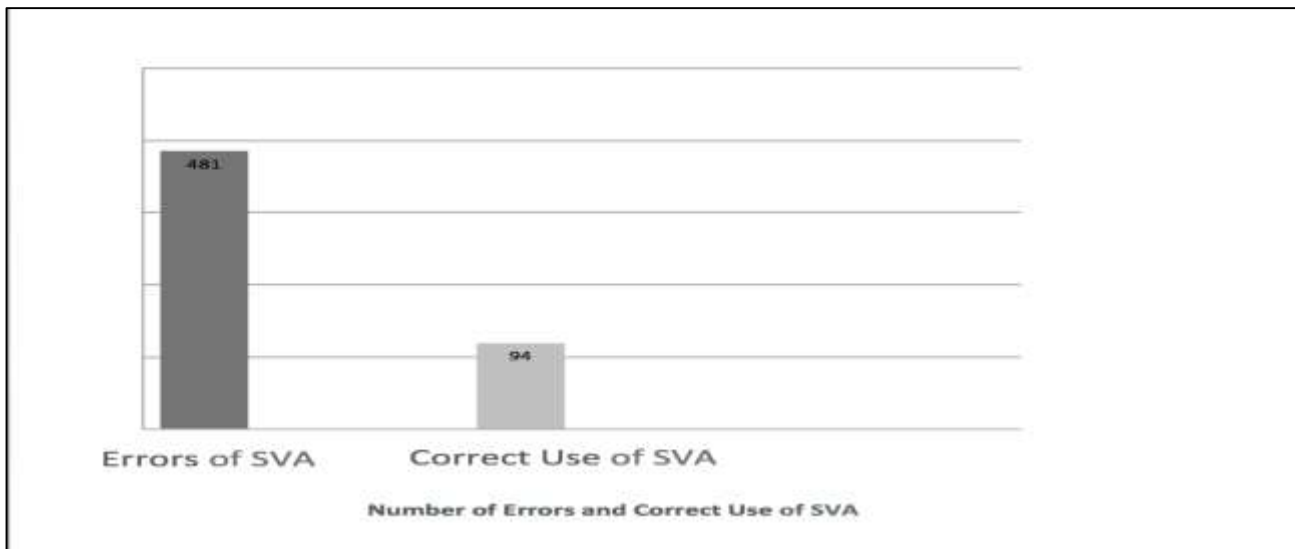


Figure 2. Number of Errors and Correct use of SVA

Subject-verb agreement errors with plural subjects

In the second part of the data, errors with the plural form of the subject-verb agreement will be discussed. Under this category, and from students' essays, a total number of 234 errors with the plural form were found, which is an average of approximately 64.6% of the total number of errors as illustrated in Figure 1. It is worth mentioning that this type of error was found more in the first five topics that students were asked to write, which is possibly due to the fact that these were new topics for the students and they were never trained to write them. In addition, the rule of subject-verb agreement had not been fully covered during the lessons. However, some examples of errors with the plural form of subject-verb agreement are presented here:

- 1- Many girls **has** the goal to study abroad.
- 2- Sports **is** the food of the soul.

- 3- The Apps on phone **provides** different recipes, **it is** also available on website, which **help** to choose healthy food.
- 4- The **governments has** the right to make decision.

In these examples, students again failed to apply the rule of the plural form of the subject-verb agreement, although in their course book it was mentioned that in order to apply this rule the headword of each sentence should be traced in term of agreement with the verb. For instance, if the headword is singular, which is usually the subject in these cases, the verb should agree with the subject. If it is singular, the verb should be singular and if it is plural, the verb should be plural; this applies to the main verb, like the 'girls have', or to auxiliary verbs, such as, 'sports are', taken from the first two sentences. For example, in the third sentence, a student tried to attempt a more complex sentence, with more than one verb used, which should all agree with the subject; this error continues along all verbs in the same sentence: 'provides', 'it' and 'helps', which may indicate that the student in this case has treated the subject 'Apps' as a singular subject rather than plural subject, although, the problem is that 'it' refers to 'recipes', which means that the subject pronoun 'it' is incorrect in the first place, as 'recipes' are plural and thus should be 'they' (and by extension, 'they are'). However, another interesting example was found in some students' sentences, such as the fourth sentence above: the word 'governments', is treated as singular rather than plural. In British English, collective nouns such as 'government', 'team' and 'committee' are often treated as plural without adding the suffix 's'. Although the verb 'has' can be used to refer to 'the government', it cannot be used with 'governments' and this is not accepted according to the explanations given by Quirk and Greenbaum (1990): 'notional concord is in agreement according to the idea of number rather than the presence of grammatical marker for that idea' (p. 14). For example, the word 'governments' can only be used to talk about more than one government. It is never correct to use the word 'governments' when talking about one instance of one sitting government. For further clarification, it is correct to say 'The governments of Britain and Canada signed an agreement last week' (referring to two different governments) or 'There were three different governments in Britain between 1970 and 1980' (referring, of course, to three different governments); but it is not grammatically correct to say 'The British governments passed a law last week' However, many students found collective nouns to be a challenging area of English grammar when it comes to the singular and the plural forms of not only verbs but also nouns in general.

Subject-verb agreement errors where the main verb or auxiliary verb is compounded with or separated from the subject

The third category of common errors with subject-verb agreement in students' writing, and which appears to be less frequent when compared to the other two forms of this grammatical rule, is errors with the singular or the plural verb when compounded with or separated from the subject in the same sentence. A total of 125 errors with this type were found, which is approximately 26.5% of the data collected in this study as shown in Figure 1. However, this type of error was only found in longer and more complex sentences that students wrote, which could have been difficult for those students at this level to trace. In other words, to pay attention and notice every single subject or verb in

the same sentence and attempt to match it accurately in terms of agreement is quite challenging for students as sometimes the subject itself is complex and can be difficult to discern whether it is singular or plural. For instance; 'The people with the red and black dragon sticker on their car are my parents'. In this sentence, the subject is 'the people with the red and black dragon sticker on their car'. This can be quite confusing for students who have been used to writing with simple subjects such as 'My class' or 'The dog'. It could be easy to consider 'their car' as the subject since it is the noun closest to the verb 'be'; however, conjugating that sentence with 'is' instead of 'are' would undoubtedly be incorrect. However, the following instances were found in some of the writing samples collected:

- 1- The advantages and the disadvantages of technology, **makes** life complicated.
- 2- Dates and Arabic coffee, **is** considered part of Saudi cultures.
- 3- When the students and the teachers **was** in the class, they **revise** all lessons.
- 4- Both eating habits and exercise **is** important for health.
- 5- Rules of sports, **is** difficult to follow, it **is** sometimes very strict.

As shown in the above sentences, students commit the same type of error with subject-verb agreement in both singular and plural. For example, in the first sentence, the subject 'advantages and disadvantages of technology' is plural in the head of the sentences, but still treated as singular when interacting with the verb 'makes'. In the second sentence, both the main verb 'revise' and the verb 'was' are marked as singular verbs with no match to the first two subjects in the sentences; although the main verb 'revise' is separated in the sentence and comes after the compound subject, the rule is still not applied accurately. However, this type of error is not frequently committed compared to the other two categories of agreement errors. In fact, most participants tended to write simpler sentences in their collected essays.

Implication of the Research

After collecting the data from the participants in this study and analysing errors, it can be summed up that the rules of subject-verb agreement were an area of difficulty for those learners. Errors with subject-verb agreement in this context and other ESL contexts should be carefully analysed in order to find solutions. Since writing in an L2 needs correct and error-free sentence construction, it is important that L2 learners be aware of these errors. Thus, more emphasis should be given to this rule in particular and other grammatical rules in general. Both teachers and learners could benefit from analysing errors and understanding their source. Learners could benefit from exposure to different sources online to study and practice grammar, which could involve dialogue journals, fill-in-the-gap activities and reading text analysis. Also, some activities could be applied in class, such as peer work for grammatical rules, games, frequent quizzes and continuous feedback. Hence, acquiring and learning grammar should not be done in classrooms or through teachers only; learners need to equip themselves with sufficient language practice outside the classroom in order to increase their language competence.

In addition, in the field of developing linguistics resources, L2 learners can benefit significantly from text analysis. The term 'text analysis' refers to a method of guiding learners on how the grammatical system of language and language syntax are intensively used in written text (Frodessen, 2001). According to Frodessen (2001), the analysis of texts helps L2 learners who are familiar with prescriptive grammar rules to some extent but still encounter some barriers in using and applying grammatical rules appropriately, such as the use of tenses, articles and various verb forms. As stated by Stapa and Izahar (2010), 'text analysis can also benefit learners with mostly implicit knowledge of grammar rather than explicit rule-based knowledge' (p. 16).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that Saudi Arabian learners face some difficulties in applying the rules of subject-verb agreement in academic writing, although the language proficiency of those students was equivalent to intermediate or upper-intermediate levels of English. After analysing the data, errors which commonly committed have been classified into three different categories: (a) subject-verb agreement errors with singular subjects (b) subject-verb agreement errors with plural subjects, and (c) subject-verb agreement errors where the main verb or auxiliary verb is compounded with or separated from the subject. However, the last category was less frequent compared to the other two. The source of this type of error was found as a reflection of some universal strategies that L2 learners seek in order to convey their message using the target language. In fact, this type of error results from a learner's failure to complete the right application of rules and failure to fully develop these rules, which leads him or her to produce unacceptable use of the target language. It is thus important for language practitioners to find remedial action to solve this problem. Erdogan (2005) states, 'Applied error analysis, on the other hand, concerns organizing remedial courses and devising appropriate materials and teaching strategies based on the findings of theoretical error analysis' (p. 1027). As a result, learners should be encouraged to use different learning strategies, and learner errors should be traced, identified, analysed and constructive activities and feedback should be given in order to curb these types of language obstacles.

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