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The students' ability in using subject-verb agreement in Senior High School

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ABSTRACT

The aims of this study is to describe the approach used by the teacher in teaching subject-verb agreement, the students' ability in using subject-verb agreement and the error occur made by the students in using subject-verb agreement. The research found that the teacher was used deductive approach and grammar practice in raising the students' consciousness on students' ability in using subject-verb agreement. The student' ability in using subject-verb agreement categorized into poor as 15 from 27 students in the class make an error (58%). This study also found that there were four sources of errors due to the errors. In conclusion, the highest error made by students dealing with subject-verb agreement was on inter language transfer, negative transfer, overgeneralization and simplification.

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1. Introduction

Writing skills in English have been regarded as an essential part of English learning for EFL students (He, 2015). Although there have been many types of research conducted to find effective ways of teaching writing and also plenty of studies on sentence pattern translation drill to improve students' writing ability. Furthermore, He (2015) found that the number one issue among the four writing problems (vocabulary, bad writing organization, and unrelated contents) is grammatical.

In line with this, Kho-Yar & Siok (2015) and Gaibani (2015) found that in making sentence the students did not consider the grammar rules, its make the reader confusion and misreading on the sentence that has been made by the students. This idea supported by Woryono (2016) who stated that the role of grammar in one's progress in writing work could not be ignored in making a sentence. In sum up, the students should be able to construct well-formed sentences and they also need to understand the basic rules of construction the sentences. This would enable them to write the language in standard written English.

There are many grammatical errors in English. One of the grammatical errors frequently found in students' writing sentences was subject and verb agreement (Zhan, 2015; Signh et al., 2017; Sermsook et al., 2017). It is a common error made by other EFL students from different countries (Sermsook et al., 2017). Further, Kurniawan & Seprizanna (2016) stated that subject-verb agreement means choosing the correct singular or plural verb after the subject. It means that if the subject is singular, so the verb is singular, and conversely.

1.1 Approach in Teaching Grammar

According to Brown (2007) specified that there are two main ways that the teachers tend to teach grammar: deductively and inductively. Both deductive and inductive teaching has their different rules of teaching grammar. Thus, which approach the teacher use depends on number factors, such as the nature of the language being taught and the preferences of the teachers and the students. However, it is can be a combination of both approaches to become a suitable approach for the EFL classroom.

Deductive approach is more teacher-centered learning. Supported by Thornbury (1999) deductive approach (rule-driven) starts with the presentation of a rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is applied. Its mean the teacher is introduced and explained the rule of the grammar first, then the students usually complete grammar exercises to become more familiar with the pattern. Further, he explained that an inductive approach (rule-discovery) starts with some examples from which a rule is inferred. This approach more focuses on how the way the students discover their own learning process. The teacher would present the students with a variety of examples for a given concept without giving any explanation about how the concept is used. At that time, the students see how the concept is used, it is expected that they will notice how the concept is to use and determine the grammar rule. Finally, the teacher explains the grammar rule as a final check that the students understand the concept.

1.2 The concept of subject-verb agreement

According to Eastwood (2002), in English grammar, subject-verb agreement is the correspondence of a verb with its subject in person (first, second, or third) and number (singular or plural) which is also called subject-verb concord. In other words, they both must be singular or they both must be plural. For instance, Subjects and verbs must agree with one another in number (singular or plural). Thus, if a subject is singular, its verb must also be singular; *vice versa*.

The girl [singular subject] reads [singular verb] mystery stories.

The girls [plural subject] read [plural verb] mystery stories.

Tonya [singular subject] is [singular verb] asleep.

Tonya and her friends [plural subject] are [plural verb] asleep.

Further, there is agreement with *be*, *have*, and a *present-simple verb*. Then *he* adds that with a *past-tense verb* is an agreement only with *be*. It means that subject-verb agreement of simple past tense is in nominal form. For instance, “**I was happy** yesterday”, “**We were late** for the movie last night”. However, the following structure for verbal is added “ed” in the end of verb or change into V2 for instance “**Robert played soccer** this last morning”, “Sophia **went** swimming in the pool last weekend”.

Subject-verb agreement in present simple, the singular subject (*she, he, it*) takes a verb in *-s, -es, or is*. It means that verb in present simple tense both of verbal and nominal form should agree with its subject. For instance, “Marco **works** in an office”, “Jorge’s Dad Allan **is** retired”, “Marina is Bob’s wife”, or “Frada lives in Jakarta”. Plural subject (*you, they, we*) with to be “**are**” and also I with “**am**”, for examples: “I **am** English teacher in Malang”. In verbal form the subject is followed by verb and do or does is used as an auxiliary for all of the subjects in negative or question sentence. For example, “Marco **doesn’t** have any brothers”. “Does Marco have any brothers?”.

The present continuous, also called the present progressive, is one of the present tenses used in modern English, the others being the simple present and the emphatic present. To describe something which is happening at the exact moment of speech, for instance “The boy is crying”. Likewise, the rules are same as present simple, and to distinguish it the teacher can put time signal at the end or in the first sentence.

From the explanations above, it is clear that subject-verb agreement is an agreement between subject and verb. If the subject is singular, the verb is singular and if the subject plural, the verb is plural because the meaning of the sentence will be unclear without the subject and the verb that agrees on each other. Agreeing to the explanation above, the concept of subject-verb agreement is a basic principle of the English language grammar. However, Al Murshidi (2014) found that the students are still confused in applying subject-verb agreement rules and their lack of knowledge of the rules of the target language is the main factor in causing the written production errors.

1.3 Causes of Errors

Based on Brown (2007) there are four sources of errors made by language learner in learning. First, Interlingual errors or mother-tongue influence, this kind of errors are influenced by the native language which interferes with the target language. They are very frequent in the initial stages of L2 Learning since the L1 is the only language system the learner knows and able to draw on, therefore negative transfer takes place. Second, Intralingual errors, these type of errors are caused by the target language itself such as: false analogy, misanalysis (learners form a wrong hypothesis). Incomplete rule application (this is the converse of overgeneralization or one might call it under generalization as the learners do not use all the rules). Exploiting redundancy, this error occurs by carrying considerable redundancy. This is shown throughout the system in

the form of unnecessary morphology and double signaling. Overlooking co-occurrence restrictions, this error is caused by overlooking the exceptional rules. Hypercorrection or monitor overuse, this is results from the learners' over cautious and strict observance of the rules. Overgeneralization or system-simplification, this error is caused by the misuse of words or grammatical rules. Third, communication strategies which the learners use are consciously used by the learners to get a message across the hearer. They can involve both verbal and non-verbal communication. There are distinctions among the following communication strategy: (1) prefabricated patterns is a memorized phrase or sentence. Learner who memorized them usually does not understand the components of the phrase; (2) cognitive and personality styles can also cause errors. For instance, a student with high self-esteem may be willing to risk more errors, in the interest of communication, since he/she does not feel as threatened by committing errors as a student with low self-esteem; (3) language switch is applied by the learner when all the other strategies have failed to help him or her. Thus, the learner uses his or her native language to get the message; nevertheless that hearer may not know the native language. Fourth, Context or Induced Errors, it refers to the setting where a language is learned, e.g. a classroom or a social situation, and also to the teacher and materials used in the lessons.

On October 27, 2017, the writers interviewed one of the English teachers in Senior High School (SMA) Ar-Rahmah Malang through preliminary study and asked about the students' ability in mastering grammar. The teacher said that the students did not master grammar well especially in subject-verb agreement. The teacher said that she also explain the term of subject-verb agreement when she taught tenses. In fact, the students did not understand well about subject-verb agreement.

Examining the previous study, there are several researches in this field. Zhan (2015) investigated a large number of grammatical errors frequently found in Chinese EFL learners' writings namely a misuse of tense and verb form. Others included those in spelling, use of particular words and phrases, Chinese-English expression, singular and plural form of nouns, parts of speech, non-finite verbs, run-on sentences, and pronouns. Similar with this, Singh et al. (2017) found that the most common type of grammar errors made by Malaysian students in primary and secondary schools were subject-verb agreement and tenses. Another common error found was in the students' construction of the complex sentence. In such constructions, they failed to include essential and nonessential clauses.

Meanwhile, the students in Indonesia also have a difficulty in learning grammar as observed by Moehkardi (2002) due to the following problems in grammatical errors; the students still transfer from L1 to target language (TL) this is may cause mistakes because of the different concept between L1 to TL. For instance, the Indonesia expression "*tertarik dengan*" is literary transferred to English "*Interested with*", however it should be "*Interested in*". It is difficult to remember because preposition "*in*" is same to Indonesian "*di*". The other researcher also found the grammatical errors in written English sentences by Thai EFL student. For those reasons, the writer took a research about the students' ability in using subject-verb agreement, causes error occur by the students in using subject-verb agreement, and the approach used by the teacher in teaching subject-verb agreement.

2. Method

The design of this study was descriptive qualitative. Further, in order to collect the data for this study, the writer obtained information from two sources: one of the English teachers and students at SMA Ar-Rohma Malang. The data from the English teacher included the approach applied by the teacher in teaching subject-verb agreement using the interview. The second data was taken from 27 students who participated to fill the test and questionnaire given by the writer. There are. The writer chose one class by recommendation from the teacher. The data from the students included the student's' ability in using subject-verb agreement and the cause of errors occur while learning subject-verb agreement.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Results

According to the result of the interview, the first question was related to approach used by the teacher in teaching grammar especially in explained subject-verb agreement. The result shows that the teacher preferred to explain the structure or the rule of grammar rather than gave the students time to search the grammar in the text. It is in line with the teacher' answer.

“I always explain the rule of grammar to the students before starting the topic, for instance this semester I teach the students about the narrative text, so I give an explanation about past tense then give them exercise to make them understand how to apply the tenses.....”

For the above explanation the teacher also gave an explanation how to used subject-verb agreement in each tense.

“In every meeting, before I give the test or exercise, I never forget to remind the students to be aware of using subject-verb agreement.”

To make it clear, this approach was aimed at guiding the students’ understanding of how to use the rule of grammar properly. After telling the approach used by the teacher in teaching grammar, the writer asked *“Is the approach in line with the purpose of learning?”* The teacher said that this approach was related to her purpose of teaching and learning. In this semester the teacher taught simple past tense, simple present tense, and present continuous. For the additional information from the teacher, she said that *“I also classify vocabulary to Nominal and Verbal, because at the beginning of the lesson I have introduced the part of speech so the students are easier to understand.”*

To sum up, the teacher was explaining the rule of grammar first before the student applied it. In additional the teacher also did brief explanation about subject-verb agreement to remind the students. Moreover, based on the result of counting the test, there was one student got 85, one student got 70, two students got 65, one student got 60, three students got 55, six students got 50, four students got 45, two students got 40, two students got 35, two students got 30, two students got 25. This explanation can be seen in Table 1. Here the percentage of the students’ ability in using subject and verb agreement.

Table 1 The percentage of students’ ability in using subject-verb agreement score

No	Level of Ability	Frequency (f)	Percentage (P)
1	Excellent	1	4%
2	Good	1	4%
3	Fair	3	11%
4	Poor	15	58%
5	Very poor	6	23%
Total		26	100%

The table shows that majority students’ ability in using subject-verb agreement fell in the poor category (58%), followed by very poor (23%), fair (11%), excellent and good category that have the same percentage (4%). Meanwhile, according to the students’ responses toward the use of subject-verb agreement, 44 % (12) of the students said that they got difficulty in using subject-verb agreement, 37% (10) of them responded very difficultly, 19% (5) of them responded Easy, while none of them responded very easy. In short, the students got difficulty in using subject-verb agreement since the majority of the students responded it.

Related to the students’ responses toward the reasons that made them difficulties in using subject-verb agreement were, they did not understand well the meaning of the words, change the sentences into the other tenses, and they still confused the structure of the sentence in English or target language. Then, in the students’ responses which was related to the students’ knowledge of the pattern or rules in suing subject-verb agreement showed that the students did not really understand the rules in using subject-verb agreement. 63% (17) the students responded not really understanding the rules in using subject-verb agreement, 26% (7) of them responded do not understand, 11% (3) of them responded understand, while none of them responded understand well. In short most of them told that they were still confused to translate the meaning into Indonesia language, lack of memorizing the formula, and confused how to apply the rules of Indonesia language into the English language.

The last question was about students’ responses toward the importance of learning of subject-verb agreement. The evidence showed that 63% (17) of the students explained that it is important in learning subject-verb agreement. The students said that this would make them easily in suing subject-verb agreement. 30% (8) of them responded very important, while none of them responded not too important and not important. In short the students need to learn more about subject-verb agreement.

3.2 Discussion

Based on the interview, the teacher said that she always focused on explaining grammar first before the students practice some exercises. In line with the Thornbury (1999) explanation that deductive approach is more teacher-centered learning, thus the teacher starts with the presentation of a rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is applied. This language awareness approach that makes the students aware of the rule that forms the basis of specific tenses involves both instruction and practice.

After explained the grammar rules the teacher gave exercises to the students in order to get more understanding about it. The teacher also reminds the students to be aware of using subject-verb agreement, since different tenses would be different subject-verb agreement. The practice or exercises that would make them aware of these differences of usages of subject-verb agreement.

In line with Ellis (2002) the teacher can drill the students' ability in grammar by using grammar practice to raising students' consciousness. In this study the teacher considers grammar practice to be the opportunity for the students to practice the structures. This means that the students can practice under the controlled conditions and the exercise attempt to encourage learners to see how grammatical structures can be used in real-life situations. While the teacher not only used grammatical practice but also to raising consciousness through grammar practice, means that after the students get the exercise and the students have misused the grammatical structure the teacher gives the students classification either in the form of more exercises and explanation again.

To sum up, the teacher did deductive approach, grammar practice, and raising consciousness through grammar practice. Firstly, the teacher provides the students with an explanation of the rule of grammar especially in using subject-verb agreement. Then, the teacher activated the students' knowledge of applying the structure by doing exercise. Besides, the teacher also deal with remind the students to be aware of using subject-verb agreement and give feedback if the students still misuse on it.

However, according to students' score it can be seen that the students' ability in using subject-verb agreement was poor, since the majority 58% (15) of the student fell in the poor category. Based on the findings of the test, the student cannot differentiate how to used subject-verb agreement in differences tenses even the time signal already stated on the test and misused in a negative sentence especially in past tenses as shows as follows:

They **weren't** go to play tennis last Friday.
They worked on Monday, but yesterday they **don't** come.
Sarah is in the kitchen. She **was** cooking right now.
You can turn off the television. I **was** sleepy right now.
Merry is a very quiet person. She **don't** talk to anyone.
It is already known that HIV **was** harmful for human.

In examining the error occurs in using subject-verb agreement by the students, the writer took from the questionnaire. Based on the result of students' responses toward the use of subject-verb agreement, the most dominant response was difficult. According to the reason of the students, they had lack of vocabulary, did not understand well the meaning of the words, change the sentences into the other tenses, and they still confused the structure of the sentence in English or target language.

The other causes error occurs in the student' ability in using subject agreement was overgeneralization or system-simplification (this error is caused by the misuse of words or grammatical rules). Next was a simplification, this occurs when learners reduce a complex aspect of grammar to a much simpler set of rules and reflect a process that is used when messages need to be conveyed with limited language resources. Based on the result of the test, the students did not distinguish between subject-verb agreements in past tense, present tense and present continuous.

In conclusion, there are several reasons why the errors occur in the students' ability in using subject-verb agreement. First is Inter language transfer and it can be categories as a negative transfer, since the students applied their native language patter in to target language which is they have a different pattern or linguistic feature. Next are overgeneralization or system-simplification and simplification.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

Based on the research findings and discussions, it can be stated that the teacher applied deductive approach and grammar practice to raising students' consciousness. It means that the teacher aware how to

teach grammar to the students, especially the pattern or the linguistic feature of the target language it's different with the background of Indonesian language.

Second, the students' ability in using subject-verb agreement was poor, since the majority of the students' score fell into the poor category. The last was the error occur made by the students in using subject-verb agreement. There are inter language transfer, negative transfer, overgeneralization and simplification.

Thus, there are several suggestions offered. It is suggested that the teacher apply more various approaches or techniques in teaching grammar thus the students will be more motivated to learn and aware of using subject-verb agreement. However, for the students, it is suggested that they should more exercises in learning subject-verb agreement, aware of using it and ask the teacher when getting difficulties in understanding subject-verb agreement. Based on the errors occur, hopefully the students can differentiate the different pattern or linguistic feature of their language and the target language. Finally, for future researchers, it is suggested that they may do deep research in observing techniques that can be used for the teacher to reduce the error.

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