

## STUDENTS' PROBLEMS ON S-V AGREEMENT IN TOEFL AND THEIR PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

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**Abstract:** This article is presented to discover the students' problems in subject-verb (S-V) agreement and provides pedagogical solutions to these problems. This study employed descriptive design. There were two instruments used to collect data. The first instrument was a test. It consisted of 10 items with two different types of questions. The second instrument was an open-ended questionnaire consisting of two questions. The participants were 25 social science students of a private university in Yogyakarta. The data included in this study were 10 students' works which were randomly selected. The result shows that the students' problems in S-V agreement came from their misunderstanding on: future continuous tense, singular-plural subject, appositive, the use of present participle as adjective, the use of simple present tense, the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject, the presence of double subjects, and the use of *both* to show double subjects. To encounter these problems, the teacher is suggested to teach the students about the essential elements of a sentence first rather than teaching other aspects. The essential elements are subject and predicate. In short, the students must understand well that a sentence, at least, must consist of one subject and one predicate (verb). After understanding the essential elements of a sentence, the students can be taught to understand other supporting aspects which also become the causes of students' problems in S-V agreement.

**Keywords:** solutions, students' problems, subject-verb agreement, TOEFL

### INTRODUCTION

TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is a standardized test used to measure English proficiency level of non-native speakers. It has become one of the most famous and internationally accepted English tests (Tanihardjo 2016, 19; Ananda 2016, 35; Nurhayati & Nehe 2016, 10). There are four types of TOEFL, namely paper-based test (PBT), institutional testing program (ITP) computer-based test (CBT), and internet-based test (IBT). TOEFL PBT and ITP consist of three sections, namely listening, structure and written expression, and reading comprehension (Ismail & Wahyuni, 2017, 64; Hajri, Jufriзал & Wahyuni 2018, 94; Abboud & Hussein 2011, 111). TOEFL ITP is the main concern of this study.

Taking TOEFL has been obligatory for college students because of academic demands (Antoni 2014, 9). TOEFL has become one of primary requirements for students to graduate from bachelor program, apply job, take master degree, study abroad, get scholarship, apply short course, et cetera (Hajri, Jufriзал, & Wahyuni 2018, 93-94; Mahmud 2014, 2582; Mufidah 2014, 80). Moreover, Mahmud (2014, 2582) states that someone's TOEFL score is usually used to indicate his/her English proficiency in academic life.

Someone requires appropriate strategies in taking TOEFL besides more knowledge about English. The strategies are useful to ease the students in answering each question. Each section of TOEFL requires different strategies (Nurhayati & Nehe, 2016, 11). The strategies can be learnt by taking a TOEFL preparation course,

joining an online discussion or a study forum on TOEFL, doing exercises in TOEFL practice books, and performing other relevant ways to successfully prepare for TOEFL.

Many students face problems and fail in taking TOEFL (Mahmud 2014, 2583). Antoni (2014, 9-10) argues that passing TOEFL is very challenging although they have finished English subjects. Most of them fail to achieve the passing grade determined by college. In addition, Ananda (2016, 36) states that many English Department students also fail to achieve good score in TOEFL. Most of the students agree that structure and written expression section is one of the most difficult part. Hajri, Jufrizal, & Wahyuni (2018, 94) reveal that the students consider that the structure and written expression section is the most difficult section.

One of the problems is related to the structure and written expression. Many students find it difficult to choose the correct answer which completes the sentence in a grammatically correct way or the underlined word/phrase which is incorrect. Antoni (2014, 9) argues that it happens since the students do not have sufficient grammar mastery and appropriate strategy to answer the questions. Ahangari and Barghi (2012, 7) state that grammar mastery is the most elaborate element of linguistic competence. Moreover, Mufidah (2014, 85) suggests that tips and strategies are really important to be learnt before taking TOEFL. Abboud & Hussein (2011, 135) also suggest to study the strategies and time management.

Structure and written expression section of TOEFL includes many skills which the students must be familiar with or even master them. This fact leads to students' confusion and difficulties in answering items in this section. The students get confused even when they have to deal with the simplest skill of grammar, that is subject-verb agreement. Antoni (2014, 9) states that the students are usually

not able to determine the subject and the verb of a sentence well due to insufficient knowledge on the strategies and inability in differentiating which words serve as the subject and the verb of a sentence. They often choose wrong answers due to their lack understanding on how to deal with this type of question.

Therefore, it is essential to conduct a systematic study to reveal grammatical problems faced by the students in subject-verb agreement. This article is presented to discover the students' problems in subject-verb agreement and provide pedagogical solutions to these problems.

## METHOD

This study used qualitative approach. Aside from that, it also employed descriptive design which aimed to describe the problems faced by the students in answering the structure and written expression section of TOEFL.

There were two instruments used to collect the data. The first instrument is a test. It consisted of 10 items with two different types of questions. Questions 1 to 5 were in the form of structure in which a part of the sentence has been replaced with a blank. Each sentence was followed by four choices. The students had to choose an answer which completed the sentence in a grammatically correct way. Meanwhile, questions 6 to 10 were in the form of written expression consisting of sentences in which there were four words or phrases underlined. The students had to choose one of the underlined words or phrases which was grammatically incorrect. The second instrument was an open-ended questionnaire consisting of two questions. The students were asked to tell and explain about their difficulties in doing the test on the questionnaire.

There was a couple of procedure done. First, the test was administered. The test took time about 15 minutes.

After completing the test, the students wrote about their difficulties in doing the test on the provided questionnaire. The data were then described.

The participants were 25 social science students of a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. They were the first-year students who had just graduated from senior high school. The data included in this study were from 10 students' works who were randomly selected. The data from the test and the questionnaire were then described to discover the problems faced by the students.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Preliminary Analysis

Structure and written expression section of TOEFL has become challenging and problematic for many students (Tanihardjo 2016, 22). The students need to analyse many grammatical problems and attempt to determine the best answer. Some of the questions are about subject-verb agreement (Nurhayati & Nehe 2016, 13).

Students still cannot answer all questions well although there are only two primary parts in this section. The first type of question is presented in the form of a sentence with a blank part. Each sentence is followed by four choices. The students are asked to choose one choice which completes the sentence in a grammatically correct way. The second type of question is in the form of a sentence in which four words or phrases are underlined. The students must choose one of the underlined words or phrases which is grammatically incorrect (Tanihardjo 2016, 21).

Wrong responses in this section are generally caused by the students' lack of grammar mastery and appropriate strategy (Antoni 2014, 9). It is previously stated that there are only two types of questions in this section (Tanihardjo 2016, 21). However, each type of the questions requires various

strategies (Nurhayati & Nehe 2016, 11). It makes the students get confused and difficult in responding to each item in this section.

Some problems in subject-verb agreement are initially identified. The problems include the students' confusion and difficulty in understanding:

1. if a sentence must have, at least, one subject and one verb;
2. which one is the subject and which one is the verb;
3. singular and plural subject;
4. an object of preposition which may look like a subject of a sentence;
5. an appositive which may appear as a subject of a sentence;
6. present participle which may appear like a verb of a sentence; and
7. past participle which may look like a verb of a sentence.

### Students' Problems

The maximum score obtained by the students was 6. The minimum score obtained was 1. There was only one student who got the maximum score. Meanwhile, two students got the minimum score. The complete results are presented in *Table 1*.

*Table 1: Students' Test Results*

Student	Score	Freq.
D	6	1
G	5	1
Y, T, H	4	3
E, A	3	2
B	2	1
L, F	1	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>10</b>

From the data presented above, it has been clear that the students had some problems in subject-verb agreement. The followings are the description of the problems:

1. Student A had some problems which were caused by misunderstanding on appositive, present participle as adjective, singular-plural subject,

- the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject, and the presence of double subject
2. Student L got difficulty in answering the questions because she had unclear understanding on tenses (future continuous and simple present tense) and singular-plural subject. She also got trouble because of appositive. Moreover, she did not understand the use of present participle as adjective. Other problems found in Student L were the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject and *both* to show double subjects.
  3. Student B failed to answer many items correctly because he lacked of knowledge on appositive, present participle as adjective, simple present tense and singular-plural subject, the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject, the use of *both* to show double subjects, and the presence of double subjects.
  4. Student G was not successful to answer all items of the test correctly because she had insufficient understanding on the aspects supporting the understanding of subject-verb agreement. One of the problems was because she did not understand appositive. The problem that she experienced also came from poor understanding on simple present tense and singular-plural subject. The use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject, the presence of double subjects, and appositive also made Student G confused.
  5. Student Y also had some problems in answering the questions. Those problems were caused by his poor understanding on these following aspects: appositive, simple present tense and singular-plural subject, the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject, the use of 'both' to show double subjects, and the presence of double subjects.
  6. Student H was unsuccessful in answering some items of the test.
- She did not understand appositive. She was also confused about the use of present participle as adjective. In addition, the problems came from the misunderstanding of simple present tense and singular-plural subject. The last two mistakes were caused by the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject and the presence of double subjects.
7. Student T also failed when answering some items in the test. She actually did not understand well singular-plural subject and simple present tense as well as singular-plural subject. Appositive also made her confused. Moreover, she was unable to comprehend the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject and the presence of double subjects.
  8. Student E could not work on the test perfectly. She answered many items incorrectly. She had a problem with appositive. She could not understand well the use of present participle as adjective. The use of simple present tense and singular-plural subject also made her confused. In the end, she did not understand well the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject, the presence of double subjects, and the use of *both* to show double subjects.
  9. Student F had very complicated problems. He could only answer one out of ten items correctly. He failed on the test because of the following misunderstandings: future continuous tense, singular-plural subject, the use of simple present tense and singular-plural subject, appositive, the use of present participle as adjective, the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject, the presence of double subject, and the use of *both* to show double subjects.
  10. Student D also had problems with subject-verb agreement. He got trouble because he did not understand singular-plural subject. The problems were also caused by

appositive, the use of present participle as adjective, and the use of *both* to show double subjects.

Those are all problems faced by the students related to subject-verb agreement. They urgently need help to answer the questions regarding to subject-verb agreement. Those problems should stimulate teachers to pay higher attention to the teaching of subject-verb agreement (Ananda, 2016: 43-44). Of course, the teachers must give solutions to the students, especially on the aspects which cause the problems such as future continuous tense, singular-plural subject, appositive, the use of present participle as adjective, the use of simple present tense, the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject, the presence of double subjects, and the use of *both* to show double subjects.

### Proposed Solutions

At first, a teacher must explain about the essential elements of a sentence to the students. The essential elements are subject and predicate. Of course, a sentence, at least, must have one subject and one predicate (verb).

In English, there are verbal-sentence and nominal-sentence. The predicate in verbal-sentence is the verb itself and the helping verb if it is necessary. The example is *Doni plays football every afternoon* and *Doni is playing football now*. The word *plays* in the sentence *Doni plays football every afternoon* is the verb, In this case, the main verb. Meanwhile, the word *is* is the helping verb (auxiliary) and the word *playing* is the main verb in this sentence. In nominal-sentence, the predicate is called as a linking verb such as: *am, is, are, was, were, be, look, seem, become, appear, modal+be*, etc. The example of nominal-sentence is *He is a handsome boy* and *She will be a doctor next year*. The word *is* functions as a linking verb in the sentence *He is a handsome boy* and the phrase *will be* plays a role as a linking verb too.

A sentence must have one subject, at least. The subject can be an abstract noun, a concrete noun, or a gerund. The teacher must be able to help the students in determining which word that will be considered as the subject of the sentence. Usually, the subject comes first before the predicate (verb). It appears at the beginning of a sentence. However, the subject can be inverted with the verb in special cases. There are some types of subject and verb inversion; the types are mentioned as follows: inverting subject and verb with question words, inverting subject and verb after place expressions, and inverting subject and verb after negatives. For example, *A driver driving fast in the Orchard road is my father*. The word *a driver* here functions as the subject of the sentence. Other examples are *What is the homework?* and *Where are you going?* The word *the homework* and *you* function as the subject of the previous sentences. Actually, the subject of a verb is the *actor* in active sentences and the *target* in passive sentences. *She eats some apples* and *The apples on the table are eaten (by her)*. In the first example, the word *she* functions as the subject. In the second example, the word *the apples* plays its role as the subject of sentence because the sentence is in passive form.

After teaching those essential elements, the teacher can continue to teach the aspects supporting the students' understanding on subject-verb agreement such as tenses (simple present tense, simple past tense, simple future tense, present continuous tense, past continuous tense, future continuous tense, present perfect tense, and past perfect tense), singular-plural subject, appositive, the use of present participle as adjective, the use of past participle as adjective, the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject, the presence of double subjects, the use of 'both' to show double subjects, etc.

To teach tenses to the students, *Arief Eko Priyo Atmojo's Block of Words* can be used to help the teacher. This block of words has simplified the tenses to be easily understood by the students. The 16 tenses have been simplified into six general patterns. The six general patterns are then distinguished as *auxiliary* and *variation*. The auxiliary and the variation create the block of words which is then coloured in certain colours. The simplified pattern and the colours can make the students understand the tenses easily. It is in the form of lesson material. *Arief Eko Priyo Atmojo's Block of Words* is presented in *Table 2* (Atmojo, 2013: 64).

After that, the teacher can continue to teach appositive to the students. Actually, an appositive is a noun coming before or after another noun which has the same meaning. For example, *My friend, George, is attending the lecture*. The word *George* here is an appositive because it is a noun having the same meaning and coming after the word *my friend*. It can be recognized from the commas put before and after the appositive itself. So, the subject of this sentence is *my friend* whereas *George* functions as the appositive.

The teacher should then teach the students about the use of present participle and past participle as

*Table 2: Arief Eko Priyo Atmojo's Block of Words*

Material	Block of Words
Present tense	S + is/am/are + V <sub>-ing</sub> /Adj/Noun S + V <sub>1</sub> (s/es) → S + do(es) + not + V <sub>1</sub> → Do(es) + S + V <sub>1</sub> ?
Past tense	S + was/were + V <sub>-ing</sub> /Adj/Noun S + V <sub>2</sub> → S + did + not + V <sub>1</sub> → Did + S + V <sub>1</sub> ?
Future tense	S + shall/should + V <sub>1</sub> /be + Adj/Noun/be + V <sub>-ing</sub> /V <sub>3</sub> S + will/would + V <sub>1</sub> /be + Adj/Noun/be + V <sub>-ing</sub> /V <sub>3</sub>
Perfect Tense	S (he, she, it) + has + V <sub>3</sub> + been + Adj/Noun/been + V <sub>-ing</sub> /V <sub>3</sub> S (they, we, I, you) + have + V <sub>3</sub> + been + Adj/Noun/been + V <sub>-ing</sub> /V <sub>3</sub> S (all in the past) + had + V <sub>3</sub> + been + Adj/Noun/been + V <sub>-ing</sub> /V <sub>3</sub>
Modals	S + may/might + V <sub>1</sub> / be + Adj/Noun/be + V <sub>-ing</sub> /V <sub>3</sub>
Modals Perfect	S + may/might + have + V <sub>3</sub> /been + Adj/Noun/been + V <sub>-ing</sub> /V <sub>3</sub>

**Note :**

- Red : Auxiliary 1      Green : Variation 1      Grey : Variation 3
- Blue : Auxiliary 2      Yellow : Variation 2

The next step is to teach the students with the understanding on singular and plural subject. The teacher must teach the students about countable and uncountable nouns, determiners (*a, an, the*), concrete and abstract nouns, gerunds as nouns, singular and plural nouns (regarding to regular nouns ending with *-s/-es* and irregular nouns which have no specific rules), pronouns, proper names, etc.

adjective because the students may misunderstand them as a part of the verb. A present participle is the *-ing* form of the verb. For instance, *The man talking to his friend has a beard*. In this sentence, the word *talking* is an adjective and not part of the verb because it is not accompanied by some form of be or helping verb. The verb in this sentence is the word *has*. Meanwhile, a past participle is the *-ed* form (V<sub>3</sub>) of the verb. *The students*

*looked bored as the teacher talked and talked*, for example. In this sentence, the word *bored* is an adjective and not part of the verb since it is preceded by a linking verb *looked* which usually functions to link a subject and an adjective, an adverb, or a noun. The verbs in this sentence are *looked* and *talked*.

Finally, the teacher must teach the students the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject and the use of *both* to show double subjects. Students must be ensured that even there are two things put together in *either ... or ...* it is still considered as singular. However, the presence of word *both* actually says that there are two things in real; so, it is considered as plural.

### CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

To be concluded, the teacher must teach the students about the essential elements of a sentence first rather than teaching other aspects. The essential elements are subject and predicate. In short, the students must understand well that a sentence, at least, must consist of one subject and one predicate (verb). After understanding the essential elements of a sentence, the students can be taught to understand other supporting aspects like tenses, singular-plural subject, appositive, the use of present participle as adjective, the use of past participle as adjective, the use of *either ... or ...* to show one subject, the presence of double subjects, and the use of *both* to show double subjects.

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