

The Use of Guided Writing to Improve Students' Understanding of Subject-Verb Agreement

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to highlight the use of guided writing in improving students' understanding of subject-verb agreement. The participants involved in this action research were 20 intermediate female students in Form 4. Based on the writing composition test, it is found that the students had difficulty in their understanding of subject-verb agreement especially in verb tense. This action research was conducted in a secondary school in Malaysia. Pre-test and post-test are the main instruments used to collect the data. The result implicates that students committed less verb tense errors through the use of guided writing. This research indicates that the use of guided writing can improve students' understanding of subject-verb agreement.

Keywords: Guided Writing, Subject-Verb Agreement, Verb Tense

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Communication is key to everything. People communicate with each other for many purposes. That being said, there are multiple ways people use to communicate. One way to communicate with each other is through language. Hornby(2007) as cited by Kurniawan(2016) stated that language is indeed very crucial to every individual as it is used as a means of communication. Language is also regarded as a system in the form of speech or writing used by individuals in a particular country.

Norhalimah(2016) in her article entitled 'The Subject-Verb Agreement Problems In Writing At The Eight Graders Of Mts An-Nur Palangka Raya' mentioned that "subject-verb agreement is needed and it requires understanding by students in making a sentence."(p.34).

An observation is made to a group of students and it turned out that students did not include English in their daily conversation with their friends and even teachers when they were in school. The students were being too dependent solely on their first language which is Malay to communicate with other individuals. The researcher was aware that this situation could cause some problems in the students' English performance skills. The students' writing performance were put on a test and it was found that most of the students made a lot of errors in their essay especially the wrong rules of subject-verb agreement.

English is taught in Malaysia as the second language while Malay language is taught as the first language in all schools in Malaysia. As English is taught as the second language, students tend to make a lot of errors when using the language. Students make mistakes the most in their writing because they take a long time to think in expanding their ideas and constructing sentences. Consequently, students do not follow the correct rules of subject verb agreement as in their first language the agreement between the subject and the verb is not italicized that much. This study attempts to focus on improving the students' understanding of subject verb agreement through guided writing.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Hudson(1998), the very first rule of subject-verb agreement is applied when a verb agrees in number or a person with its subject. That being mentioned, a singular subject must have a singular verb while plural subjects must have plural verbs to form a correct sentence.

A study conducted by Al-Dubib(2003) entitled Error Analysis of Subject-Verb Agreement in the Writing of EFL Saudi Female Students: A Corpus-Based Study shows

how female students in the English Department of Languages and Translation encountered problems in applying the rules of subject-verb agreement in their writings. The students have problems in applying subject verb agreement rules in their writings because most of them feel connected too much to their first language in which the subject and the verb do not necessarily need to agree to each other so they do not need to obey any rules of subject verb agreement. Furthermore, this study has shown similar results with a project entitled University Students' Errors in Using Subject Verb Agreement in Writing in which the researcher in charge stated that the students construct deviant sentences from their first language (Shami, 2013).

The suggestion given by (Lipstein & Renninger, 2007) states that students who have more interest in writing are more likely to develop a better understanding in writing. This is because they have the knowledge to use different strategies in their writing and to construct correct sentences.

There are many types of essay writings that are taught to the students in schools in Malaysia. One of the types of essay writings that is popular for English is guided writing. Initially there are two ways to conduct guided writing based on the research made by (Galbraith & Torrance, 2004) which are planning strategy and revising strategy.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study conducted is an action research which utilizes quantitative data and quantitative analysis technique. Watts(1985) as cited by Ferrance(2000) stated that "action research is a process in which participants examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using the techniques of research."(p.118)

The study is conducted in a cluster secondary school which is located in Ipoh, Perak. It focuses on 20 female Malay students in Form 4 class and the level of English proficiency for all students is intermediate. The students are in the same class and they are account stream students. The students were being too dependent solely on their first language which is Malay to communicate with other individuals. The use of English language in their communication is only limited to when they are learning English subject in class at school as the students do not converse in English with other people when they are outside of school. The students are chosen since they are in the same class and it helps the researcher to conduct activities with them.

Before the study was conducted, a request was made to get permission from the principal of the school and then it was proceeded by distributing consent letter to the

students who were involved. The participants were labelled as numbers in the study for the sake of confidentiality.

The data collection techniques used to collect data from the students are pre-test and post-test. The data collection is needed to see what problems are encountered by the students in subject-verb agreement.

For the pre-test, students were required to write an essay titled 'About Me' in which they were initially informed that it was just a class task which needed to be completed in 40 minutes and the essay should not be written less than 350 words. No other guidance was given and students wrote their essay solely based on what they wanted to write whereas for the post-test they were given a worksheet to guide them in writing their essay.

Pre-test and post-test have the same method of analysis. Once the students finish writing their essays, the essays were collected and marked. The wrong rules of subject-verb agreement especially in the wrong usage of verb tense errors in students' essay writing were identified. After that, all the errors were recorded and the data were presented in a table to show the result. This is done to compare the students' performances in their understanding of subject-verb agreement during the pre-test and post-test and to find the mean values committed between the pre-test and post-test.

There was a limitation to the study because some students wrote different length of essays even when they were informed in advanced to write essay that should not be less than 350 words. Consequently, there were students who wrote extremely long essay and thus they committed more errors than those who have written short essay.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study aims to highlight the use of guided writing in improving students' understanding of subject-verb agreement. This segment discusses the results of the finding based on the two research questions the study.

4.1 RQ1: What are the problems among students in understanding the rules of subject-verb agreement?

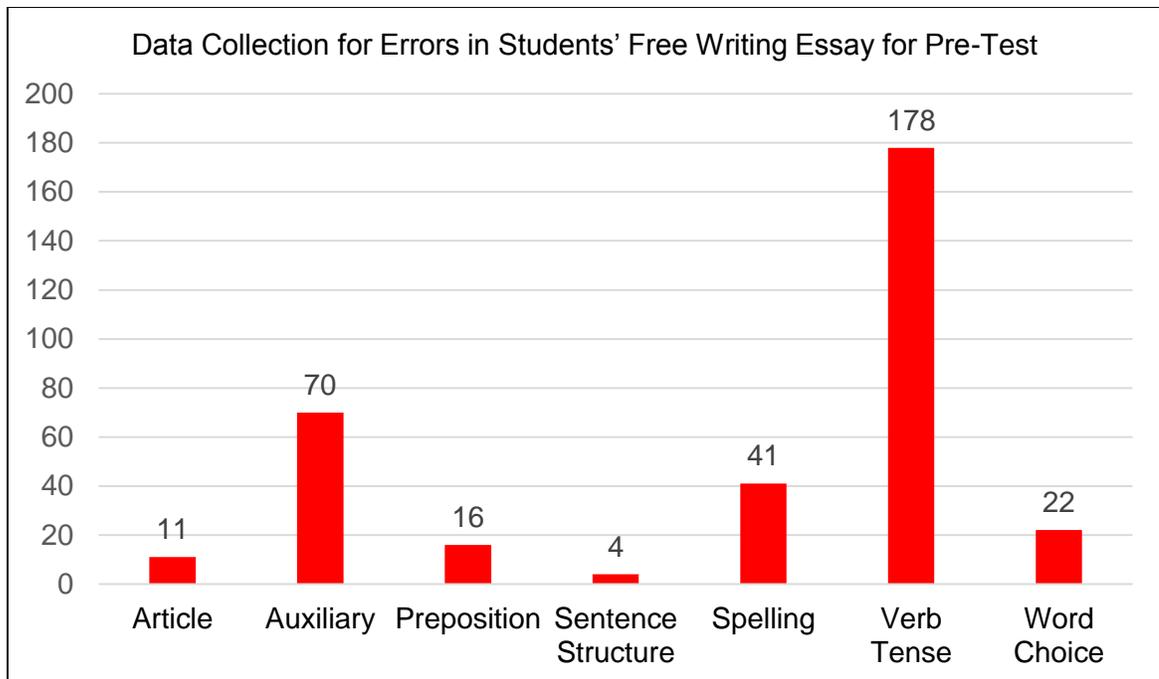


Figure 4.1: Data Collection for Errors in Students' Free Writing Essay for The Pre-Test

Based on the pre-test, errors committed by 20 students are categorized into seven categories which are article, auxiliary, preposition, sentence structure, spelling, verb tense and word choice.

As shown in Figure 4.1, the most common error omitted by the students is verb tense which had occurred for 178 times which makes up for about 51.59% of the errors in the students' essay writing. The second common error made by the students is auxiliary that gains 20.29% in which had occurred for 70 times, followed by errors in spelling that occurred 41 times. The fourth common error committed by the students in their pre-writing test is word choice that occurred 25 times. The fifth common error made by the students is article which occurred for 11 times and the least error committed by the students is sentence structure which only occurred for 4 times.

Based on the pre-test, the researcher found out that most students did not know how to use the correct verb tense for the subject and time given in their writing. Tense plays a major role in understanding the rules of subject verb agreement. This is because they kept on adding the letter 's' in their verb even when the subject of the sentence is plural. Students did not understand that singular subjects can only take singular verb forms whereas plural subjects need to take plural verb forms.

When it comes to subject-verb agreement, it means that there should be agreement between the subject and the verb. Meaning to say if the subject is singular, the verb use in the sentence should be singular and if the subject happens to be plural then plural verb should be used in the sentence. This is also supported by Greenbaum and Nelson(2002) as cited by Chele(2015) that subject verb agreement refers to the matching of subject and verbs according to their number, whether it is singular or plural. Students find it confusing to construct a sentence when they have a singular subject but they are required to add the letter 's' to the verb. They have a hard time in comprehending this rule because they are not familiar with it as such rule is not applied in their first language which is Malay language. Malay language does not have any rule regarding subject-verb agreement.

4.2 RQ2: Does the use of guided writing improve the students' understanding of subject-verb agreement?

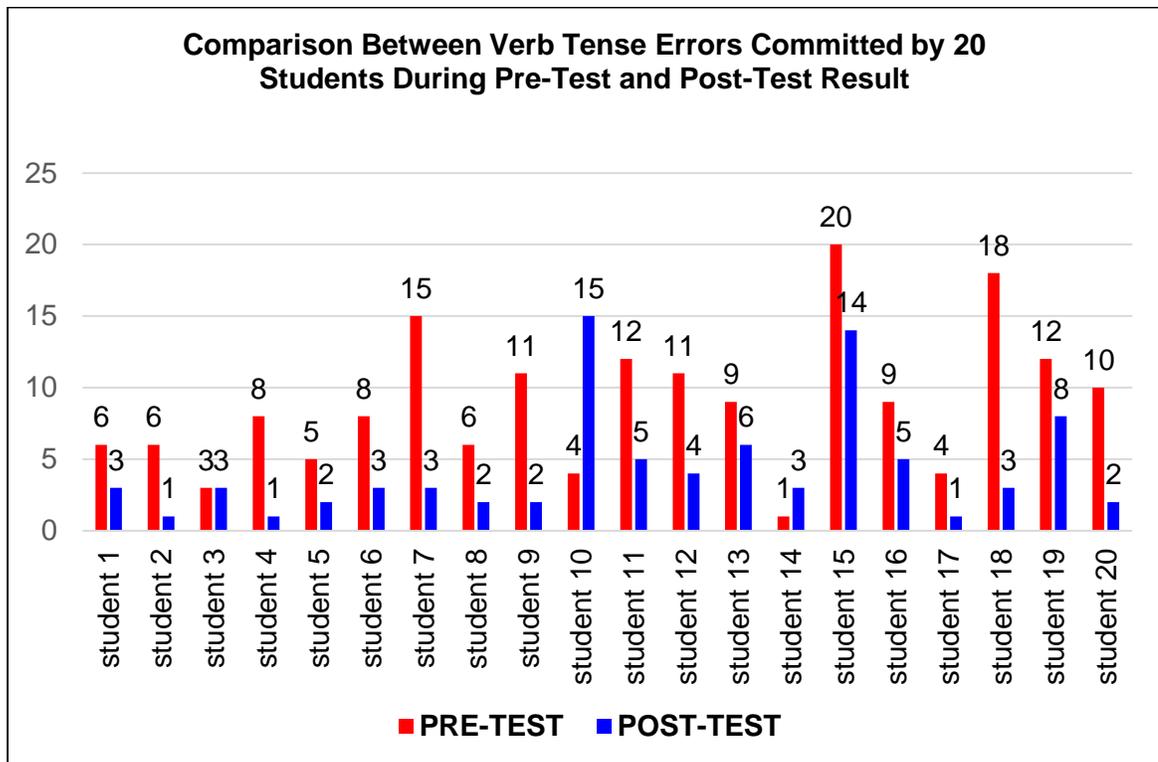


Figure 4.2: Comparison Between Verb Tense Errors Committed by 20 Students During Pre-Test and Post-Test Result

	Mean
Pre-Test	8.9
Post-Test	4.35

Table 4.2: Mean Values of Verb Tense Errors for Both Pre-Test and Post-Test of 20 Female Students in Their Writing

Guided writing is chosen to improve the students' understanding of subject-verb agreement. Figure 4.2 displays the comparison between verb tense errors committed by 20 students during pre-test and post-test. The students had to do the same title of essay for both their pre-test and post-test. This is to prove how far does the use of guided writing improve their understanding of subject-verb agreement.

According to the data from the pre-test and post-test, it is proven that the use of guided writing does improve students' understanding of subject-verb agreement. This is because out of 20 students, 17 of them showed a major improvement in their writing as they committed less wrong rules of subject-verb agreement in the form of verb tense errors during their post-test. A major improvement is seen in student 4, 7,9,18 and 20 as the amount of verb tense errors committed by them are way lower than their pre-test result. This shows that there is an increase in students' understanding of subject-verb agreement.

Two out of 20 students however did not show any improvement even after having guided writing intervention for three sessions as during the post-test they ended up committing more errors compared to their performance during the pre-test. Student 10 committed verb tense errors for 4 times during pre-test but during post-test she committed verb tense errors for 15 times. the same result happened to student 14 in which she committed 3 verb tense errors during the post-test but she only committed it 1 time during pre-test.

Student 3 did not have any improvement during the post-test as she made the same amount of verb tense errors for both pre-test and post-test which is 3 times.

Based on Table 4.2, the mean value of verb tense errors for pre-test was 8.9. however, this value drops to 4.35 during the post-test. This implicates that the students have committed less errors in their writing for their post-test. This also means that the use of guided writing does help the students in their understanding of subject-verb agreement. The difference between the frequency of errors during pre-test and post-test is 4.55.

As a conclusion, the use of guided writing is effective in improving students' understanding of subject-verb agreement.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Taking everything into account, the use of guided writing plays a significant role in improving students' understanding of subject-verb agreement. Guided writing allows learners to not only improve their writing performance but it can also help them in generating their ideas. It is important to understand fully the rules of subject verb agreement. Based on the research, guided writing has helped the students in improving their understanding of subject-verb agreement as it is proven that the students committed less verb tense errors in their post-test.

5.1 Recommendation for future research

This research has potentials to be developed in the future. The research can be developed by having a more reliable test when collecting data for the research. This is because a reliable test allows the researcher to have better findings when conducting a research. Other than that, the researcher can use other intervention to improve the students' understanding of subject-verb agreement as guided writing is just one of the methods that can be used for improvements. Not only that, this research can also be potentially developed and used as a guide to further support the study by having different instruments and research questions for another purpose of study.

5.2 Implication on Teaching and Learning

Future educators should address the rules of subject-verb agreement in their language teaching because students always have a confusion in their understanding of subject-verb agreement due to the interference from their first language. Students should be given more exposure on the rules of subject-verb agreement by preparing fun activities or apply various approaches and techniques available to introduce the rules of subject-verb agreement.

Being highly motivated allows the learners to participate actively in the class when subject-verb agreement is being taught. Learners should be aware of the importance of understanding the rules of subject-verb agreement as it is the core rule that allows them to construct meaningful sentences. Thus, learners should do a lot of activities which involves tasks on subject-verb agreement.

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