



## **Students' Ability and Factors in Using Subject-Verb Agreement: A Case Study of Indonesian EFL Learners in University Level**

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### **Abstract**

Learning subject-verb agreement (SVA) is still challenging to be mastered by EFL learners especially in University level. Hence, the aim of this study is to describe the student's ability and to find out the factors in using SVA. The method of this study used qualitative method that displaying analysis descriptively. The participants were 100 Indraprasta PGRI Jakarta University students who took grammar class and learnt about subject-verb agreement. The data was collected by giving test involved short answer choices that consisted of basic SVA, SVA using expression of quantity, SVA using there +be, and SVA using some irregularities, and short multiple-choice questions that related with the factors of learning SVA. The result showed the student's ability in using SVA in fairly good and the factors came from the student's motivation in improving their ability such as lack of reading the materials of SVA, lack of understanding on the SVA materials, lack of understanding on their lecturer's explanation, lack of rereading the SVA materials after getting explanation from their lecturer, lack of doing the exercises, lack of practicing by themselves in SVA exercises, lack of doing self-correction in practicing SVA exercises, lack of doing analysis on the mistakes of SVA exercises, and lack of restudying the mistakes of SVA exercises.

**Keywords:** student's ability, subject-verb agreement, factor in using SVA

### **INTRODUCTION**

Learning English grammar for Indonesian EFL learners in University level is assumed that it is uneasy to be mastered. As mentioned by (Seely, 2007) "The word 'grammar' is much abused." There are several factors such as different tense, different structure, different pattern and many more. These factors lead the students to get difficulties in mastering grammar easily. Not only on diversity of pattern or structure between Bahasa Indonesia and English but also student's interest and motivation in learning English determine on mastering grammar. There are many materials that are taught in grammar such as tenses, phrases, clauses, and subject-verb agreement. In this study, the researcher limits the study on subject-verb agreement (SVA) and focuses on finding out the student's ability and the factors. As EFL learners are very important to learn SVA because in writing context conducting

sentences, paragraphs, or essays need correct SVA. It is not only in writing context but also in speaking context as those two skills are productive skills. Those productive skills are the main skills that the students can perform when they graduate from university level. Therefore, it is crucial to research the student's ability and the factors, in supposed to improve their ability by knowing the errors and the factors of using SVA.

The previous researches that studied in the same field as follows: 1) (M. Mustafa Izahar, 2010) their research displayed that even at the level of postgraduate studies (majoring in English) learners still face difficulties in subject-verb agreement. 2) (Anisa Kurniadhani Suryo, 2018) their study showed that the students' ability in using subject-verb agreement was poor, since the majority of the students' score fell into the poor category. 3) (Nayan & Jusoff, 2009) the result was that students still possess problems in the usage of their subject verb agreement in their writing. Majority of the students have problems in their general rule than sub-rules. Students have problems in subject-verb agreement because they don't have this kind of rule in their L1. 4) (Chele, 2015) according to her findings, students make both performance errors and competence errors. 5) (Tafida & Oikunade, 2016) they found that students still have problems with subject- verb agreement. Those are several results that indicates SVA is still needed digging up to minimize errors and increase the student's ability.

Subject -verb agreement based on (Azar, 2002) is divided into five items they are final -s/es: use, basic subject-verb agreement, subject-verb agreement: using expressions of quantity, subject-verb agreement: using there + be, and subject-verb agreement: some of quantity irregularities.

Final -s/es: use, pronunciation, and spelling: a final -s or -es is added to a noun to make the noun plural, such as: friend= a singular noun, fiends = a plural noun. A final -s or -es is added to a simple present verb when the subject is a singular noun (e.g., Mary, my father; the machine) or third person singular pronoun (she, he, it). For instance: *Mary works* = singular, *she works*=singular, *the students work* =plural, *they work* =plural.

Basic subject-verb agreement involves verb + -s/es = third person singular in the simple present tense and noun + -s/es = plural. Two or more subjects connected by and require a plural verb. *Every* and *each* are always followed immediately by singular nouns. Sometimes a phrase or clause separates a subject from its verb. These interrupting structures do not affect basic agreement e.g. *that book on political parties is interesting* or *the idea in that book are*

*interesting*. A gerund used as the subject of the sentence requires a singular verb e.g. *growing flowers is her hobby*.

Subject-verb agreement: using expressions of quantity in most expressions of quantity, the verb is determined by the noun (or pronoun) that follows of. For example: *some of + singular noun*= singular verbs, *some of + plural noun*= plural verb. *one of, each of, and every one of* take singular verbs. *One of, each of, every one of, + plural noun* = singular verb. Subjects with *none of* are considered singular in very formal English, but plural verbs are often used in informal speech writing.

In the structure *there + be*, *there* is called an "expletive." It has no meaning as a vocabulary word. It introduces the idea that something exists in a particular place. Pattern is : *there + be + subject + expression of place*. Sometimes the expression of place is omitted when the meaning is clear such as the implied expression of place is clearly in the world, "There are seven continents." The subject follows *be* when *there* is used such as the subject is book in "There is a book on the shelf." or "There are some books on the shelf." In very informal spoken English, some native speakers use a singular verb even when the subject is plural, as in "There's some books on the shelf." The use of this form is fairly frequent but is not generally considered to be grammatically correct.

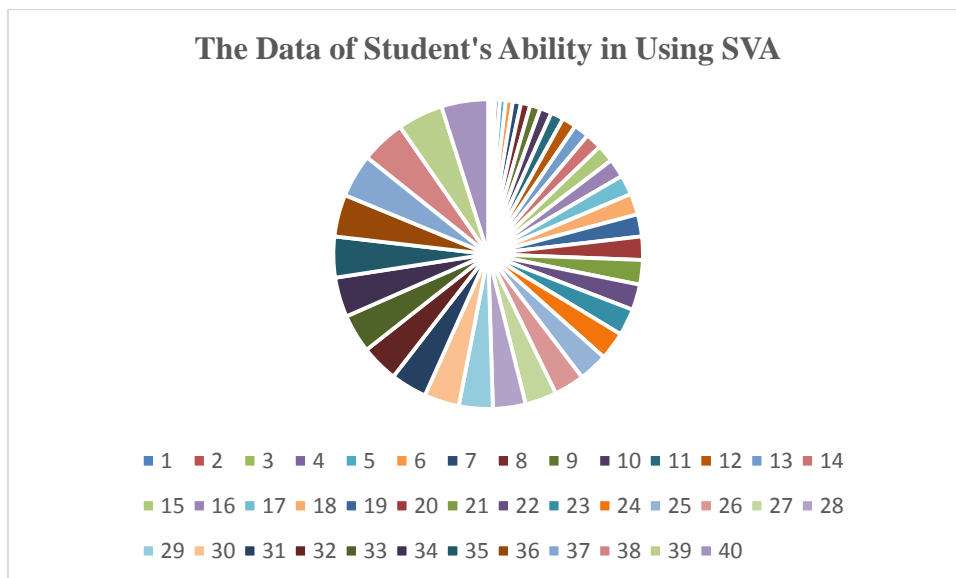
Sometimes a proper noun that ends in *-s* is singular. In the examples, if the noun is changed to a pronoun, the singular pronoun *it* is used (not the plural pronoun *they*) because the noun is singular such as *The United States = it (not they)*. *News* is singular. Fields of study that end in *-ics* require singular verbs. Certain illnesses that end in *-s* are singular: *diabetes, measles, mumps, rabies, rickets, shingles*. Expressions of *time, money, and distance* usually require a singular verb. *Arithmetic* expressions require singular verbs for instance: "Two and two is four. Two and two equals four". *People, police, and cattle* do not end in *-s*, but are plural nouns and require plural verbs. For instance, *English = language, The English = people from England*. Some nouns of nationality that end in *-sh, -ese, and -ch* can mean either language or people, e.g., *English, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Portuguese, French*. A few adjectives can be preceded by *the* and used as a plural noun (without final *-s*) to refer to people who have that quality, other examples are *the young, the elderly, the living, the dead, the blind, the deaf, and the disabled*.

## METHOD

This study used qualitative method, based on (Creswell., 2012)Qualitative research explores a problem and developing a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon.” Meanwhile, (L.R. Gay, 2012) “Qualitative research is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive narrative and visual (i.e., non-numerical) data to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest.” The participants of this study were 100 Indraprasta PGRI Jakarta University students who took grammar class and learnt about subject-verb agreement. The data was collected by giving test that consists of 40 numbers within short answer choices that consist of basic SVA, SVA using expression of quantity, SVA using there +be, and SVA using some irregularities, and 10 short multiple-choice questions that related with the factors of learning SVA. The technique of this study was conducted in descriptively, therefore, the researcher calculated the data by Microsoft excel afterward was presented in percentage result.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After collecting and calculating the data, there are several findings that were found and discussed in the following explanation. Firstly, the description about the result of student’s ability in using SVA. The average of score were categorized into following categorization:



Based on the diagram pie above, the average of the student’s ability in using SVA shows in fairly good average that is on score 70.2. The most errors found was on using some irregularities in SVA and there were 57 out of 100 students answered in incorrectly that is “*Many Japanese (commute, commutes) to their places of work.*” The answer is supposed to

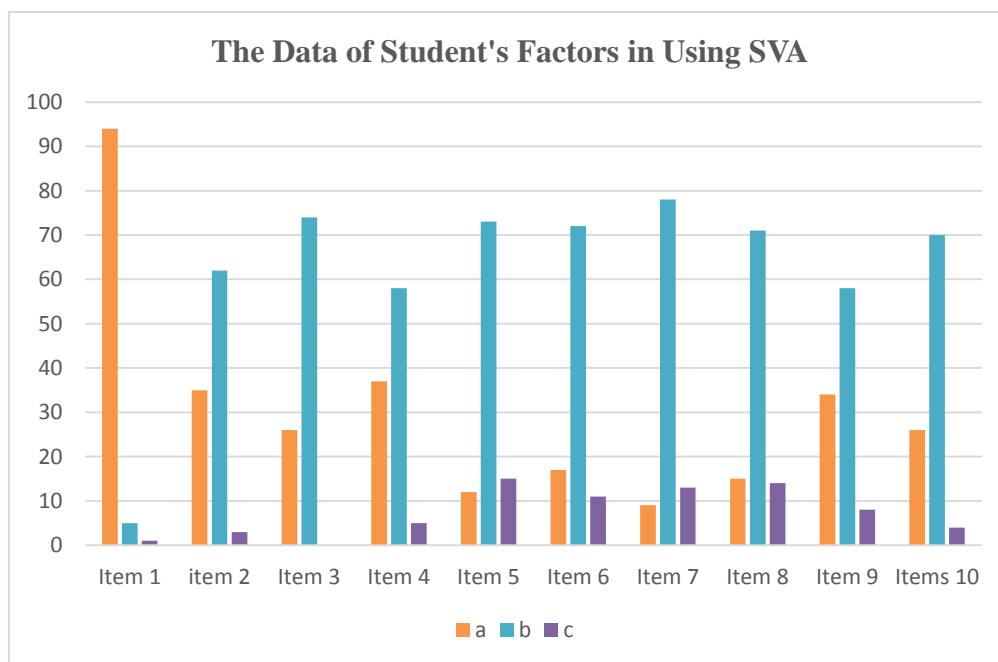
be *commute* because *Japanese* here refers to people so that the verb that must be followed should be in plural verb. The next one found was in using basic SVA that 56 students answered in wrong answer that is “*The extent of Fatima’s knowledge on various subjects (astounds, astound) me.*” here the answer must be *astounds* even though there is the word *subjects* that looks like in plural and interrupts the subject however the main subject there is *the extent of Fatima’s knowledge* hence the verb followed must in singular verb. Again in using some irregularities in SVA, the error was done by 55 students that is “*Physics (seek, seeks) to understand the mysteries of the physical world.*”

The answer is supposed to be *seeks* because the subject is *physic* is kind of fields of study then the verb that must be followed is singular verb. Still in the same case using some irregularities in SVA was found error that was done by 53 out of 100 students that is “*The poor (is, are) helped by government programs.*” the correct verb which followed the subject is supposed to be *are* because *the poor* represents people who have quality, so that the verb must in plural verb. In the same amount as the previous discussion that the error was don by 53 students that is about SVA using there +be that is “*Why (is, are) there a shortage of available apartments for rent in this city at present?*” the subject in the sentence is *there a shortage of available apartments* even this sentence in the form of question the using of *there* follows the subject, so the verb is supposed to be in singular verb form. Using some irregularities in SVA seems the most difficult for the students that was found again that 47 students answered incorrectly in “*Portuguese (is, are) somewhat similar to Spanish (isn’t it, aren’t they)?*” the correct verbs in this sentence are all in singular verb form (*is* and *isn’t*) because *Portuguese* and *Spanish* are singular subject that refers to language. There were also found errors within 44 incorrect answers of the students that using SVA using expression of quantity “*The number of employees in my company (is, are) approximately ten thousand.*” The correct verb is singular (*is*) because the subject is *the number*.

Next, it is still in the same case with 41 students who did the error that is “*(Does, Do) all of the students have their books?*” the correct answer is *do* because the expression quantity of *all of* follows the subject *the students* hence the verb is in plural form. In the same amount with the sentence “*A number of students (is, are) absent today.*” 41 students answered incorrectly that the correct answer is *are* because *a number* is an expression of quantity meaning “*a lot of*” that is followed by plural noun and plural verb. However, it is still found in basic SVA within 41 of the students were answered incorrectly and the sentence is “*The professor and the student (agrees, agree) on that point.*” The subject is compound subject or

two subjects that consist of *the professor and the student* therefore the verb form is plural (*agree*). One example case more is “(Is, Are) *having the responsibility for taking care of pets good for young children?*” that there were 40 students answer incorrectly, in this case the correct answer (*is*) because the subject is gerund that is *having the responsibility* hence the verb is in singular form.

The collecting data to find out the factors toward the student’s in using SVA was based on 10 short multiple-choice questions and there were found various difference factors among 100 students that participated in this study and the finding of this data can be seen form the following bar table:



By looking at the bar table above, it can be discussed from the first item that the question is about the important of learning SVA, in percent the data shows that the students thought is 94% who stated on important, and 5% is not really important and 1% who stated it is not important. The second one is about the students’ reading on the SVA materials and the participants answered 62% stated that they just a little on reading the materials of SVA and 35% stated that they read the materials and 3% only stated that they didn’t read the materials. The third is about the understanding of the SVA materials, and they answered in 74% that they just a little understand on the SVA materials, only 26% of the students who understood, and none of them did not understand. The fourth is about the student’s understanding when the lecturer explains of SVA materials, the data displays 58% that they only a little understood on their lecturer’s explanation, 37% stated understood, and 5% stated that they didn’t understand. The fifth is about rereading of SVA after getting explanation from their

lecturer and the data is 73% stated that they just sometimes in rereading the SVA materials after getting explanation from their lecturer, 15% never rereading, and 12% did it. The sixth is about the students on doing all the exercises of SVA the data presents 72% they only did some the exercises, 17% stated did all the exercises, and 11% never do all the exercises. The seventh is about the student's practicing by themselves in SVA exercises and the data shows that 78% stated that they did it only sometimes, 13% stated never, and only 9% stated always did it. The eighth is about doing self-correction in practicing the exercises of SVA, and the data shows that 71% stated sometimes, 15% stated always did it, and 14% stated never did it. The ninth is about doing analysis on the mistakes of SVA exercises, the data presents 58% they did it just sometimes, 34% stated always did it, and 8% stated never. The last item is about restudying the mistakes of SVA exercises, the data shows 70% stated sometimes, 26% stated always, and 4% stated never did it.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the description of this study shows the findings that the student ability in using SVA is in fairly good. Another finding is the factors of learning SVA that the student's thought that learning SVA is important, yet in the contrary most of them lack of motivation in improving their ability in using SVA such as 62% they just a little on reading the materials of SVA, 74% that they just a little understand on the SVA materials, 58% that they only a little understood on their lecturer's explanation, 73% stated that they just sometimes in rereading the SVA materials after getting explanation from their lecturer, 72% they only did some the exercises, 78% stated that they did only sometimes in practicing by themselves in SVA exercises, 71% stated sometimes doing self-correction in practicing SVA exercises, 58% they did just sometimes in doing analysis on the mistakes of SVA exercises, and 70% stated sometimes about restudying the mistakes of SVA exercises. The future study may be suggested in other topic research such as the using of phrases, clauses, or sentences.

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