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## SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT ERRORS IN THE WRITTEN ESSAYS OF DIPLOMA STUDENTS AT NJALA UNIVERSITY

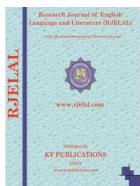
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### Abstract

The study of learner errors has been of interest in language teaching. This is because such studies provide an insight into what goes on during the process of second language learning. The insights from such studies guide language teachers as to what methods to adopt in teaching their learners. The purpose of this study is to investigate errors of subject-verb agreement in the written essays of diploma students at Njala University. In order to carry out this study, a total of 60 participants drawn from the Computer Science, Electronics and Telecommunications, Data Processing and Industrial Technology diploma programmes were randomly selected for data collection. The participants were asked write two essays each of at least three hundred words from a list of topics that were relevant to their daily experiences and culture. The essays were used to elicit information regarding the errors in the use of the grammatical rule of subject-verb agreement. The study revealed that the most common type of subject-verb agreement errors committed by students at the diploma level was that which has to do with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular and plural subjects.

Lack of correct information or background knowledge; use of prescriptive teaching methods; poor attitude on the part of the learners came up as some of the factors which account for the inappropriate use of subject-verb agreement in students' writings. The use of active learning teaching methods and a positive attitude towards learning would go a long way in addressing some of the challenges encountered by students.

Keywords: subject-verb agreement, errors, second language learning, attitude.

### INTRODUCTION

English plays an invaluable role in Sierra Leone. Apart from the fact that it is the official language of the country, it is also the second language of most people. English is used at all levels of the educational system. As Rossiter (2015:2) puts it,

“English is the main language taught and the medium of instruction in schools and in higher education. As a result, virtually all writing is in English .... The ability to use English ‘properly’ is therefore the sign of an educated person, the lack of English carries the stigma of being uneducated, illiterate.”

Because English is not the mother tongue of Sierra Leoneans, its use poses tremendous challenges for most users. One of such challenges has to do with errors related to subject-verb agreement. Incorrect use of subject-verb agreement is a grammatical error which is very common in the writings of students at all levels – primary to tertiary. It is important to mention that this particular type of error is committed even by graduates, some of whom are educators. The fact that errors are committed by non-native speakers should not be anything completely strange; making errors is part of the language acquisition process (Harmer, 2007); errors should serve to inform instructors about their learners' progress in terms of learning a target language and more importantly guide them in tailoring their delivery strategies (which methods work best). However, persistence of certain errors, especially at the higher levels, is a cause for concern.

The grammar of a language deals with the way that particular language works. It shows how words are combined to form sentences; in other words how the various parts of speech function to form intelligible utterances. The most commonly used word classes in any language are nouns and verbs. The reason for this is obvious; with nouns, for example, one has to label referents in his or her speech and writing otherwise his or her communication would be quite unclear - difficult to understand. Correct labeling of referents aids clarity in communication. Verbs, one could say, play a very essential role in languages; their importance cannot be overemphasised. There is no single sentence without a verb. In fact a construction cannot be referred to as a complete sentence if it does not have a verb/predicate. Communication would be almost impossible without these two elements. Even with the language acquisition process these are the first classes of words that an individual learns. According to Freeman and Freeman (2004),

“Children start with the most important words: nouns to represent objects and verbs to represent actions. “

In light of the aforementioned, it is glaringly clear that one cannot talk about subject-verb agreement without mentioning the essential functions of nouns and verbs in languages. Even though other elements such as pronouns, noun phrases, gerunds, gerund phrases etc. could also serve as subjects, nouns are perhaps the most frequently occurring subjects in sentences; and this particular study focuses on an issue related to subjects and verbs, and how they function together in sentences.

English Language is widely acclaimed as a global language which is used as a medium of instruction as well as subject of instruction in Sierra Leone and many other post-colonial countries. The aim of teaching English Language has always been to enable learners communicate effectively in the language. In the process of teaching and learning, teachers as well as learners encounter numerous challenges in the area of grammar and usage. The grammatical rule of subject-verb agreement otherwise referred to as concord continues to pose a serious challenge to second language of English.

Communication basically involves the exchange of information between people; it is a vital part of our everyday lives. Communication is enhanced when people use language appropriately to convey meaning.

Communication can be put into three categories – oral, written and non-verbal. The focus in this piece of work is on written communication, although it must be noted that the oral mode also has great relevance to the topic being dealt with. It is through oral and written communication that participants make use of their competence (knowledge of a language) in real contexts.

As has already been mentioned, one cannot construct a sentence without making use of subjects and verbs. Even with imperative sentences, if a subject is not clearly stated it will be implied. Subjects and verbs are the compulsory elements in a sentence. A good grasp of subject-verb agreement is required for every day communication. Speaking and writing are essential parts of an individual's social, educational and professional life. Writing is given more emphasis

here because that is what is mostly used in formal situations. If a writer litters his or her work with errors of subject-verb agreement, that would send a bad signal about his or her intelligence and credibility even though he or she might be understood by the receiver. It is therefore important for learners, teachers and all others concerned to treat this particular topic seriously.

From interactions with students and other users of English, it has been observed over the years that a major grammatical error committed by learners and other users of English as a second or foreign language is that related to subject-verb agreement. It is so visible – in the classroom, on radio and television, in meetings – everywhere.

Subject-verb agreement is grammatical rule which states that the subject and the verb must agree in number and person. This means that when the subject is singular, the verb must be singular, and when the subject is plural, the verb must also be plural. This might appear to be a straightforward rule, but studies have shown many learners find difficulty in applying this rule when they speak and write. Al Harun & Sufian (2015) identified three major subject-verb agreement errors among University students in Bangladesh, which were listed as follows;

- i. Common errors regarding third person singular number in agreement with verbs.
- ii. Common errors regarding third person plural number in agreement with verb.
- iii. Common errors related to disagreement of verb with compound subjects, (Al Harun & Sufian 2015: 100-101)

From the above findings, it is clear that some users of English as a second or foreign language find it quite challenging to internalise this grammatical rule when they write or speak. Students are often seen to be committing the same errors repeatedly. They have difficulty particularly with “the third person singular” constructions. Learners tend to misunderstand the rule used in forming the plural of nouns by adding ‘s’. They fail to realize that in the third person singular, the ‘s’ does not indicate plural as it is the case with nouns, but rather the ‘s’

is used to indicate singular. In the examples below, nouns are pluralized by adding ‘s’.

<b>Singular</b>	<b>Plural</b>
computer	computers
book	books
sentence	sentences
table	tables
pencil	pencils
box	boxes

It appears they transfer that same concept to verbs too. With verbs, however, number works differently – with particular reference to the third person singular. In fact, it is quite the contrary of what obtains with nouns. This is what Richards (1971) refers to as overgeneralization, wherein learners have the tendency to create deviant structures based on their experience of other structures of the target language they have learned.

With verbs, the singular form takes an ‘s’ whilst the plural does not. It is important to stress here that this particular point goes for the third person singular (not the first and second). There are other cases that are potential sources of learning difficulty for second language learners. These include structures with nouns preceded by each, every, many a; parenthetical phrases; neither... nor; either ... or constructions etc. Some learners also experience confusion of agreement when dealing with nouns that name subjects such as mathematics, politics and physics. (Fitikides 2009).

Studies have proved that analyzing the errors of learners in the process of second language learning can help in identifying learners’ linguistic difficulties (Khansir 2012). Thus, identifying the difficulties of learners will provide a sure way of finding remedies to these problems associated with learning a second or foreign language.

#### **AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

##### **AIM**

The aim of this study is to investigate the problems that diploma students at Njala University face in the use of subject-verb agreement in their written essays.

**OBJECTIVES:** The specific objectives of this study include the following:

- To examine the errors of diploma students in the use of subject-verb agreement in their written essays.
- To determine reasons why they commit such errors.
- To suggest ways of helping students overcome the problems identified in the use of subject-verb agreement.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Subject-verb agreement is performance related; it has to do with a user's ability to produce correct structures; a person's ability or inability to use concord correctly can be detected in their speech or writing. It cannot be observed when an individual is reading or listening (as these are receptive skills), but it can be observed when one is speaking or writing (the productive skills which are based on performance – the ability to apply one's competence in a given context).

Dulay, Burt & Krashen (1982) emphasize the importance of error analysis in second language learning generally when they stated that it reveals to teachers, syllabus designers and textbook writers the areas that we need to focus our pedagogy on.

Incorrect use of subject-verb agreement does not so much affect intelligibility, but it does have a negative effect in that it sounds awkward in the ears of proficient speakers or users of the language. The way a person speaks or writes portrays a lot about their level of proficiency. Although it is natural for slips to occur, but when such slips become persistent, it becomes a cause for concern. In examinations, marks are not awarded for appropriate content only. Clarity and orderly presentation of material; use of correct sentences; appropriate diction; and proper use of capitalization and punctuation are all components that are scored. Therefore if a student's paper is cluttered up with a lot of grammatical mistakes, especially ones having to do with subject-verb agreement, it means that that particular student has not grasped the concept well, and he or she will

have a low score for grammatical accuracy. In other words he or she is yet to have a thorough understanding of how the language works.

Language is very crucial to human existence. People need to communicate all the time. Without communication we cannot understand each other and the world around us. According to Brown (1987:101),

“Language is so pervasive a phenomenon in our humanity that it cannot be separated from the larger whole - from the whole persons that live and breathe, and think and feel.”

One needs language in almost everything one does. When applying for a job, one may need to fill in application forms or write application letters; he/she also has to write Curriculum Vitae or résumés. In the workplace people might have to write reports, memos, letters etc, as the context requires. All of these must be carefully written – free of grammatical errors and spelling mistakes. If an applicant submits a poorly written application letter to his or her prospective employer, it would surely militate against him or her. His or her chances of being employed would be narrowed down. Even if such a candidate is employed, if he or she does not improve, he or she will be less valued in the work place. Employers prefer people with excellent communication skills. For these and other such reasons, the issue of concord must therefore be treated with utmost seriousness. This study would be of tremendous significance to learners of English as a second or foreign language; teachers of English language; textbook developers; teacher educators and other stakeholders who are interested in language teaching and learning. It would be particularly useful to teachers because they are in the business of passing on information to learners. They should be aware of the different approaches to language teaching and how each works to achieve a desired goal. In other words teachers should be au fait with active teaching methods that facilitate deeper comprehension and internalisation of concepts.

From the perspective of teaching methods, it is often assumed that several factors come into play as far as effective delivery of lessons is

concerned. Moreover, a conducive learning environment is very key in determining the performance of learners. Some classroom environments are not very conducive to enhance effective learning. As Kuyvenhoven (2010) notes, high pupil-teacher ratio, inadequate resources, insufficient interaction time and inadequate seating accommodation are all challenges faced by teachers in the primary schools in Sierra Leone, hence the need for well trained and motivated teachers.

Even though there might be attendant problems, the methodologies employed by the teacher could render such challenges almost invisible. As Freeman and Freeman (2004) suggests that when teachers understand the basic language structures and processes, it becomes easier for such teachers to make good decisions on the choice and handling of difficult topics such as phonics, spelling and grammar.

From observation of what goes on in the classrooms, one can tell that teachers use more of the prescriptive rather than descriptive approach. The former renders learners passive participants who cannot solve problems through enquiry; they rather depend on memorising 'rules' which they cannot apply in everyday discourse. As a result when they are faced with situations where those memorized rules do not seem to hold, they are left in a limbo. That is why Farrant (2004:170) observes that

"Efficient teaching in school demands of a teacher sound knowledge of all that pupils must know, together with an ability to relate the content, methods, sequence and pace of his work to the individual needs of his pupils, using appropriate media to support him."

If teachers work assiduously to ensure that learning takes place, learners would grasp concepts more easily, and by the time they get to the tertiary level they would not be committing errors of subject-verb agreement so profusely.

One cannot talk about the relevance of such a study without mentioning learners' attitude

towards the way they approach the learning of English. Students admire people who speak and write English well but, most do not want to make an effort to improve on their own weaknesses so that their performance will get to the level of those they admire so much. In fact, most look for alternative ways of expressing themselves - in order to avoid making mistakes. The use of social media (through which they can evade the need for complete sentences) presents itself as a great option for them. This choice, however, does not aid proficiency; it somewhat encourages the use of unacceptable structures. A learner can only become a proficient user of a language through consistent practice. Attitude constitutes an integral part of learning; in other words it controls the way an individual approaches his or her learning. Positive attitudes yield maximum output whereas poor attitudes do not promote increase in learning. Teachers can also help learners develop a positive attitude to learning the target language by making them see the relevance of what they are learning. All of this is closely linked to the use of appropriate methodologies as has been discussed earlier.

#### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

For the purpose of data collection, sixty (60) first year students pursuing the Diploma programme in Computer Science, Electronics and Telecommunications, Data Processing and Industrial Technology at Njala University were randomly selected. This category of students had barely spent one semester of their study.

In order to elicit information from these students, a test was administered on continuous writing, and students were exposed to examination conditions while writing their essays. They were each required to write two different essays of at least 300 words long on a topic that was relevant to their culture and daily activities. This was to ensure that participants wrote as freely as possibly on familiar issues in their communities.

The students were given clear instructions and were asked to feel relaxed while writing their essays. They were given thirty minutes to write each essay. At the end of the first thirty minutes, the students were given five minutes to settle in



order to start the second essay. The purpose of asking them to write essays was to elicit as much ratable language as possible.

At the end of the test, the scripts were each carefully marked and every subject-verb agreement error was identified and listed for further analysis. The errors recorded in each of the essays were categorized under different headings. The errors committed in subject-verb agreement were presented in tables and percentages. Some examples of the most prevalent errors were also listed in the analysis.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

From the students' essays, errors related to subject-verb agreement were sorted under eleven headings. The numbers of errors that participants committed in their essays are summarized in the table that follows.

**Range of Errors**

Table 1- Range of Errors

No.	Number of errors committed	Committed by
1.	None	08 students
2.	One error	19 students
3.	Two errors	11 students
4.	Three errors	14 students
5.	Four errors	02 students
6.	Five errors	03 students
7.	Six errors	02 students
8.	Seven errors	Nil
9.	Eight errors	01 student
10.	Total number of students	60 students

The number of subject-verb agreement errors committed by each participant ranged from 0 – 8.

The table above clearly reveals that out of the 60 students to whom the test was administered, only 8 (13.3 %) did not commit any error of subject-verb agreement. This does not however mean that those students didn't commit any other type of error, but since the focus of this study is on subject-verb agreement, discussions of other errors have not been considered here. The

other 52 students committed at least one error of subject-verb agreement. This means that 86.7 % of the participants who took the test committed at least one subject-verb agreement error. The significant difference between the two groups being discussed is evidence enough that a lot of second language learners find the rules of subject-verb agreement quite challenging. The table below presents a summary of this same piece of information in a more concise manner.

Table 2

Category of Candidates	f	%	Cumulative Percentage
Committed 1 or more errors	52	86.7%	86.7 %
Committed no error	08	13.3%	100 %
Total	60	100%	

As has already been discussed, there is great disparity between the number of those who committed errors of concord and that of those who didn't as summarized in the table above.

Table 3 - Categories of Errors

No.	Categories of Subject-Verb Agreement Errors	f	%	Cumulative Percentage
1.	Noun Subjects (1) <i>Singular Subject - Plural Verb</i>	26	20.6 %	20.6%
2.	Noun Subjects (2) <i>Plural Subject - Singular Verb</i>	28	22.2 %	42.8%
3.	3 <sup>rd</sup> Person Subject Pronouns (1) <i>Singular Pronoun - Plural Verb</i>	15	11.9 %	54.7%
4.	3 <sup>rd</sup> Person Subject Pronoun (2) <i>Plural Pronoun -</i>	08	6.3 %	61.0%

	<i>Singular Verb</i>			
5.	Inconsistency within a single structure	04	3.2 %	64.2%
6.	Errors relating to <i>Indefinite Pronouns used as Subjects</i>	06	4.7 %	68.9%
7.	Errors relating to <i>Demonstrative Pronouns used as Subjects</i>	03	2.4 %	71.3%
8.	<i>Nouns preceded by each/ every</i>	02	1.6 %	72.9%
9.	Errors of concord with <i>Relative Pronoun subjects</i>	29	23.0 %	95.9%
10.	Errors relating to <i>2<sup>nd</sup> Person Subject Pronouns</i>	03	2.4%	98.3%
11.	Errors relating to <i>1<sup>st</sup> Person Subj. pronouns</i>	02	1.6 %	99.9%
	Total	126	99.9 %	

The table above clearly shows the types of errors that were identified in the essays of the participants of this research. A total of 126 errors were identified in all the essays and they have represented in percentages. . The errors committed by the participants were categorized under eleven (11) headings.

The first and second categories deal with errors of concord between **Noun Subjects and Verbs**. Contrary to the rule of subject-verb agreement, these categories represent situations where a singular subject takes a plural verb and the reverse. Out of the 126 errors recorded, 26 (20.6%) had to do with singular noun subjects used with plural verbs, and 28 (22.2%) showed instances of plural subjects being used with singular verbs. This shows that students did not understand the subject-verb agreement rule which states that third person singular subjects take singular verbs and third person plural subjects take plural verbs.

The third and fourth categories are those having to do with third **Person Subject Pronouns**.

There were 15 errors (11.9 %) relating to the use of third person singular subject pronouns with plural verbs whilst 8 errors (6.3%) were found for third person plural subject pronouns being used with singular verbs,.

Category 5 represents cases of **inconsistency within the same structure**. What this means is that the same writer uses concord both correctly and incorrectly within a single sentence. Although this particular pattern was seen in only 4 (3.2%) of the recorded errors, it is a clear indication that there are some students who are not even aware of appropriate usage of concord. The correct bit might have come about as a result of guessing. It could also mean that such students just used the subjects and verbs haphazardly; such students have a poor background knowledge regarding concord.

The sixth category deals with errors of subject-verb agreement between **indefinite pronouns (used as subjects) and verbs**. Of the total number of errors identified in the students' essays, 6 (4.7%) fell under this group; singular indefinite pronouns were used with plural verbs and vice versa.

Category 7 reveals that 3 (2.4%) of the recorded errors had to do with disagreement between **Demonstrative Pronouns (used as subjects) and verbs**. For example, the sentences "This make students to pay less attention" and "These goes to the students", the participants failed to understand that demonstrative pronoun 'this' is singular and should go with a singular verb. In category 8, 2 (1.6%) of the errors were those relating to **nouns preceded by 'each' or 'every'**. In such situations, a singular verb should be used when a sentence starts with 'each' and 'every', but the contrary was done as would be seen in the examples later.

Category 9 deals with one of the most frequently occurring type of error discovered in the writings of the students to whom the test was administered – that relating to concord between **Relative pronouns (used as subjects) and verbs**. Relative pronouns are usually used to introduce subordinate or dependent clauses which serve as modifiers in complex sentences. The modifying clauses being specifically referred to for the

purpose of this piece of work are the adjectival clauses which modify nouns and pronouns in sentences. Data collected from the marked scripts revealed that this category accounted for 29 (23.0%) out of the 126 errors documented.

The tenth and eleventh categories deal with errors of subject-verb agreement between **2<sup>nd</sup> person subject pronouns and verbs** and **1<sup>st</sup> person subject pronouns and verbs** respectively. The table above shows that 3 (2.4%) of the errors detected were related to the use of second person subject pronouns whilst 2 (1.6%) had to do with the use of first person subject pronouns. It seems somewhat absurd that such errors are being committed by students at the tertiary level. Even though one might say that they only account for an insignificant percentage, it really deserves some serious thought because it signals that some basic concept has still not been thoroughly grasped. The first and second persons should not pose much problem as they retain the base form of the verb. The change occurs with the third person. It is only the third person singular that takes **s** or **es** at the end, as the context dictates. These two examples illustrate the point being made.

Singular	Plural
I eat	We eat
You eat	You eat
He/She/It <b>eats</b>	They eat

A careful look at Table 3 indicates that the majority of subject-verb agreement errors committed by the students in this study are those directly related to the third person. Even though the errors have been categorized under various labels it could be observed that the first four categories are all directly linked with the third person. The noun subjects in categories 1 and 2 are all part of the third person umbrella. In light of the foregoing one could say that errors relating to agreement between third person subjects and verbs account for over half of the errors recorded – 77 out of 126 (61.1%); this clearly is in accord with what was mentioned earlier – the fact that students find the third person usage a very challenging area in relation to subject-verb agreement.

Errors dealing with relative pronoun subjects and verbs follow closely, accounting for 23% of the errors recorded. Very closely related to the third person subjects are the errors of demonstrative and indefinite pronoun subjects; in fact they should be regarded as third person subjects, looking at it from the perspective of the role of participants in a conversation. It is the third person that can be captured under demonstrative and indefinite pronoun subjects. This simply points to the fact that most of the segments highlighted in Table 3 are branches of the third person.

The following are some examples of errors of subject-verb agreement under the various categories extracted from the essays of the participants: The subjects in each of the sentences are in boldface while the verbs are underlined.

1. Errors of Agreement between Noun Subjects and Verbs
  - (a) Singular Noun Subjects Used with Plural Verbs
    - i. Because at the end when **the student** fail the teacher may ask him or her to bring money.
    - ii. If **a rider** do not know how to ride properly and then jump on the street they will cause accident.
    - iii. **Examination malpractice** in Sierra Leone have become so alarming.
  - (b) Plural Noun Subjects Used with Singular Verbs
    - i. **Movements** occurs while writing the exams.
    - ii. Moreover **some parents** believes whatever **their children** tells them.
    - iii. **The teachers** in that particular school has less time to teach the children.
2. Errors of Agreement between 3<sup>rd</sup> Person Subject Pronouns and Verbs
  - (a) Singular Subject Pronouns Used with Plural Verbs



- i. **He** distribute the materials to make money.
  - ii. **He** or **she** don't want to lose money.
  - iii. At the end of the day **he** or **she** expect his or her teacher to help him or her.
- (b) Plural Subject Pronouns Used with Singular Verbs
- i. **They** always goes with the perception that children in the cities are clever.
  - ii. **They** always leaves their own side of the road.
  - iii. **They** tells pupils no phone is to be taken in the hall.
3. Errors Showing Inconsistency within a Single Structure
- i. **The student** continues doing this, and get him or herself in public exams.
  - ii. And **they** don't want to know how **these children** gets these grades.
  - iii. In the case of the parents, they are the ones that give money to **their children** or **wards** that asks them.
4. Errors of Agreement between Indefinite Pronoun Subjects and Verbs
- i. **Some** smokes, they communicate on Mobile phones while carrying passengers; **some** usually goes to night clubs at night.
  - ii. Since **one** do not know how to use the road signs ...
  - iii. If **someone** try to cross to the other side of the road, **somebody** hit them.
5. Errors of Agreement between Demonstrative Pronouns Used as Subjects
- i. **These** goes to the students.
  - ii. All **that** happen because some students are not ready to learn.
  - iii. **This** give student to pay less attention.
6. Errors of Agreement between Noun Subjects Preceded by 'each' or 'every' and Verbs
- i. Almost **every** facet of Sierra Leone society participate in examination malpractice.
  - ii. **Each** pupil know that rule.
7. Subject-verb Agreement Errors – Relative Pronoun Subject and Verbs
- i. This is because so many bike riders **who** does not know the major signs and images are on the road.
  - ii. Some even have this thick black smoke **that** normally come out of the bike.
  - iii. And these are **the parents** that has no value for education.
8. Errors of Agreement between 2<sup>nd</sup> Person Subject Pronouns and Verbs
- i. If **you** looks at the road sides, the signal or signs that show how to ride are there.
  - ii. For example, **you** wants to cross to the other side of the road ...
9. Errors of Agreement between 1<sup>st</sup> Person Subject Pronouns and Verbs
- i. Any way that is not legal but illegal is what **we** refers to as malpractice.
  - ii. Secondly, **I** says it is the government institutions who are responsible for the many fatal accidents.

## CONCLUSIONS

From what has been discussed so far, we can come to the conclusion that errors related to concord are common in the writings of diploma students of Njala University. The errors collected from marked scripts were carefully recorded and categorized. Most of the errors had to do with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person subjects (nouns and pronouns) and verbs as could be seen in the examples above. As was mentioned earlier, there are other errors in the

given examples, but nothing has been said concerning those kinds of errors because the focus of this piece of work is on subject-verb agreement. The whole discussion therefore revolves around that specific area...

Most of the errors committed were as a result of the lack of correct information or background knowledge. Some apparently transferred their knowledge of the rules of forming the plural of nouns in the process of learning the grammatical rule of subject-verb agreement.

Some of the examples revealed that certain students could not determine the true subject of a sentence. They were rather confused by intervening phrases as seen in example 1 (b) iii above. All of this is as a result of poor background knowledge or failure to understand the rule of subject-verb agreement.

The attitude of students towards their own learning is another factor that affects the way they use language. They prefer the shortcuts provided by social media and the like. In fact some detest continuous writing exercises so much because they know that is where their weaknesses will be brought to light. Some students erroneously think that because English is not their major discipline of study, it should not be given much attention. They forget the fact that it is the medium through which one learns the other subjects. A good command of English is a great advantage to an individual and a fundamental requirement in university education and the workplace.

Methodologies employed by teachers could also affect the way students learn. The more effective the methodology a teacher uses, the greater will be the output in terms of learners' comprehension. Because of overcrowded classrooms, some teachers do not give time to practice by giving classwork or assignments. In some cases where assignments are given, students are given the necessary feedback on their performance.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to help students avoid making errors of subject-verb agreement, instructors

should endeavour to use less of the prescriptive methods; descriptive methods encourage exploration and discovery of ideas and consequently deeper understanding of concepts. The integrated approach to language teaching especially at the primary and high school levels could yield great dividends. Learners should also be encouraged to see the relevance of what they are studying. Thus they will be motivated to accord it due attention.

It is therefore recommended that the Communicative Language Teaching approach should be adopted so that learners will not only memorise rules, but rather they should be made to practice the use of subject-verb agreement. This brings to mind the issue of prescriptive versus descriptive approaches to English Language teaching. Teachers should not only rely on teaching the grammatical rules; they should also allow students to practice the rules they have learned in every day discourse.

Students must also strive to develop a positive attitude towards their work. Mastery comes through consistent practice. Determination and interest are also key factors. Students should rid themselves of the view that because English is not their main discipline of study, they should not dedicate much time and attention to it. Students are advised to listen to good radio stations and view TV channels where English is used impeccably. They can also try to imitate positive role models. Reading a lot of well written materials, doing group activities that involve peer mentoring are also strategies for developing language skills. As was mentioned earlier, the way a person approaches his or her work goes a great way to determine the extent to which he or she will succeed in his or her learning, and the issue of subject-verb agreement is no exception.

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