

The Performance of Iraqi EFL University Students in Using Subject Verb Concord: An Error Analysis

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1. Introduction

In English, the term concord refers to the correspondence between two grammatical items in which a form of one item involves a corresponding form of another. The most important kind of concord in English is between subject and verb:

1 He Smiles.

2 They smile.

The problem arises from the state that most Iraqi EFL university students may encounter difficulties in using concord in English because students are often confused in establishing a correspondence between subjects and verbs which may result from their misunderstanding of some rules of concord.

The present study aims at:

1. Identifying the performance of Iraqi EFL university students in using different types of concord in English.
2. Identifying the sources of the students' errors so that remedial suggestions can be put in this regard.

It is hypothesized that most Iraqi EFL university students face difficulties in using subject-verb concord in English.

To achieve the aims of this study, the following steps will be followed:

1. Presenting a theoretical study about concord in English.
2. Selecting a sample of Iraqi EFL university students; fourth year in a diagnostic test designed to find out the difficulties they face in using concord in English and investigating their performance at the recognition and production levels.
3. Analyzing the findings of the test to identify learners' errors and classify these errors according to their sources as well as suggesting the remedies.

2. Concord in English

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 176) define concord as the correspondence between two grammatical units in a sentence. The most important type of concord in English is concord of number between subject and verb in that a singular subject requires a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb:

3 He plays football.

4 They play football.

These two sentences represent the correspondence between subjects and verbs. In sentence (3) a singular subject (he) requires a singular verb (plays) while in sentence (4) a plural subject (they) requires a plural verb (play). Therefore, concord of number and person are achieved in these sentences. For purposes of concord, a subject in the form of clause or prepositional phrase counts as singular:

5 To deal with them as kids is not correct.

6 After the exams is the time to relax.

3. Principles of Grammatical Concord, Notional Concord and Proximity

Quirk *et al* (1972: 359) mention the following factors which interfere with concord:

A. Grammatical concord: in which the verb agrees with its subject in number:

7 The window is open.

8 The windows are open.

B. Notional concord: the correspondence between the verb and subject according to the idea of number rather than the actual presence of the grammatical marker for that idea:

9 The government have broken all their promises.

C. Proximity: the agreement of the verb with the noun or pronoun closely precedes it:

10 No one except his parents agree with him.

11 One in ten take drugs.

4. Types of Concord

The present study focuses on concord of number and person between the subject and its verb because they are the most important types of concord and most students' errors may occur within these areas.

4.1 Concord of Number

Leech and Svartvik (1994: 317) refer to number as a feature of nouns, for example:

12 Book - singular which denotes one and

Books - plural which denotes more than one.

4.1.1 Collective Nouns

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 177) state that collective nouns, notionally plural but grammatically singular, obey notional concord:

13 The audience were enjoying the play.

In collective nouns, the choice of the verbs is based on whether the group is being considered as a single undivided body or as a collection of individuals.

Quirk *et al* (1985: 760) mention that a singular noncount noun head may be premodified by phrases coordinated by 'and'. As subject, the noun phrase will be followed by a plural verb:

14 American and Dutch beer are (both) much lighter than British beer. [American beer is.....and Dutch beer is.....]

But when the phrases are postmodifying, a singular verb is used:

15 Beer from America and Holland is much lighter than British beer.

4.1.3 Coordinated Subject

Quirk and greenbaum (1973: 177) mention that when a subject encompasses two more noun phrases coordinated by 'and', a distinction is to be done between appositional and non-appositional coordination. Under the latter coordination we include cases that have a verb in the plural:

16 Tom and Mary are now ready.

17 What I think and what I do are my own affairs.

With conjoinings which represent a single entity a singular verb is used:

18 The hammer and sickle was flying from a tall flag pole.

But conjoinings expressing a mutual relationship take a plural verb:

19 Your problem and mine are similar.

4.1.4 Quasi-Coordination

Quirk *et al* (1985: 761) mention that subject noun phrases may be linked by prepositions such as (as long with, rather than, and as well as). Grammatical concord involves a singular verb when the first noun phrase is singular:

20 The captain, as well as the other players, was tired.

4.1.5 Coordination with 'Either.....Or' and 'Neither.....Nor'

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: 178) denote that the correlatives 'either...or' and 'neither...nor' require a singular verb when used as singular and they need a plural verb when they are used as plural subject:

20 Either John or Mary is working.

21 Neither your father nor your brother is here.

22 Either the strikers or the bosses have misunderstood the claim.

23 I believe that neither the politicians nor the electors are very clear about the issue. (Burton, 1982:151)

Quirk *et al* (1985: 762) indicate that the principle of proximity can be applied to subject-verb concord. The number of the verb is determined by whichever phrase comes last. In colloquial English, a plural verb may be used with two singular subjects connected by 'neither...nor' in which 'nor' can behave like 'and':

24 Neither John nor his wife have arrived.

This is more natural in spoken idiom than the form preferred by some:

25 Neither he nor his wife has arrived.

4.1.6 Indefinite expression as subject

Indefinite expressions of amount or quantity, especially with the determiners and with the pronouns no, none, all, some, any and fractions such as half, have both count and noncount uses. With noncount nouns, the verb is singular but with count nouns the verb is plural:

26 Some cement has arrived.

27 Some books have been placed on the shelves. (Ibid: 763)

4.2 Concord of Person

In addition to concord of number, English has also concord of person. Radford (1988: 305) mentions three forms of person in English Grammar:

1. The first person form (I-singular and we-plural)

2. The second person form (you-singular and plural)

3. The third person form (he, she, it-singular and they- plural)

Lyons (1968: 240) and Flower (1971: 86) state that the pronoun, which functions as a subject, determines the form of the verb that agrees with it:

28 I/We/You They come.

29 He/She/It comes.

5. The Test

According to Bachman (1990: 20) and Skehan (1999: 203), a language test is a systematic method and a means of checking the student's performance through the elicitation of certain behaviour to make inferences about certain characteristics of an individual.

The test is composed of two questions and each question consists of fifteen items. The first question is designed to measure the student's performance at the recognition level in which they are given incomplete sentences with two options and they have to fill in the blanks with the correct choices. The second question is designed to measure the student's performance at the recognition level. The students are provided with sentences and they have to indicate whether the verbs of the sentences are right or wrong then they have to correct the wrong ones.

The items of the test are taken from the grammar sources referred to previously especially “ A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language”, 1985, by R. Quirk et al. as well as “ A University Grammar of English-Workbook”, 1947, by R. A. Close.

The test is designed to locate the precise area of difficulty faced by Iraqi EFL university students in using Subject- verb concord in English.

5.1 Results Analysis

This section shows the results of the test according to the students’ performance of each question of the test to show whether the hypothesis of this study is confirmed or refuted.

5.1.1 Students’ Performance of Question One

Question one is designed to measure the students’ performance at the recognition level to find out whether the students are able to recognize and choose the correct verbs that correspond to the given subjects. The number of correct responses at the recognition level is (681, 45.4 %) which is lesser than that of incorrect responses (819, 54.6 %) and this in turn verifies the hypothesis of the study.

5.1.2 Students’ Performance of Question Two

The second question is designed to measure the students’ performance at the production level to see whether the students are able to indicate whether the verbs of the sentences are right or wrong and to correct the wrong ones. The number of correct responses at the production level is (573, 38.2 %) which is lesser than that of incorrect responses (927, 61.8 %) and this also confirms the hypothesis of the study.

5.1.3 Students’ Performance of Subject-Verb Concord in the Whole Test

According to the findings of the test, the total number of students’ correct responses at both the recognition and production levels is (1254, 41.8 %) which is lesser than that of incorrect responses (1746, 58.2 %) as shown in the following table:

Table (1) :The Students’ Performance in Using Subject-verb Concord in the Whole Test

Level	No. of Question	No. of Correct Responses	%	No. of Incorrect Responses	%
Recognition	1	681	45.4	819	54.6
Production	2	573	38.2	927	61.8
Total		1254	41.8%	1746	58.2%

5.2 Error Analysis

Taylor (1975: 74) describes error analysis as a type of linguistic analysis which concentrates on the error made by the learners.

5.2.1 Sources of Errors

Corder (1973: 293) states that learners’ errors can be a strategy when learning a second (or foreign) language and evidence of the state of the learner’s knowledge and how language is learned or acquired.

According to Brown (1987: 177-8) the learners’ errors can be attributed to four main factors: interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies.

5.2.1.1 Interlingual Transfer

Lado (1964: 86) mentions that this source of error is the result of the influence of the mother tongue on the students' performance in the target language. Ellis (1994: 48) denotes that many errors occur as a result of the influence of the mother tongue which takes place when the patterns of the native language differ from those of the target language.

The interlingual effect is clear through the students' errors in their responses at the recognition level to items (1), (2), (10) and (15) in question (1):

Item (1) No one except his own supporters agree with him.

* No one except his own supporters agrees with him

Item (2) One in ten take drugs.

*One in ten takes drugs.

Item (10) More than one person has protested against the proposal.

*More than one person have protested against the proposal.

Item (15) The captain, as well as the other players, was tired.

*The captain, as well as the other players, were tired.

The percentage of errors of this kind is (31%) of the total errors in the whole test.

5.2.1.2 Intralingual Transfer

Richards (1974: 6) mentions that intralingual errors are due to the generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language. So, they are items produced by the student which do not reflect the structure of the mother tongue. Such errors may be attributed to certain factors one of which is **overgeneralization** which refers to the incorrect application of the previously learned material to a present foreign language context. Other factors include processes like **ignorance of rule restrictions** which leads the student to apply some rule to a category to which it is not applicable, **incomplete applications of rules** that involve a failure to learn more complex types of structure because the learners find that they can achieve effective communication by using simple rules, and **false concepts hypothesized** that may derive from faulty comprehension of a distinction in the target language.

The items (7), (9), and (12) in question (1) can illustrate the subjects' strategy of overgeneralization:

Item (7): Either the mayor or his deputy is bound to come.

*Either the mayor or his deputy are bound to come.

Item (9): Either your eyesight or your brakes are at fault.

*Either your eyesight or your brakes is at fault.

Item (12): Your problem and mine are similar.

*Your problem and mine is similar.

The items (3), (11) and (15) in question (2) are examples of the students' ignorance of rules restrictions:

Item (3): Ours is a great people, isn't it?

*Ours are great people, aren't they?

Item (11): More than one student has succeeded.

*More than one student have succeeded.

Items (15): Bacteria of the harmful kind cause disease.

*Bacteria of the harmful kind causes disease.

The items (11) and (14) in question (1) are examples of the strategy of incomplete applications of rules:

Item (11): Neither you, nor I, nor anyone else knows the answer.

*Neither you, nor I, nor anyone else know the answer.

Item (14): The two guests have arrived but neither is welcome.

* The two guests have arrived but neither are welcome.

The items (1), (4), and (9) in question (2) can illustrate the false concepts hypothesized:

Item (1): There are people waiting to see you.

*There is people waiting to see you.

Item (4): The police have unenviable task.

*The police has unenviable task.

Item (9): The news, I am afraid, has got much worse.

*The news, I am afraid, have got much worse

The percentage of such errors is (39%) of the total errors.

5.2.1.3 Context of Learning

Errors may also result from the influence of the situation of learning (the classroom), the misleading explanation by the teacher, or the textbook writer who focuses on some aspects of the target language and neglects others. Buck et al.(1989: 3) define context as “the circumstances or settings in which a person uses language”. The impact of the context of learning can be found in the second question in items (7) and (8):

Item (7): The youth are more serious than my generation was.

*The youth is more serious than my generation was.

Item (8): The youth was more serious than his uncle.

*The youth were more serious than his uncle.

The percentage of errors in the students’ performance is (8%) of the total errors.

5.2.1.4 Communication Strategies

Farch and Kasper (1983: 14) mention that these strategies have to do with how we express our messages. They are potentially conscious plans by the student to solve what presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal.

There are many communicative strategies but some of them have been found in the students’ responses such as “ guessing” which refers to the use of clues that are language or not language based, such as knowledge of the context or text structure. The following examples are from question (1), items (4 and 6) and question (2), items (5 and 10):

Item (4): The hammer and sickle was flying from a tall flag pole.

*The hammer and sickle were flying from a tall flag pole.

Item (6): Good and bad taste are included by example.

*Good and bad taste is included by example.

Item (5): Your old folk don’t know anything about us.

*Your old folk doesn’t know anything about us.

Item (16): Mumps is an unpleasant ailment.

*Mumps are un pleasant ailment.

The percentage of errors that might be related to such strategies is (22%) of the total number of the students’ errors.

6. Conclusions

The results of the test of Iraqi EFL university students at the fourth year in the Department of English/ College of Education/ University of Babylon in using subject-verb concord in English can be concluded in the following:

1. The number of correct responses at the recognition level (question one) is (681, 45.4%) which is lesser than that of incorrect responses (819,54.6%).
2. The number of correct responses at the production level (Question two) is (573,38.2%) which is lesser than that of incorrect responses (927,61.8%).
3. The total number of students' correct responses at both the recognition and production levels is (1254,41.8%) which is lesser than that of incorrect responses (1746,58.2%). These results indicate that Iraqi EFL university students face difficulty in using subject-verb concord in English and this in turn verifies the hypothesis of the study.
4. The poor performance of the testees is attributed to the following strategies arranged according to the errors ascribed to each:
 - a. Intralingual transfer constitutes the majority of students' errors since it accounts for (39%) of their total errors. These errors are concerned with different grammatical errors committed by the students.
 - b. Interlingual interference constitutes (31%) which is the second highest rate of errors. These errors are related to the use of the rules of the native language and the use of literal translation by the students.
 - c. The students' use of communicative strategies is the third rate of errors (22%) when the students attempt to structure what they mean.
 - d. The negative effect of context of learning constitutes the fourth rate since it accounts for (8%) of their total errors.

The following points can be suggested as remedies for the difficulties encountered by the students in using subject-verb concord:

1. More attention should be given to subject-verb concord in English because this type is the most important type of concord and it is very important for the students to learn.
2. The grammar books should include more subjects about English concord with enough examples.
3. More emphasis should be given to the topic under investigation at all levels of education.

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Appendix One The Test

Q1. Fill in the blanks with the correct choices to complete the following sentences:

1. No one except his own supporters.....with him. (agree, agrees)
2. One in ten.....drugs. (takes, take)
3. The public.....tired of demonstrations. (is, are)
4. The hammer and sickle.....flying from a tall flag pole. (was, were)
5. What I say and what I think.....my own affair. (is, are)
6. Good and bad taste..... included by example. (is, are)
7. Either the Mayor or his deputy.....bound to come. (are, is)
8. A large number of people.....applied for the job. (has, have)
9. Either your eyesight or your brakes.....at fault. (are, is)
10. More than one person.....protested against the proposal. (have, has)
11. Neither you, nor I, nor anyone else.....the answer. (know, knows)
12. Your problem and mine.....similar. (are, is)
13. Measles.....sometimes serious. (is, are)
14. The two guests have arrived but neither.....welcome. (is, are)
15. The captain, as well as the other players,.....tired. (were, was)

Q2. Indicate whether the verbs between brackets in the following sentences are correct or wrong and correct the wrong ones:

1. There (is) people waiting to see you.
2. The people wholehearted (support) you.
3. Ours (are) great people, (aren't they)?
4. The police (has) an unenviable task.
5. Your old folk (doesn't) know anything about us.
6. Splendid cattle (was) grazing on the hillside.
7. The youth (is) more serious than my generation was.
8. The youth (were) more serious than his uncle.
9. The news, I'm afraid, (have) got much worse.

10. Mumps (is) an unpleasant ailment.
11. More than one student (have) succeeded.
12. The acoustics of this hall (are) excellent.
13. The archives of this society (is) kept in the basement.
14. (Does) people always believe what you say?
15. Bacteria of the harmful kind (cause) disease.

Appendix Two

The Answers of the Test

Q1.

1. agree
2. take
3. are
4. was
5. are
6. are
7. is
8. have
9. are
10. has
11. knows
12. are
13. is
14. is
15. was

Q2.

1. wrong- are
2. correct
3. wrong- is, isn't it?
4. wrong- have
5. wrong- don't
6. wrong- were
7. wrong- are
8. wrong- was
9. wrong- has
10. correct
11. wrong- has
12. correct
13. wrong- are
14. wrong- Do
15. correct