Subject-Verb Agreement Errors by English Language Students

(A Case Study of Second-Year Students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University)

Hadeel Salah[1], Machalla M.A. Megaiab[2]

[1] Islamic University of Mohamed Bin Ali Al-Senussi, Language Center-Libya

Hadoolsal8@gmail.com

[2] English Department, Faculty of Languages, Tobruk University, Tobruk, Libya

Machalla.abdullah@tu.edu.ly

Abstract

Subject-verb agreement (SVA) is a core element of English grammar, yet it poses persistent challenges for Libyan EFL learners. This study investigates the types and causes of SVA errors among second-year students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Al-Beida. A quantitative case study design was adopted to investigate subject-verb agreement errors among second-year English language students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University.Data were collected using a 30-item grammar test and a 16-item Likert-scale questionnaire, allowing for statistical analysis of both grammatical performance and learner perceptions. Test items targeted compound subjects, quantifiers, collective nouns, and indefinite pronouns، while errors were classified as intralingual, interlingual, or developmental. Findings revealed that intralingual errors were the most prevalent (particularly overgeneralization and simplification), followed by interlingual errors influenced by Arabic, and fewer developmental errors. The most frequent mistakes occurred with compound subjects and quantifiers. Questionnaire data showed that students attributed their difficulties mainly to L1 interference, limited exposure to authentic English input, and insufficient instructional strategies.These

findings align with prior studies but highlight the value of integrating learner perceptions into error analysis. The study concludes that improving SVA accuracy requires explicit instruction, contextualized practice, and systematic corrective feedback. It recommends targeted pedagogical interventions to address recurring error patterns and enhance grammar teaching in Libyan EFL contexts.

Keywords: Subject-Verb Agreement, Error Analysis, Intralingual Errors, Interlingual Errors, Developmental Errors, Learner Perception, EFL

الأخطاء في اتفاق الفعل مع الفاعل لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية
(دراسة حالة لطلبة السنة الثانية بجامعة عمر المختار)

هديل صلاح¹، ماشاء الله عبد الله مغيب²

¹ الجامعة الإسلامية محمد بن علي السنوسي، مركز اللغات – ليبيا
hadoolsal8@gmail.com

² قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية اللغات، جامعة طبرق، طبرق، ليبيا
Machalla.abdullah@tu.edu.ly

المستخلص

يُعَدّ اتفاق الفعل مع الفاعل (SVA) عنصرًا أساسيًا في قواعد اللغة الإنجليزية، ومع ذلك فإنه يشكّل تحديًا مستمرًا لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا. تستكشف هذه الدراسة أنواع وأسباب أخطاء اتفاق الفعل مع الفاعل بين طلاب السنة الثانية في جامعة عمر المختار، البيضاء. وتهدف الدراسة إلى تحديد أنماط الأخطاء الشائعة وفحص العوامل اللغوية والمعرفية الكامنة وراءها. تم تبني تصميم كمي باستخدام اختبار قواعد مكوّن من 30 سؤال اختيار من متعدد، واستبيان مكوّن من 16 عبارة وفق مقياس ليكرت. قاست هذه الأدوات دقة الطلاب النحوية وإدراكهم لمصادر الأخطاء. ركزت أسئلة الاختبار على الفاعل المركب، وكلمات الكمية، والأسماء الجمعية، والضمائر النكرة. جرى تصنيف الأخطاء وفق نظرية تحليل الأخطاء إلى: أخطاء داخلية (Intralingual)، وأخطاء بينية (Interlingual)، وأخطاء نمائية (Developmental). كانت الأخطاء الداخلية، خاصة الإفراط في التعميم والتبسيط، هي الأكثر شيوعًا. كما أشار المتعلمون إلى تأثير اللغة الأم والتعليم غير الفعال كعوامل مساهمة. دعمت النتائج أبحاثًا سابقة، لكنها أبرزت أيضًا

مدى أهمية دمج وجهات نظر المتعلمين. توصي الدراسة بالتعليم الصريح، والممارسة
الهادفة، والتغذية الراجعة المستمرة. وللنتائج تطبيقات في تحسين تدريس القواعد في سياقات
تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن دقة اتفاق الفعل مع
الفاعل تتطلب تعليمًا صريحًا، وممارسة في سياق واقعي، ومزيدًا من التغذية الراجعة
التصحيحية، كما توصي بتدخلات تعليمية مستهدفة تعالج كلًّا من البنية السطحية
والأسباب الكامنة وراء أخطاء المتعلمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اتفاق الفعل مع الفاعل، تحليل الأخطاء، الأخطاء الداخلية، الأخطاء
البينية، الأخطاء النمائية، تصورات المتعلمين، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

1.Introduction

Within the Libyan educational framework, English is taught as a foreign language at every academic level. However, despite extensive exposure, a significant number of university students continue to encounter difficulties with grammatical precision, particularly in their written communication. At Omar Al-Mukhtar University, second-year English language students are required to show intermediate to advanced proficiency; nonetheless, educators consistently identify recurring subject verb agreement errors in their essays and written tasks. These errors are not incidental; they illustrate systematic trends of learner challenges and interlanguage progression. According to Error Analysis (EA) theory, such errors function as diagnostic indicators that expose underlying cognitive mechanisms and linguistic deficiencies within the learner's interlanguage system (Corder, 1967; James, 1998). Dulay et al. (1982) and Ellis (1997) categorize errors as interlingual (influenced by L1), intralingual (emerging within the L2), or developmental (reflecting natural stages of language acquisition). While various international studies have examined SVA errors, most rely on qualitative or descriptive methodologies. In the Libyan context, there is a marked lack of empirical studies that utilize quantitative instruments, such as structured grammar evaluations or perception-based questionnaires, to measure both performance and learner awareness.

Moreover, few studies strive to systematically correlate these two aspects. This investigation seeks to address these deficiencies by employing a quantitative approach that combines test-based performance data with student perceptions. The goal is to identify

the most prevalent types of subject-verb agreement errors among second-year students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University, to classify them according to EA theory, and to analyze the linguistic and cognitive factors that contribute to their occurrence. Through this strategy, the study aims to provide evidence-based pedagogical recommendations for enhancing grammar instruction and supporting learner development in Libya.

2. Statement of the Problem

Subject-verb agreement errors are prevalent among EFL students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University, affecting the clarity and effectiveness of their writing. Despite the importance of this problem, there has been limited research on the specific types and causes of these errors in Libyan analyzing the subject-verb agreement errors in students by testing them with multiple choice and Likert scales about their perception of the factors behind these errors, thereby contributing to the development of more effective instructional strategies. Despite extensive research on subject-verb agreement (SVA) errors among English language learners, several significant gaps remain. Many previous studies have employed qualitative methods to analyze written texts or classify errors using descriptive frameworks, offering valuable but limited insight into the frequency, distribution, and causes of these errors.

Few studies have adopted a robust quantitative methodology that systematically identifies and categorizes SVA errors using standardized tools. Moreover, most research has overlooked learners' perspectives on the causes of their grammatical mistakes, such as the influence of native language interference, incomplete rule acquisition, and the effectiveness of instructional practices. In the Libyan context, empirical investigations intoSVA errors, particularly those combining performance data with learner perceptions, are scarce. Therefore, this study aims to address these limitations by adopting a quantitative approach to assess both the grammatical accuracy and underlying factors contributing to SVA errors among second-year English language students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Al-Beida, Libya. The findings will provide practical insights for improving grammar instruction and tailoring pedagogical strategies to

3. Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the subject-verb agreement errors made by second-year students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Al-Beida, Libya?

2. What are the underlying causes of subject-verb agreement errors among second-year English language students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University?

4. Objective of the Study

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the subject-verb agreement errors found in essays written by second-year students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University, Al-Beida, Libya.

2. To explore the factors contributing to these errors.

5. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it adds to the limited body of research on subject-verb agreement errors in the context of Libyan EFL learners, providing a detailed analysis of these errors and their causes. Secondly, the findings will help educators develop targeted interventions to improve grammatical accuracy in students' writing. This could lead to enhanced writing proficiency and better overall academic performance. Furthermore, the study's insights can inform curriculum design and teaching methodologies, ultimately enhancing the quality of English language education at Omar Al-Mukhtar University.

6. Literature Review

Over the last five years, various studies have explored the subject-verb agreement errors faced by students. For instance, Elmejie, Elzawawi, and Msimeer (2021) conducted research to evaluate the proficiency of Libyan undergraduate students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) by examining the types of subject-verb agreement errors they make. Their study, which involved 40 intermediate and advanced English majors from the Faculty of Arts at Misurata University, aimed to identify, analyze, and classify these

| International Science and Technology Journal | **العدد Volume 37** | |
| المجلة الدولية للعلوم والتقنية | **المجلد Part 1** | ISTJ |

http://www.doi.org/10.62341/hsmm2804

errors into three categories: subject-verb agreement errors with third-person singular subjects (TPSS), third-person plural subjects (TPPS)and compound subjects (CS). Data were collected through a written test with six short passages, and the results showed that error rates were below 30% for both groups, indicating no significant differences in subject-verb agreement errors between them. The study highlights the importance for EFL teachers to recognize common errors and reveals that errors with TPPS were the least frequent, while those with CS and TPSS were more common. These findings suggest that language proficiency has a minimal impact on adherence to the SVA rule and provide valuable insights for both second language acquisition research and teaching practices.

Similarly, Wau (2024) examined the challenges faced by third-semester students in the English Language Education Study Program at Nias Raya University with subject-verb agreement, a grammatical rule that ensures subjects and verbs in a sentence match correctly. This research, which involved analyzing written sentences from 37 students, focused on identifying errors according to subject-verb agreement rules (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002). The analysis highlighted several areas of difficulty for the students, including the use of number and person, conjunctions like "and," "or," and "neither…nor," prepositions such as "with" and "as well as," and collective nouns. Additional issues were noted with indefinite pronouns, quantity phrases, singular nouns ending in -s, relative pronouns such as "who" and "that," pronouns like "what," and introductory "there," as well as citations and titles. These findings offer valuable insights for English lecturers working to address and resolve subject-verb agreement issues.

Building on this, a study by Mehat and Ismail (2021) aimed to identify errors made by adult ESL learners by analyzing writing samples from 30 students in an academic writing class at Universiti Putra Malaysia. This study specifically examined the influence of the learners' native language on their writing mistakes. The analysis revealed that most errors were related to subject-verb agreement and verb tenses, indicating significant L1 interference. These findings provide valuable insights for instructors, curriculum developers, and textbook authors, offering guidance on designing materials that address these issues and improve learners'

Zahrida (2023) employed a qualitative approach to investigate the subject-verb agreement difficulties faced by sixth-semester students in the English Education Study Program at the University of

Bengkulu for the 2022/2023 academic year. Using validated and reliable tests, the study categorized errors into six types of subject-verb agreements: full verbs, linking verbs, modals, auxiliary be, auxiliary have, and auxiliary do. The analysis revealed that learners predominantly struggled with subject-verb agreements, totaling 540 errors. Modals presented the greatest difficulty (23%), followed by linking verbs and full verbs. This highlights the need for more effective methods to enhance students' understanding of subject-verb agreement, particularly regarding modal usage.

7. Theoretical Framework

Error Analysis (EA) theory, which emerged in the 1960s as an alternative to Contrastive Analysis, provides the theoretical foundation for this study. Pioneered by linguists like Stephen Pit Corder, EA shifts the focus from predicting errors to analyzing the actual mistakes learners make, viewing them as natural parts of the learning process. This approach helps in understanding the learner's "interlanguage", the transitional linguistic system they develop. The framework distinguishes between "errors," which stem from a lack of knowledge, and "mistakes," which are temporary performance slips. Errors are further categorized by their causes: interlingual errors arise from first language interference, intralingual errors result from the complexities of the target language itself, and developmental errors reflect the natural stages of language acquisition. This study utilizes this framework to not only identify but also to understand the underlying reasons for subject-verb agreement issues among learners.

The theoretical framework also incorporates the specific concept of subject-verb agreement (SVA), a core grammatical rule in English requiring the verb to match its subject in number and person. This principle ensures clarity and grammatical consistency in both written and spoken communication. The study acknowledges the criticisms of Error Analysis, such as its potential to focus on superficial errors and sometimes overlook the broader context of a learner's development. However, EA is deemed essential for this research because it offers a structured method to pinpoint specific challenges, like those related to SVA, and to analyze their cognitive and linguistic origins. By applying EA, the study can move beyond simple error identification to explore the deeper processes of

language learning, making it a valuable tool for improving teaching methods.

8. Research Design

This research adopts a quantitative and explanatory research framework focused on identifying and examining subject-verb agreement (SVA) errors committed by second-year English language students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University. The study has two primary objectives: to ascertain the types and prevalence of SVA errors in student writing and to investigate the learners' perceptions regarding the root causes of these errors. The study uses two main instruments to achieve these goals: a 16-item Likert scale questionnaire and a structured grammar assessment with 30 multiple choice questions. The grammar assessment is designed to pinpoint actual SVA errors in student performance, while the questionnaire collects data on learners' self-reported experiences and beliefs about the origins of these errors.

The study involved 36 second-year undergraduate students from the English Language Department at Omar Al-Mukhtar University situated in Al-Beida, Libya. Their ages varied between 18 and 20 years. All participants were non-native English speakers, with Arabic as their primary language. They were chosen through convenience sampling based on their availability, willingness to participate, and their representativeness of the target population. This age group was selected because it is anticipated that students at this level have acquired fundamental grammar knowledge, which allows for a meaningful evaluation of their proficiency in subject-verb agreement. The analysis of student responses was conducted through descriptive statistics, which featured: the frequency of error types (interlingual, intralingual, developmental), average scores, and the number of students for each response. The distribution of errors was investigated by grammatical structure, accompanied by visual representations such as bar graphs and pie charts.

9. Findings and Discussion

The results of this investigation indicated that second-year English language students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University in Al-Beida frequently encountered subject-verb agreement (SVA) errors across a variety of grammatical structures. The most

common errors were noted in compound subject constructions, indefinite pronouns, collective nouns, abstract nouns with plural forms, and phrases based on quantifiers. For example, Figure 1 illustrates a considerable error rate with compound subjects like "Either the manager or his assistants," where the proximity rule was often violated.
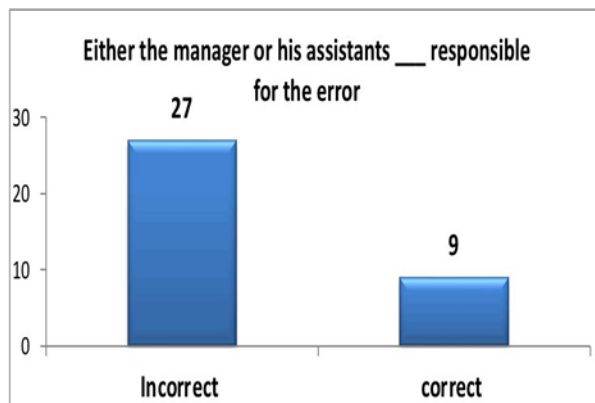

Figure 1: Learners fail to apply the proximity rule in compound subject structure with "Either...or."

In a similar manner, Figure 2 illustrates the difficulties encountered by learners when utilizing distributive pronouns such as "each of the participants," with the majority opting for a plural verb form rather than the necessary singular.
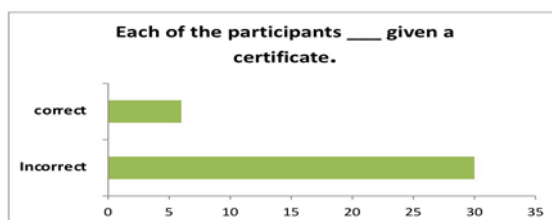

Figure 2: High error rate with singular verb agreement after "each of" phrases.

Many of these errors were attributed to intralingual factors, which encompass the use of simplification techniques, the overgeneralization of grammatical rules, and the insufficient application of grammatical forms. This is clearly shown in Figure 3,

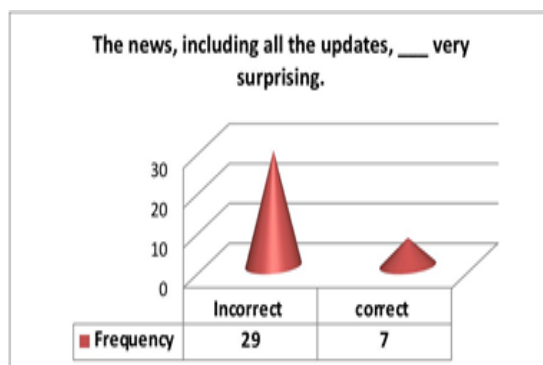which illustrates the confusion caused by singular uncountable nouns that appear plural, such as "news."

Figure 3: Morphological confusion with the uncountable singular noun "news."

These intralingual errors were notably common, indicating that many learners had not entirely grasped the rules concerning subject-verb agreement. Furthermore, interlingual influences were present, as some students incorporated syntactic structures from their first language, Arabic, into English, which resulted in errors in sentence structure and verb application. Figure 4 demonstrates that a significant portion of learners admitted to unconsciously using L1 grammar rules in their writing.

Figure 4: Some learners admit to unconsciously applying L1 grammar rules in English

Additionally, developmental errors were noted, illustrating the typical progression of learners as they navigate different phases of

second language acquisition. Figure 5 demonstrates that learners frequently simplify intricate subject-verb agreement rules, a behavior characteristic of developmental learning stages.

Figure 5: Learners simplify subject-verb agreement rules, leading to frequent errors.

In conjunction with the results from the grammar assessment, the Likert-scale questionnaire illuminated students' perspectives on the factors contributing to their errors. Many participants noted that their struggles were due to issues with recalling grammatical rules while facing time limitations, the complexity of sentence construction, and a lack of sufficient instruction in the classroom. Figure 6 reinforces this observation, demonstrating that a large number of learners agreed that time pressure has a detrimental effect on their use of agreement rules.

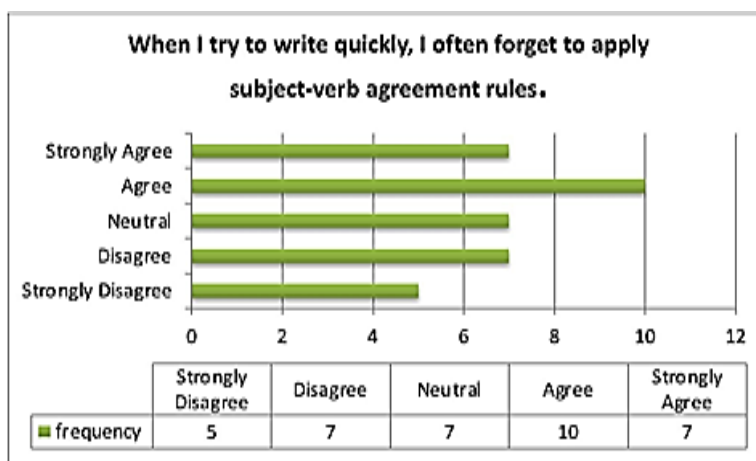|	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
■ frequency	5	7	7	10	7

Figure 6: Time pressure negatively affects learners' application of agreement rules.

Others emphasized the role of their first language and the deficiency of corrective feedback from instructors. Together, the results from the test and the questionnaire furnished a complete understanding of both the objective grammatical issues and the subjective experiences of learners, illuminating the complex relationship between linguistic competence, cognitive processing, and the standard of instruction .

10. Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of the current study revealed that the highest error rate occurred in sentences involving compound subjects with proximity rules, such as "Neither the manager nor the employees ___ aware," where almost all students failed to apply the correct plural verb. In contrast, the lowest error rate was found in existential sentences with the structure "There are many options," where most students responded correctly. These findings clearly demonstrate the variation in learners' understanding of subject verb agreement (SVA) across different syntactic patterns. More importantly, the results are best explained through three main linguistic causes: interlingual, intralingual, and developmental errors. These categories help us better understand the sources of learner difficulties rather than focusing only on surface-level error types.

In terms of interlingual errors, the results strongly align with findings by Mehat and Ismail (2021) and Hasanah and Habibullah (2020), who noted that first language interference is a major factor in SVA difficulties. Many students in this study incorrectly selected plural verbs in phrases like "Each participant ___ given a certificate," likely because Arabic does not apply strict subject-verb agreement rules in such cases. Learner perception data supported this, with more than half of the participants stating that differences between English and Arabic grammar rules contributed to their mistakes. This reinforces the idea that L1 transfer continues to influence learners' choices, especially in complex structures involving quantifiers or collective phrases.

Regarding intralingual errors, the present findings are similar to those of Susfenti (2020) and Hanim et al. (2024), who identified confusion caused by incomplete or faulty learning of English rules. Learners in this study often overgeneralized simple SVA rules—such as adding "-s" to every third-person subject, regardless of whether the subject was singular, plural, or abstract. For example, students misapplied singular verbs to expressions like "The scissors

___ on the table" or "Many a student ___ struggling," failing to recognize special constructions that do not follow the standard rule. These mistakes stemmed from learners relying too heavily on form rather than structure, which is typical of intralingual interference.

Developmental errors also played a key role, reflecting what Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) describe as natural learner mistakes during the process of acquiring grammatical accuracy. This was evident in items involving sentence complexity, such as "Mathematics, as well as physics, ___ difficult," where students treated "as well as" as a compound conjunction like "and," leading to incorrect plural agreement. Although many students knew the basic rule, they struggled to apply it when the sentence structure became more complex or when writing under time pressure. The perception responses confirmed this: many learners reported that even when they knew the correct rules, they forgot to apply them while writing or speaking quickly. This reflects the gap between knowledge and automatic use, which is characteristic of developmental learning stages.

While several previous studies, such as those by Dasra et al. (2023), Hardi et al. (2022), and Sholehah et al. (2023), focused on classifying errors according to surface taxonomy (e.g., omission, misformation), the present study differs by analyzing errors through the lens of deeper linguistic factors. This approach offers a clearer understanding of why learners make these mistakes, not just how they appear on the surface. Moreover, unlike Elmejie et al. (2021), who found low error rates in compound subjects, this study revealed that compound constructions—particularly those using "either…or" or "neither…nor", were among the most difficult for students. This suggests that students in this context have not yet internalized flexible SVA rules and require further instruction on syntactic agreement. In addition, while Dinillah et al. (2021) reported a high level of student proficiency in SVA (with an average score of 88.24), the current research showed only moderate performance overall, with certain structures, especially quantifiers and collective nouns, causing confusion for most students. The variation may be due to contextual factors such as curriculum design, instructional methods, or the language environment.

11. Conclusion

This investigation demonstrated that subject-verb agreement (SVA) is still a complex area for many second-year English language students at Omar Al-Mukhtar University. The students frequently made similar types of mistakes, which were not random. These mistakes were caused by difficulties in understanding English grammar rules, confusion from their native language (Arabic), and the typical challenges that arise when learning a second language. Most students appeared to know the grammar rules when they were studying in isolation, but they faced challenges in applying them correctly when writing full sentences. This suggests that even if students learn the rules, they may not fully understand how to apply them in practical writing situations. This issue may be due to insufficient practice, limited feedback, or difficulties with sentence structure and the pressure experienced during writing tasks. This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind these errors by integrating test results with learners' perspectives. Furthermore, it reinforces the necessity of enhancing grammar instruction within educational settings. These findings align with those of other researchers, yet they extend beyond previous work by incorporating a combination of performance metrics and student insights, thereby assisting educators in better comprehending and addressing their students' requirements.

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