



**THE USE OF NOTIONAL AND GRAMMATICAL AGREEMENT
OF THE FIRST SEMESTER STUDENTS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
EDUCATION STUDY PROGRAM**

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Abstract

Grammar is one of the fundamental aspects of language learning. However, the English language learning often focuses on grammatical agreement but ignores notional agreement. Considering the situation, this paper attempted to explore the notional agreement understanding of the first semester students of the English Language Education Study Program of Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta. Data, which were collected from 44 students or participants of the Grammar One class, were analysed based on the correct and incorrect answers to the grammar items. Results showed that most of the students were unable to use the notional agreement correctly. The average correct answer or score of the students was 14.36 (below 50%) out of 30 items. Based on the observation and interview, the students faced some difficulties in using and understanding the concepts of the subject-verb agreement and notional agreement.

Keywords: grammar, grammatical agreement, notional agreement

Introduction

In English, subject-verb agreement is straightforward from the viewpoint of grammar. The singular noun takes the singular verb and the plural noun takes the plural verb. Theoretically, in the English language, there are three types of agreement or concord, namely grammatical, notional and proximity agreement (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1986). Interestingly, people tend to use the plural verb after the word *scissors*. As an illustration, people would say or write: *The scissors were sharp*. In the sentence, the agreement of the plural noun takes the plural verb. However, in speaking people tend to use the notional agreement (Haskell, Thornton, & MacDonald, 2010). It refers to the agreement of the subject and its verb that is being determined by meaning instead of form.

However, in some cases, the subject-verb agreement is not obvious. The singular noun may look like plural and the plural noun may look like singular. Morgan (1972) gives an example related to the bias of the use of singular and plural noun, as in “bacon and eggs tastes good”. Grammatically, “bacon and eggs” are considered as a plural noun. On the other hand, “bacon and eggs” is considered as a set or name notionally. Note that proximity concord is excluded in

this paper considering the scope of the present study. The bias of the use of notional agreement in sentences is sometimes problematic for the English learners, especially EFL learners. Therefore, the understanding of EFL learners about notional agreement is the primary focus to be explored in this study. It is expected that the results of this study can be used by EFL teachers to solve the grammatical problems of their students.

Notional and grammatical agreement is a fundamental aspect in grammar. Both types of notional and grammatical agreement affect language production (Brehm & Bock, 2013). Therefore, it is important to know how to use notional and grammatical agreement properly. It is related to subject-verb agreement, where the number of the verb must equal with the number of the subject (Bock & Eberhard, 1993). It means that a singular subject will use a singular verb and a plural subject will use a plural verb. However, sometimes the subject-verb agreement may be confusing to understand. In some cases, the singular noun may look like a plural noun and a plural noun may look like singular (Morgan, 1972). Thus, it may confuse students, including the first semester students who took the Grammar One class.

Notional agreement refers to the number of the subject's referent in a sentence produced by the speaker's awareness (Humphreys & Bock, 2005; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1986). Grammatical agreement denotes to the traditional linguistic number of a noun as the head or subject in a sentence. English speakers seem to notice the concealed notional subjects' diversity in collective nouns. Thus, notional number variations make the subject-verb agreement uncertain. Individual nouns, including nouns with identical meanings, vary in concord properties (Bock et al., 1999). The lack of rules over the concord is debatable whether -- how, and to what degree the notional number impacts agreement.

Grammatical agreement is defined as verb number which focuses more on the form rather than the meaning (Keeney & Wolfe, 1972; see also Kurniasari, 2017). The variation of verbs in the concord does not give any meanings to the reality. For example, the contrast between verb *read* and *reads* is only in the language form. Hence, *book* and *books* refer to the literal amount of the noun *book*. Grammatical agreement is important for the use of subject-verb agreement that speakers appropriately implement (Brehm & Bock, 2013; see also Swan, 2005). It refers to the plural or singular subject which is being used in a sentence. Therefore, grammatical agreement is form-based concord in a language.

Grammatical agreement may be different from notional agreement as a consequence of processes of the speaker's language awareness (Bock, 1995; see also Chandra & Yulia, 2018). Grammatical concord focuses more on the language form rather than the literal meaning. On the other hand, notional concord has its point of view on the real meaning of the language. For instance, the word *clothing* is grammatically singular but it is notionally plural (Brehm & Bock, 2013). As a conclusion, grammatical agreement is simpler than the notional agreement due to the fact that in comprehending the meaning of grammatical agreement is not necessary to understand the literal meaning.

Method

The setting of the study was Grammar One class of Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta. The current research investigated the use of notional

agreement and grammatical agreement by the first semester students of Grammar One class. The researchers observed the Grammar One class on September 7, 2018. The Grammar One class of Sanata Dharma University was chosen because the new students started to learn English grammar at university level. There were 50 students as research participants.

The study used three data collection instruments, namely a questionnaire, direct observation, and semi-structured interview. The questionnaire helped the researchers to collect the quantitative data. The direct observation was chosen to ensure that the students would not be distracted when they were observed. The semi-structured interview was conducted to enable flexibility in asking questions. The current researchers decided to select five students as interviewees.

The data collection procedure consisted of three steps. First, the students were observed to figure out the real situation in the class. Second, the students were given a questionnaire to measure their usage and their knowledge of notional and grammatical agreement. Third, five students were interviewed to find out their difficulties in using notional and grammatical agreement.

The data analysis involved assessing the students' questionnaire results, reading collected transcripts from the interviews, and interpreting notes from the observation. The interview transcripts and the observation notes were gathered and classified into categories. The purpose was to identify the students' use of notional and grammatical agreement. The study used thematic analysis because it was a flexible method to draw conclusions of the study.

Findings and Discussion

The following section presents the findings and discussion of the study. The data were analyzed to find out students' understanding in using notional agreement. The data were analyzed from three sources. The sources were the observation, the questionnaire, and the interview. The data showed students' comprehension of notional agreement.

Based on our observation, the students were confused to determine the subject-verb agreement. They had some difficulties when using the plural and singular verb related to notional agreement. The students were unaware of the collective nouns in the sentences. The cause of this issue was that they could not understand how to identify some parts of speech. For example, they could not differentiate a noun, adjective, and adverb in the sentences.

Based on the Questionnaire

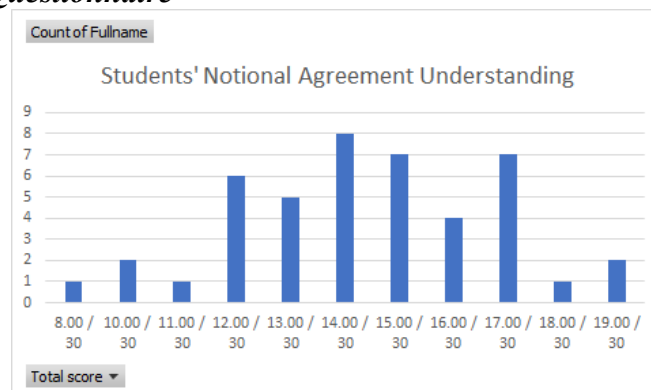


Figure 1. Students notional agreement understanding

In general, Figure 1 showed that most of the students did not understand the concept of notional agreement. It can be proved by the number of the average score of the students, namely 14,36 out of 30. It showed that fewer than half of the students understood the concept of notional agreement. Furthermore, the highest score of the student was only 19 out of 30, which means even the highest score achiever may not understand the concept of notional agreement well.

10. The class ... writing a test now.

33 / 44 correct responses

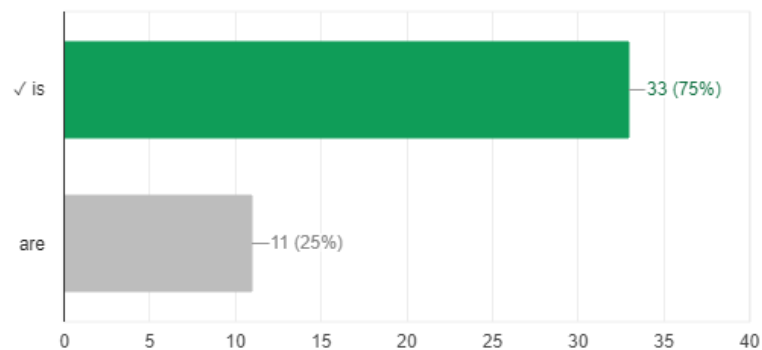


Figure 2. Students' responses for question number 10

Based on the questionnaire, most of students were able to use the notional agreement in question number 10 correctly. There were 33 out of 44 students who were able to answer correctly. It means that most of the students were able to understand the notional agreement from number 10. They could understand the subject-verb agreement in the question.

21. Track and field his favorite sport.

6 / 44 correct responses

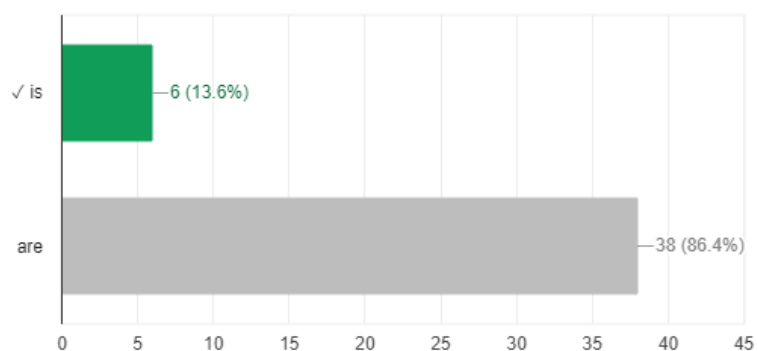


Figure 3. Students' responses for question number 21

22. There ... leftover macaroni and cheese in the refrigerator.

6 / 44 correct responses

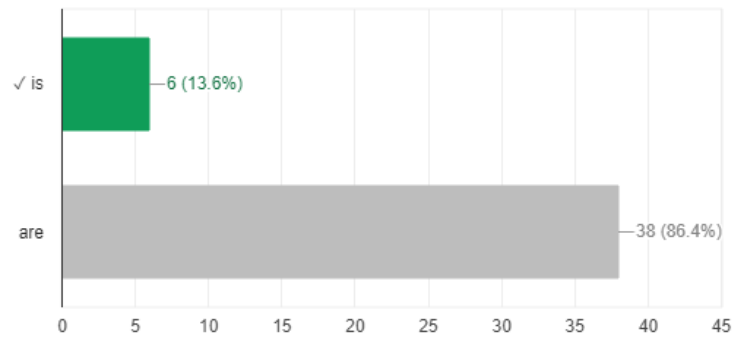


Figure 4. Students' responses for question number 22

On the other hand, most of the students could not use notional agreement in questions 21 and 22. Figure 4 showed students' lack understanding of notional agreement. It can be related to their lack of vocabulary knowledge about some particular words found in the questions, e.g. 'track and field' and 'macaroni and cheese'. Only six out of 44 participants understood that those particular phrases were singular.

2. The team ... determined to win.

11 / 44 correct responses

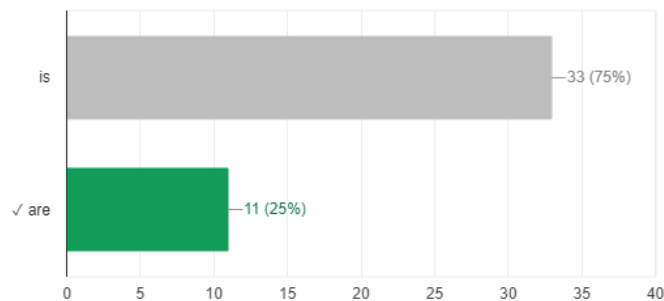


Figure 5. Students' responses for question number 2

5. The police ... looking for Ken Brown everywhere.

11 / 44 correct responses

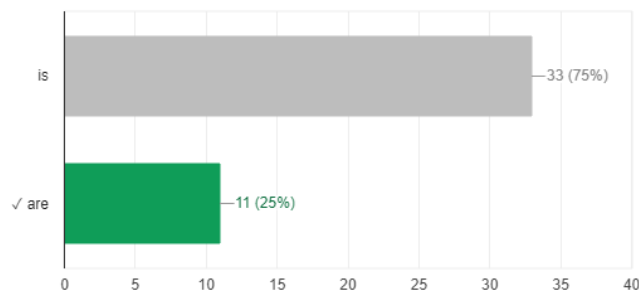


Figure 6. Students' responses for question number 5

Both of the figures (Figure 5 and Figure 6) show that most of the students are not able to use the notional agreement well. Only 25% of the students are able to use it well. Based on our observation, the students tend to have some difficulties in determining whether the subject is singular or plural. Therefore, it can be inferred that the possible reason why the students could not use the notional agreement well in those numbers is that they could not determine the subject numbers correctly.

Based on the Interview

There were five interviewees chosen in this study to represent the range of the students' notional agreement understanding. The interviewees were from the two different Grammar One classes in their first semester. There were two female students and three male students.

The first interviewee (student 1) could not give adequate explanations about grammar, parts of speech, and subject-verb agreement. It seemed that he could not explain the terms orally, but he seemed to understand how to use it in a sentence. He did not understand notional agreement, either. However, he wanted to learn more about notional agreement.

Grammar is a formula or rule for language. Part of speech is noun or verb, it is a class for words. Noun is inanimate objects. I have heard about collective noun, it is abstract like feeling. Subject-verb agreement is a formula to understand the meaning of a sentence. (Student 1)

Furthermore, the second participant (student 2) had a good understanding of grammar and parts of speech. He was able to give brief explanations about grammar and parts of speech. However, he did not understand notional agreement. Moreover, he did not understand collective nouns and their relation to notional agreement to determine plural or singular subjects. He said that it was important to understand notional agreement

I have never heard about collective noun or notional agreement. However, I know it is important to understand it to be able to use English. (Student 2)

Meanwhile, the third interviewee (student 3), who had the lowest score of the exercise, did not understand about notional agreement. She also had some difficulties with the concept of grammar itself. She did not understand the subject-verb agreement in a sentence well. She was confused in explaining what the subject-agreement was. In addition, she said that it was beneficial to add the use of notional agreement as the learning material in the class.

Collective nouns may be countable and uncountable nouns. I do not know about it. I do not know about the definition. However, I have ever done an exercise about it. My friends and I were asked to look for the subject and the verb to correct the wrong sentences. Subjects usually do something. The thing which is done by the subject is verb. However, I do not know about subject-verb agreement. I also do not know what notional agreement is. (Student 3)

From the fourth interviewee (student 4), we concluded that she did not understand notional agreement. She had difficulties in determining singular or plural subjects. As a result, the participant could not use verbs in the sentences well. Being asked about notional agreement, the student did not have any idea

about it. Therefore, the notional agreement was a new term and concept for the fourth participant.

Yes, I sometimes feel confused whether it is singular or plural. I thought that it is because the article [in some of the sentences] is the, it is followed with a singular noun. I do not know about notional agreement, but I want to know more about it. (Student 4)

The last interviewee (student 5) was able to explain grammar and parts of speech in general. However, he did not know the term *subject-verb agreement*. Hence, he unconsciously understood how to use subject-verb agreement in sentences. He mentioned that he had difficulty in determining the number of subjects in the questionnaire. It could become an evidence that he did not understand collective nouns and notional agreement. In addition, he said that notional agreement was important to be taught in the classroom to make students able to use the subject-verb agreement in a sentence.

I am confused how to determine singular or plural subject in the questionnaire. Notional agreement is important to be taught in classroom. As a student, I would like to understand notional agreement to determine the subject-verb agreement. (Student 5)

Finally, it can be concluded that collective nouns and notional agreement were new terms for the first semester undergraduate students of the English Language Education Study Program of Sanata Dharma University. According to the interviewed students, notional agreement should be taught explicitly in class. They agreed that notional agreement was important because it was a crucial part in grammar learning (see also Mestari & Malabar, 2017; Mulatsih, 2018). They would like to know more the meaning of a phrase using notional agreement and also increase their awareness to determine the number of subjects in a sentence.

Conclusion

Grammatical agreement, in general, has become the focus of the English language learning. However, notional agreement is also an important factor in English language learning. Given the exercises related to the use of notional agreement, most of the students struggled to use the notional agreement correctly. Only 14.36 out of 30 was the average score of the 44 participants. Based on the interview, the students stated that they had some difficulties in comprehending the notional agreement. Additionally, they recommended that the explanation on the use of notional agreement is important to be taught in the class.

This study has some limitations related to the given exercises and the availability of the participants. The given exercises only contained one sentence in every number; better contexts were needed. The exercises did not contain familiar vocabulary for the participants so that they might have some difficulties in understanding the exercises. The available participants were also limited. There should be 50 participants, but only 44 participants responded to the questionnaire.

Finally, this study can be used as a reference for learners of English to understand and use notional agreement. Thus, administrators and teachers of educational institutions, especially which are related to English education, are encouraged to start making notional agreement as one of the learning materials.

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