

# AN ANALYSIS ON THE SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT ERRORS IN WRITING PARAGRAPH MADE BY THE SECOND SEMESTER STUDENTS OF ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

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## Abstract

This research aimed at identifying the subject-verb agreement errors in students' writing, finding out the subject-verb agreement errors mostly made by the students in their writing, and finding out the source of the errors. This research applied a descriptive research. The data of the research were collected through non-test and test instruments. Test instrument covers writing test. Non-test instruments cover questionnaire and interview. Furthermore, the data obtained through non-test were analyzed descriptively while the data obtained through test instruments were analyzed by employing descriptive statistical analysis. The result of data analysis showed that error on the basic subject-verb agreement was 70.75%. It was followed by the errors on final *-s/ -es* (14.15%), the using expressions of quantity (9.43%), the using *there + be* (5.66%), and none errors (0%) about some irregularities. This research found that there were six sources of errors due to the errors. In conclusion, the highest error made by the second semester students of English Department at Tadulako University dealing with subject-verb agreement was on the basic subject-verb agreement (70.75%) and it was influenced by 6 sources of errors.

**Keywords:** Subject-Verb Agreement; Errors; Writing; Paragraph; Sources of Errors

## INTRODUCTION

English is a language that is used widely all over the world. In some countries like United Kingdom, Australia, America, Netherland, and Canada, English is used as the first language. In contrary, other countries, such as Malaysia, India, and Singapore, they use English as the second language. In Indonesia, however, English becomes a foreign language.

Consequently, Indonesian students learn English as a foreign language after learning their first Indonesian language as the national language or the local language. As a result, English is difficult to learn due to big differences between the two languages. The difference almost occurs in all language aspects: morphology, syntax, and semantics.

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Those differences can influence the students ability in studying skills of the language. English as other languages consists of four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Writing is the most difficult skill for students. It is because writing needs the process in which the students have to learn words, phrases, clauses, and to arrange them into a grammatically correct sentence.

Grammatical sentence means that the sentence should follow the rules of the language. For example, the verb can be changed depending on the subject because different tenses have different rules, plural nouns sometimes are not always given 's' at the end of the word but they are in totally different words. Those conditions above sometimes make the students confused. For instance, the students frequently produce an error dealing with subject-verb agreement in a simple sentence like he drink a cup of coffee instead of he drinks a cup of coffee.

Based on those problems faced by the students above, Brown (2000) classifies sources of errors into four sources; interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies. Interlingual transfer mostly happens in the beginning stages of learning other languages. It is because the learners' knowledge about the first language is still strongly set. Therefore, it is not surprisingly if the learners in this stage do many errors. It is supported by Brown (2000:224) who asserts "The beginning stages of learning a second language are especially vulnerable to interlingual transfer from the native language, or interference".

Unlike interlingual transfer, Brown (2000) states that intralingual transfer refers to the target language as the main factor of errors in learning other language. It means that the factor comes out from the target language. It commonly happens to the students who have already known such knowledge about the target language. It is because they begin to operate the target structures within the target language.

Brown (2000:226) explains "Students often make errors because of a misleading explanation from the teacher, faulty presentation of a structure or word in a textbook, or even because of a pattern that was rotely memorized in a drill but improperly contextualized". It means that the sources of errors in context of learning could be the teachers or the materials.

The fourth major source of errors is communication strategies. He argues that it refers to the learning style. In means that the teachers should be sure that the techniques they used fit the materials in order to transfer the materials successfully. It is absolutely inappropriate if the teachers use silent method in teaching speaking subject.

In the students university level especially in the second semester, the students are expected to have an understanding not only how to write grammatically correct paragraph but also how to have good coherence (including cohesion) and unity. Coherence and unity themselves are related to the content aspect. Coherence and unity can be achieved if the sentences and paragraphs are grammatically accepted. Therefore, the ability of constructing grammatically correct sentences becomes very important to help them in writing a good paragraph.

In general cases, most of the students especially English students of Tadulako University have problem concerning grammar. The writer chose the second semester students as the sample. They took writing 1 subject where they were studying how to construct a good sentence when they have already studied structure 1 subject discussing about subject-verb agreement.

According to Turkenik (1998), there are three basic rules of subject-verb agreement. They are:

1. In simple present or past tense, the main verbs are be and have, for example: I am an undergraduate student; She was a student; and They have two children.
2. The verbs in the third person singular must be added –s, -es, or –ies in simple present tense, for example: Shania goes to school by bike; March watches television six hours a day; and The fly flies very fast.
3. Compound tenses use be or have as the first auxiliary, for example: Garcia was screaming along the road; Anitha has finished her study; and Nadia has been waiting here for two hours.

The researcher focused the research on the 5 subject-verb agreement rules (Azar, 1999) covering final –s/ -es: use, basic subject-verb agreement, subject-verb agreement: using expressions of quantity, subject-verb agreement: using *there + be*, and subject-verb agreement: some irregularities of writing descriptive paragraph written by second semester students of English Language Education Study Program of Tadulako University. The researcher chose descriptive paragraph because the generic structure of descriptive paragraph is simple present tense and one of the topic discussed in writing 1 is about descriptive writing.

The researcher formulated the research questions as follow:

- a. What kinds of subject-verb agreement errors are mostly made by the students in writing paragraph?
- b. Why do the errors occur?

Referring to the research questions above, the objectives of this research were to identify the subject-verb agreement error in students' writing, to find out the subject-verb agreement errors mostly made by the students in their writing, and to find out the source of the errors.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In this research, the researcher used descriptive research design that was conducted through analyzing errors of students' writing. In general, the aim of this research is to describe the reality behind phenomenon deeply and descriptively.

The participants of this research were the second semester students in English Study program of Tadulako University who took writing 1 subject. The second semester students are divided into four parallel classes: A, B, C, D. For that reason, with cluster technique, the researcher took students in one class to be the participants of this research.

In collecting the data, the researcher used three kinds of data collections. They were test, questionnaire, and interview. In this research, the main instrument was test. The researcher administered a test to the students to construct some paragraphs related to their topic in writing 1 subject which later on were analyzed descriptively. Therefore, the researcher only constructed the instruction to do the test.

Questionnaire was given to the participants in order to look for additional data that can support the data which had been found through interview and document. It was needed because some students cannot answer obviously in the interview sometimes. It will be written in form of multiple choices.

Interview is the conversation with particular purpose. In this research, the researcher was the interviewer and 10 participants were the interviewee. Interview would be used by the researcher to know the condition of participant. She interviewed the participant whether it was in a group or in individual through face to face interview. Before doing the interview, she made list of points that were interviewed. In this case, she did the enjoyable interview but seriously. The interviewer used interview guideline or instrument in terms of questions list that would be given to the 10 participants.

After doing data collection process, the researcher analyzed the result of interview and document by using analytically descriptive method. In other words, the researcher described the data in sequence language through narrative form. The researcher identified students' errors from the result of the participants' answers sheets, especially whether the

subjects agree the verbs or not. The percentage was obtained by using the following formula as stated by Sudjono (1989:79):

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

Where:

P = percentage of errors

F = frequency of incorrect answers

N= number of students

The researcher classifies the level based on the criteria proposed by Depdikbud (1993:37) as follow:

1. 66%-100% of errors are classified as high.
2. 36%- 65% of errors are classified as middle.
3. 0%- 35% of errors are classified as low.

## FINDINGS

First of all, the researcher would like to present the percentage of the students' errors based on the result of the test as follow:

Table 1  
The Number and Percentage of the Errors

No	Types of Error	Number of Error in Sentence
1.	final -s/es	15
2.	basic subject-verb agreement	75
3.	using expressions of quantity	10
4.	using there + be	6
5.	some irregularities	0
Total		106

Table 1 shows the number and percentage of the errors done by the students. It indicates that the students did the errors mostly in basic subject-verb agreement. None of the students did errors in some irregularities in subject-verb agreement. The errors can be seen in the students' incorrect answers as follow:

## 1. Final –s/-es

The table shows that there were 15 incorrect sentences dealing with omission –s/-es at the end of the verbs for the subject of the third person singular. The errors can be seen in most of the students' incorrect sentences as follow:

- a) Tadulako University provide good facilities for it's students.
- b) Which every year Tadulako University get more four thousand new candidate University sudent,
- c) Tadulako University become better.

The 3 subjects on these sentences above were Tadulako University which means it belongs to the third person singular. It needs singular verbs. Consequently, the verb in sentence a) should be provides instead of provide, sentence b) should be gets instead of get, sentence c) becomes instead of become.

## 2. Basic subject-verb agreement

Table 1 shows that there are 75 sentences dealing with basic subject-verb agreement rules. There are two sorts of errors done by the students.

First, many students constructed sentences with no verbs. Even the sentences need auxiliary verb and ordinary verbs. They refer to omitting them. The researcher can say that the sentences have no verbs. There were 25 sentences which had no verbs. The errors can be seen in most of the students' incorrect sentences as follow:

- a) Tadulako University location at Soekarno Hatta.
- b) This university most popularity in Sulawesi Tengah.
- c) In Tadulako University still much building which is still process building.

In sentences a) and b), they should have auxiliary is after the subject Tadulako University and this university. In sentence (c) it should need verb has after the subject Tadulako University.

Second, most of the students did errors in agreeing the verbs to the subject. They were not certain how to use the singular or plural verbs in constructing sentences. There were 48 sentence errors dealing with this case. Those errors are:

- a) And in Tadulako university still have dirty toilet.
- b) Teacher training and education faculty is the biggest faculty then other faculty and have the most student.
- c) I think Tadulako university condition and facilities is not good.

In sentence a) the verb have should be has because the subject is the third person singular, Tadulako university. In sentence b) the second verb should agree with the first verb, as a result, the verb should be has instead of have. In sentence c) the subject requires plural verb because the subject is plural. It means that it should use are instead of is.

### 3. Using expressions of quantity

The table shows that there are 10 incorrect sentences dealing with using expressions of quantity. Here are the examples of the errors:

- a) ....because in each faculty have Wifi.
- b) In every faculty also have mosques and canteens.
- c) All of the material is given by power point, so every class should have infocus.

In sentences a) and b) the quantity expression of each and every requires singular verbs. As a consequent, the verb should be has instead of have. In sentence c) the quantity expression of all of requires plural verb, so the verb should be are instead of is.

### 4. Using there + be

The table shows that there are 6 incorrect sentences dealing with using expression of quantity. The errors of the sentences can be seen as follow:

- a) In there have many buildings, plants, and pants.
- b) There's a lot of useless bulding in untad.
- c) There are is strategic.

In sentence a) it requires plural verb because the subject is plural (many buildings, plants, and pants). Therefore, the verb should be are instead of have. In sentence b) it also requires plural verb because the subject is plural (a lot of useless building). As a result, the verb should be are instead of is. In sentence c) there are double verbs.

### 5. Some irregularities

Table 1 shows that none of the students did the errors in some irregularities for subject-verb agreement.

The result from next instrument is from questionnaire. The questionnaire was intended to obtain some information from the research sample on their subjective condition as well as the difficulties faced in learning English especially subject-verb agreement. The researcher used questionnaire for the purpose of making the students to choose the available options freely. The results of the questionnaire were presented in the following tables.

Table 2  
The Students' Problem on English Lesson

No	Statement	Options	Frequency
1.	Apakah anda mengalami kesulitan belajar bahasa Inggris?	Selalu	3
		Sering	22
		Jarang	10
		Tidak pernah	1
Total			36

Table 2 shows that 3 students got problems in learning English; 22 students frequently got problems; 10 students rarely had problems; 1 students never faced problems. Based on this information, the researcher concluded that most of the students had problems in studying English lesson. It means that it is not surprising if they do not really master in using subject-verb agreement in constructing grammatically correct sentence.

Table 3  
Students' Opinion about Subject-Verb Agreement

No	Statement	Options	Frequency
2.	Bagaimana pendapat anda tentang <i>subject-verb agreement</i> ?	Sangat sukar	4
		Sukar	20
		Mudah	12
		Sangat mudah	0
Total			36

Students' opinion about subject-verb agreement is there were 4 students thought subject-verb agreement was very difficult; 20 students considered that was difficult; 12 students said that was easy; none of the students reflected that was very easy. Based on this information, the researcher concluded that most of the students thought that subject-verb agreement was difficult. It supported that they did many errors in using subject-verb agreement because most of them felt it was difficult.



Table 4

## The First Time the Students Study about Subject-Verb Agreement

No	Statement	Options	Frequency
3.	Sejak kapankah anda mempelajari <i>subject-verb agreement</i> ?	SD	4
		SMP	18
		SMA	5
		Perguruan tinggi	9
Total			36

Table 4 informs the first time the students study about subject-verb agreement; 4 students have started since from elementary school; 18 students have begun since from junior high school; 5 students studied since senior high school; 9 students have known when they are in college. Based on this information, the researcher concluded that most of the students had learned subject-verb agreement since in junior high school. It means that even they had studied for years but they had not mastered how to use subject-verb agreement especially in written form.

Table 5

## The Students' Response on Subject-Verb Agreement

No	Statement	Options	Frequency
4.	Apakah anda mengalami kesulitan dalam menggunakan <i>subject-verb agreement</i> ?	Selalu	7
		Sering	3
		Kadang-kadang	24
		Tidak pernah	2
Total			36

Here are the students' responses on subject-verb agreement; 7 students had difficulty; 3 students often got difficulty; 24 students sometimes found difficulty; only 2 students never faced difficulty in using subject-verb agreement. Based on this information, the researcher concluded that most students still got difficulty in using subject-verb agreement.

Table 6  
Students' Problems in Learning Subject-Verb Agreement

No	Statement	Options	Frequency
5.	Apakah yang membuat Anda kesulitan dalam menggunakan <i>subject-verb agreement</i> ?	Jarang belajar di rumah	12
		Jarang kerja tugas	1
		Jarang bertanya pada dosen	13
		Ketiganya benar	10
Total			36

Table 6 draws the students' problems in learning subject-verb agreement; 12 students rarely studied at home; 1 student seldom did tasks; 13 students seldom asked lecturers; 10 students said those three statements are true. Based on this information, the researcher concluded that the main source of students' problem in learning subject-verb agreement is because they rarely ask the lecturers when they get difficulty or confused about the materials discussed.

Table 7  
Students' Response on Some Irregularities in Subject-Verb Agreement

No	Statement	Options	Frequency
6.	Apakah anda mengetahui aturan-aturan pengecualian dalam <i>subject-verb agreement</i> ?	Mengetahui dengan baik	0
		Kurang mengetahui	26
		Mengetahui	7
		Tidak mengetahui	3
Total			36

These are the students' responses on some irregularities in subject-verb agreement; none of the students understood well; 26 students did not really mastered the irregularities of subject-verb agreement; 7 students knew that kind of irregularities; 3 students was not familiar with some irregularities in subject-verb agreement. Based on this information, the researcher concluded that most of the students did not really know about some irregularities in subject-verb agreement. It could be addressed to the case found that there was no errors about some irregularities in subject-verb agreement. It was because they never did sentence construction by using some irregularities.

Table 8

Students' Alternative if They Get Difficulties in Learning Subject-Verb Agreement

No	Statement	Options	Frequency
7.	Apa usaha Anda jika mengalami kesulitan dalam menggunakan <i>subject-verb agreement</i> ?	Bertanya pada dosen	8
		Membaca buku-buku yang berhubungan dengan <i>subject-verb agreement</i>	18
		Bertanya pada teman	9
		Tidak melakukan apa-apa	1
Total			36

Table 8 indicates students' alternative if they faced difficulties in learning subject-verb agreement; 8 students asked lecturers; 18 students read related books; 9 students asked friends; 1 student did not do anything. Based on this information, the researcher concluded that most of the students tried to find related books when they got difficulties in studying subject-verb agreement. Since they still did such errors about subject-verb agreement, only reading books was not too effective to solve the problems.

Table 9

Students' Response on How Important to Learn Subject-Verb Agreement is

No	Statement	Options	Frequency
8.	Apakah mempelajari <i>subject-verb agreement</i> itu penting?	Sangat penting	21
		Kurang penting	0
		Penting	14
		Tidak penting	1
Total			36

Students' response on how important to learn subject-verb agreement are; 21 students assumed that is very important; none of the students stated that is not too important; 14 students thought that is important; 1 student said that is not important. Based on this information, the researcher concluded that most of the students thought that learning subject-verb agreement is very important. Unfortunately, even they knew it was very important and had learned it since in the junior high school, they still got difficult in using it.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the collected and analyzed data, they show that the second semester students of English department at Tadulako University still had many difficulties in using subject-verb agreement. It was proved by the percentage of their errors. They did 106 errors dealing with subject-verb agreement.

The students did many errors. They did 70.75% errors dealing with the basic subject-verb agreement. It indicates that basic subject-verb agreement is high level of difficulties. The next four kinds of errors are classified as low level of difficulties. They did 14.15% errors about final *-s/ -es*, 9.43% errors about using expressions of quantity, 5.66% errors about using *there + be*, and 0% errors about some irregularities. It means that the students are not getting many difficulties in relation to those four kinds of subject-verb agreement.

The results of the test which have been transferred into percentage shows that there are only two classifications of the error; high and low. High means that the students get many difficulties while low means that the students do not get many difficulties. The highest errors dealing with basic subject-verb agreement (70.75%). In contrast, 0% of the students did errors towards some irregularities. It happened because the students were asked to construct some paragraphs and none of the students used some irregularities rule.

Sentence fragment is one of the weaknesses at the students. It is supported by Bram (1995) who explains that one of the four common weaknesses at the sentence level for beginner is sentence fragment. As the beginners, the students constructed many sentences fragments instead of a sentence. In other words, they wrote many sentences without any verb. The researcher found there were 25 sentences having no verb. Most of the sentences were about describing the place of a thing, for example, Tadulako University location at Soekarno Hatta.

Moreover, Turkenik (1998) divides subject-verb agreement into two parts; basic rules and special cases of subject-verb agreement. The basic rule looks more simple than the special cases because they have patterns. Yet the special cases mostly are unpredictable, it makes them more complicated than the basic rules. Therefore, the errors of special cases should be more frequent than the basic rules. This research found totally in contrast to Turkenik's theory (1998). It found the most error made by the students is misplacing *have/ has*. They wrote 40 errors concerning misplacing has to have. All those errors are because the subject is a thing but they used have instead of has, for example, Tadulako University have wide land.

Unlike Syukri's research (2003) which found that the highest error percentage was on missing *-s/ -es* (10.21%) for plural while in the recent research the highest percentage was on basic subject-verb agreement (70.75%). The recent study found that the lowest error percentage in relation to some irregularities (0%) meanwhile in Syukri's study (2003) the lowest is on wrong/missing inflected ends (0%).

Those errors were made by the students can be explained more by looking at the result of the questionnaire. The questionnaire results can draw the reasons why they did those errors. The researcher found there are 3 main reasons. The first is because the students assumed that subject-verb agreement material was difficult. As a result, it is not surprising if they did many errors regarding to subject-verb agreement. The second reason is because they did not ask the lecturer when they found difficulties in learning subject-verb agreement neither in the classroom nor in outside. The last reason is because they did not know exactly about the subject-verb agreement rules. That is why they did not know well how to construct correct sentences.

It is very surprising when the researcher did both spreading the questionnaire and interviewing all the participants, they did not know what subject-verb agreement is. After giving them some examples like she drinks some coffee or Ali goes to school, the researcher assumed that some of them realized what subject-verb agreement is. In opposite, some of them still confused about adding *-s* even for the subject or the object in determining the verb.

Furthermore, the sources of errors found in this research are intralingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies as proposed by Brown (2000). Intralingual transfer includes the rules of subject-verb agreement itself. The students sometimes understand when the material is being taught but they will easily forget the rules after the class. Some of them said it was because they did not study it continuously, but some of them claimed that the lecturer taught unclearly. What they know about subject-verb agreement is about adding *-s* only. Consequently, they sometimes did not pay any attention to the subject when determining the verb, but they pay attention to the object. It means they claim that adding *-s* at the end of a noun is the same as verbs rules for the third person singular in simple present tense. In other words, they do overgeneralization.

Next, context of learning also becomes one of the sources of error. This research found that both the lecturer and the textbook are the sources of the error made by the students regarding to subject-verb agreement. The students told that they did not understand well what the lecturer explains. For that reason, they could not master the rules or even they

know the rules at the time of learning process, but they still get confused when applying the rules into sentences. In fact, they were not taught the five subject-agreement rules as proposed by Azar (1999) in structure 1 class. The lecturer did not give them any textbook. He/she only showed them the materials on the powerpoint which containing too many explanations that they did not understand. They also stated that it also could be their mistake because they did not ask the lecturer when they got difficulties or even did not understand at all.

The last source is about communication strategies. The students claim that the lecturer taught them with inappropriate method. It made them bored while the learning-teaching activity was in progress. They said that the lecturer dominantly did speech. They did not have enough time to do exercises since learning structure of a language needs more exercises. In other words, too many explanations are not enough yet.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

Based on the analysis of data and description in the previous section, the researcher would like to put forward her conclusions as follow:

The students' errors in using subject-verb agreement in simple present tense indicate that the most errors made by the students were basic subject-verb agreement. Here are the percentage of the errors; 70.75% errors of basic subject-verb agreement; 14.15% errors of final *-es/ -es*; 9.43% errors of using expressions of quantity; 5.66% errors of using *there + be*; 0% errors of some irregularities.

Besides kinds of errors, there are six sources of errors due to subject-verb agreement rules. The first is the students think that subject-verb agreement material is difficult. The second is they do not ask the lecturer when they found difficulties in learning it neither in the classroom nor outside. The third is because they do not know exactly about the subject-verb agreement rules. The fourth is intralingual transfer. The fifth is context of learning. The last is communication strategies.

In connection with the conclusions, the researcher would like to give some suggestions to students, lecturers, and next researchers. For the students, they should do more exercises in learning subject-verb agreement and be active to ask the lecturers or friends when getting difficulties in learning subject-verb agreement. They should know and master the 5 rules of subject-verb agreement to construct grammatically correct sentences. For the lecturers, they should develop better atmosphere for the students in order to make them feel free to ask when they get difficulties about it, and provide an appropriate method

in teaching English. Last, for the other researchers, they may do some studies about subject-verb agreement in relation to other skills like listening, speaking, and reading.

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