CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.0 Introduction

This chapter consists of four sections. The first section focuses on the summary of the study. The second part concerns conclusions drawn from the findings, while the third section is concerned with implications drawn from the study. Section four offers suggestions for further research.

5.1 Summary

This study investigated the written subject-verb agreement errors in the interlanguage of 50 Form 1 students of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Menjalara, an urban school in Kepong, Kuala Lumpur. From a sum of 4000 responses elicited from a self-designed cloze test, a total of 2454 (61.4%) responses which were incorrectly used was analysed according to five categories of singular and plural subject-verb agreement errors of the Present Tense form. The quantity and percentage of errors in every question was tabulated out of which the most common error was derived by noting the error with the highest frequency count. The most common error for each particular question was described and its possible cause(s) stated in terms of interlingual or intralingual factors. The study also sought to examine the singular and plural subject-verb agreement and which of the two posed more difficulty.

5.2   Conclusion

In this study, the following conclusions can be drawn. The first conclusion is based on Table 8.0:

Table 8.0: Distribution of Singular and Plural subject-verb agreement error category

Category	Subject + verb	% of subject-verb agreement errors
1	Singular subject + *does*	54.1
	Plural subject + *do*	45.9
2	Singular subject + *has*	53.1
	Plural subject + *have*	46.9
3	Singular subject + *full verb*	52.2
	Plural subject + *full verb*	47.8
4	Singular subject + *is*	54.5
	Plural subject + *are*	32.7
	Singular subject + *am*	12.6
5	Countable nouns + *auxiliary verb*	50.3
	Uncountable nouns + *auxiliary verb*	49.7

From the above table, it can be seen that the most number of errors occurred in the singular verb agreement than in the plural verb agreement. Thus, most of the subject-verb agreement errors are found in the singular subject + verb categories:

1. Singular subject + *does*:   54.1%

2. Singular subject + *is /am*:   67.1%

3. Singular subject + *has*:   53.1%

4. Singular subject + *full verb*: 52.2%

The higher frequency of *singular subject-verb* agreement errors indicated that the learners encountered more problems in the above-mentioned areas as compared to the *plural subject + verb* category of errors. As for the *countable nouns + auxiliary verb* and *uncountable nouns + auxiliary verb* category of errors, the level of difficulty encountered by learners was almost the same. Hence, it can be concluded that singular subject-verb agreement forms present more difficulty to the learners. This finding is consistent with Sheena's (1996) study which revealed that the percentage errors for the singular subject and plural verb was 67.8% compared to the plural subject and singular verb errors which constituted 32.2% of the subject-verb concord selection errors.

The second conclusion is based on Table 8.1.

Table 8.1   Distribution of errors by categories

Category	Subject + verb	% distribution of errors by categories
1	Singular subject + *does*	24.7
	Plural subject + *do*	
2	Singular subject + *has*	23.1
	Plural subject + *have*	
3	Singular subject + *full verb*	21.2
	Plural subject + *full verb*	
4	Singular subject + *is*	15.5
	Plural subject + *are*	
	Singular subject + *am*	
5	Countable nouns + *auxiliary verb*	15.5
	Uncountable nouns + *auxiliary verb*	
	Total	100

In the above table, the third column shows the overall percentage of errors according to categories. The percentage distribution of errors by categories is obtained by dividing the total number of errors for that particular category by the total number of errors for the five categories and multiplying by 100. The *singular subject + does and plural subject + do* category has the highest percentage of errors (24.7%), followed by the *singular subject + has and plural subject + have* category (23.1%), *singular subject + full verb and plural subject + full verb* category (21.2%). The last two categories have the same percentage of errors: *Countable nouns + auxiliary verb*

106

and *uncountable nouns + auxiliary verb* category (15.5%) and *singular subject + is /am* and *plural subject + are* category (15.5%). Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the *singular subject + does and plural subject + do* category posed the most difficulty followed by the *singular subject + has and plural subject + have* category and *singular subject + full verb* and *plural subject + full verb* category. However, learners also encountered considerable difficulty in the *countable nouns + auxiliary verb and uncountable nouns + auxiliary verb* apart from *singular subject + am/is* and *plural subject + are* categories.

The process of establishing the causes of errors was partly speculative and partly based on evidence of errors found in the most common error of a particular question. The causes of errors can be attributed to interlingual and intralingual factors.

As for interlingual factors, there were 3 questions which constituted this structure, "Subject + verb + adjective" and indicated transfer from L1 (Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu) as a source of errror, examples of which are as follows:

39. * She <u>very</u> tall and slim. (is)

47. * She <u>very</u> serious about her health. (is)

61. * It does not eat the food even when it <u>very</u> hungry. (is)

Based on the above sentences, a general pattern can be observed in that **BE** (*is*) as the main verb is omitted before adjectives and the qualifier "very" is used instead.

In the L2, the **BE** verb is used before an adjective, whereas, it is absent in Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu. Thus, the omission of the **BE** verb could be attributed to the absence of such verb in Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu. This pattern when compared with the Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu structures showed negative transfer from the two languages. Sheena (1996) also noted that the verb, **BE** is deleted before an adjective phrase in her study of verb phrase errors and the omission of the copula **BE** accounted for 55.9% of the distribution of Omission errors. It can be observed in this study that the likely cause of the most common error made by students for 4 (Questions 39, 47, 51 and 61) out of 80 questions could be due to negative transfer from Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu.. Thus, it can be concluded that the interlingual errors constituted a small percentage of subject-verb agreement errors. This corresponds with the findings of other research (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982; Gass and Selinker, 1993; Sheena, 1996).

It can be noted from the data in Chapter 4, that several subject-verb agreement errors show a lack of concord when an adverb of frequency, such as, 'sometimes', 'never', 'often', 'usually' or 'always' precedes the verb as demonstrated in the following examples:

* He sometimes <u>do</u> his homework at night. (does)

* I usually <u>helps</u> my mother. (help)

However, the corpus of errors did not confirm this hypothesis because it can be observed that students still commit numerous subject-verb agreement errors even when the verb came directly after the subject.

In comparison with MT interference errors, a large percentage of subject-verb agreement errors stem from intralingual errors. They are learner strategy-based errors (overgeneralisation, misanalysis and approximation), induced errors (faulty models, drills, mechanical exercises in concord and exercises based on substitution tables), performance errors (lack of attention and lack of practice in the /s/ form), ignorance of L2 rules and L2 rule restrictions.

The findings from the data indicated that drills, mechanical exercises and exercises based on substitution tables, ignorance of L2 rules and rule restrictions, lack of practice in the –/s/ and /z/ form and lack of attention are among the common causes of subject-verb agreement errors. Hence, intralingual rather than interlingual factors are the causes of most of the singular subject-verb agreement errors made by the L2 learners.

5.3   Implications

With the implementation of the communicational English syllabus in Malaysian schools, emphasis on the use of language is more often on fluency. As stated earlier by educationists (Sunday Star, 3 October 1999), as long as learners can communicate effectively, the purpose is served. However, there is a need to strike a balance

between fluency and accuracy for effective communication. Batstone (1994) suggests an approach which not only focuses on grammatical forms but also emphasizes self-expression and meaning, thereby encouraging learners to use grammar as a communicative instrument. In short, there should be a balance between grammar-based exercises and communicative tasks.

In the teaching of subject-verb agreement items, teachers should exercise caution when using drills, mechanical exercises in concord and exercises based on substitution tables. Though there is a place for patterned practice especially for beginners, teachers need to teach students thinking skills so that students study the context instead of attending mainly to the first part of the sentence (the subject-verb agreement) and ignoring the rest of the sentence. Chacko, in his article, "Driven by need to teach thinking" (Sunday Star, 28 May 2000), suggests teaching students to think by learning to put content in context. Perhaps, teachers should use short excerpts to enable learners to see how the surrounding words affect the meaning of the context. The teachers could expose students to more English by focusing on exercises and passages on subject-verb agreement items. Thus, with indepth and intensive practice on subject-verb agreement items students would be more exposed to such structures.

As for material writers, there is a need to get qualified editors to edit the materials produced so that learners do not produce wrong forms. They should also produce grammar materials in context since the main disadvantage of such materials is a lack of contextualization (Petrovitz, 1997). The Textbook Division (BBT) cited a 1998

Universiti Putra Malaysia study which revealed that teachers thought workbooks were more important than textbooks in students' learning (Sunday Star, 2 July 2000). Since workbooks are extensively used by teachers and students in teaching and learning, extra care should be exercised in the selection and approval of workbooks.

Learners lack knowledge in subject-verb agreement rules. There is a need to teach grammatical rules which serve as guides in learning L2. Kumar, in his article, "Take a little time to master some troubling agreements" (Sunday Mail, 28 May 2000), advocates learning rules which enables learners to master a very important aspect of English grammar. However, emphasis should not be on rules alone but on meaning, that is, by making it communicatively meaningful. Since learners "seem to look for general patterns, for systematic occurrences" (Fromkin and Rodman, 1974:253), they should be taught learner strategies of inductive learning, such as, making hypothesis about L2 rules from recurrent features of subject-verb agreement items. Learners should also be made aware of rule restrictions in subject-verb agreement in the course of teaching and learning.

As seen in chapter 1, most learners do not cultivate the habit of reading English books. Teachers should help to promote the reading habit through interesting materials so that learners unconsciously adopt the structures without having to resort to rules most of the time. As suggested by Jagjeet (Sunday Mail, 28 May 2000), one of the best ways to improve one's English is to read extensively.

Most of the subject-verb agreement errors are in the Present Tense Third Person singular form. One of the common causes of errors is the omission of the suffix "*s*" in the singular verb form. This could be due to the lack of practice in the /s/ form as in the omission of /s/ in *keep* in the sentence, *She keep one in her house (keeps)*. This confirms the findings of George (1963) and Mohamed (1998) who claim that the Simple Present Third Person –*s inflexion* causes great difficulty for many learners. I agree with Mohamed (1998:61) that teaching techniques in terms of classroom drills do not make enough "distinction between marked and unmarked forms". Thus, learners should be made aware of the importance of the suffix "*s*" in singular verbs as it constitutes an important part of English grammar. Perhaps, emphasis on pronouncing the /s/ and /z/ sounds and writing the "*s*" suffix attached to singular verbs and plural countable nouns should be emphasized. George (1963: 42) suggests that it is a good strategy to "begin using only the 3rd Person form of the Simple Present, avoiding *I, you, we, they* until well after the 3rd Person singular usage is established." Teachers should also draw learners' attention to the fact that there is a distinction between the Simple Present Third Person singular subject and the plural subject which in turn determines the singular or plural usage of the verb as the subject-verb agreement is absent in Mandarin, Bahasa Melayu and Tamil.

Another common cause of subject-verb agreement errors is lack of attention. Teachers could encourage learners to proof-read their work in order to minimize errors. Peer-correction also helps students to identify their friends' errors. Through peer and self-evaluation, it is hoped that students will take responsibility for their own work and hence, eliminate careless errors and produce more effective work.

5.4   Suggestions for further research

Based on the above study, the following are some of the recommendations for further research:

1.   Research on subject-verb agreement errors using 70% cloze test and 30% free writing as instrumentation.

2.   A study on other forms of subject-verb agreement items.

3.   A study on subject-verb agreement errors among students from three races: Chinese, Indians and Malays.

4.   A longitudinal study on subject-verb agreement errors of a few students to verify if learners' performance could be improved over a period of time.

5.   A study on the Simple Present and Past Tense subject-verb agreement forms.