THE USE OF A SYMBOL IN TEACHING
SUBJECT- VERB - AGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT

Many students are found to be very weak in Subject-Verb-Agreement (SVA). They are always confused whether to put or not to put the letter 's' at the end of the verb. Therefore this research is carried out to determine the effectiveness of teaching the grammar rules of Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA) using the 'Snake' pictures symbolising the letter 'S' for singular verbs in 'Snake Attack' activity. For the purpose of this study, 30 students of low to intermediate proficiency level from SMK Bandar Seri Alam were chosen as the respondents. One group was considered to be the experimental group who underwent the lesson using 'Snake Attack' activity and the other group as the control group underwent the traditional grammar lessons (prescriptive grammar). A pre-test and a number of treatments were conducted followed by a post-test to find out the effectiveness of the treatment and short interview sessions were held to find out students' perception of the activity. Results showed that both groups showed improvement in their post-test results. However, the experimental group achieved a significant difference in their post-test results compared to the pre-test where all respondents attained same results or higher. Many of the students from the experimental group attained marks with differences of more than 50%. The results showed that the experimental group performed better than the control group. Subsequently, the interview sessions revealed that students preferred the 'Snake Attack' activity as it is fun and the rules are easy to comprehend and remember.

ABSTRAK

Ramai pelajar didapati lemah dalam tatabahasa Bahasa Inggeris (Subject-Verb Agreement). Mereka sentiasa keliru sama ada untuk meletakkan atau tidak meletakkan huruf 's' pada akhir kata kerja. Justeru itu, kajian ini dijalankan bertujuan untuk mengkaji keberkesanan pengajaran tatabahasa Bahasa Inggeris bagi 'Subject-Verb Agreement' (SVA) menggunakan gambar 'Ular' yang melambangkan huruf 'S' untuk kata kerja tunggal (Singular Subjects) dalam aktiviti 'Snake Attack'. Bagi tujuan kajian ini, 30 orang pelajar dengan tahap penguasaan dari aras rendah hingga sederhana dari SMK Bandar Seri Alam telah dipilih sebagai responden. Satu kumpulan telah dikategorikan sebagai kumpulan eksperimen - kumpulan yang menjalani pelajaran menggunakan aktiviti 'Snake Attack' dan kumpulan kawalan, kumpulan yang menjalani pelajaran tatabahasa tradisional (prescriptive grammar). Satu pra-ujian dan beberapa rawatan telah dijalankan diikuti dengan ujian pos untuk mengesan keberkesanan rawatan tersebut dan sesi temuduga ringkas untuk mengetahui pendapat pelajar tentang aktiviti tersebut. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa kedua-dua kumpulan menunjukkan peningkatan dalam ujian pos. Walau bagaimanapun, hanya kumpulan eksperimen mencapai perbezaan yang signifikan dalam ujian pos mereka berbanding dengan pra-ujian di mana semua responden mencapai keputusan yang positif. Beberapa pelajar mencapai perbezaan lebih daripada 50% daripada markah pra-ujian. Ini bermakna bahawa kumpulan eksperimen telah mencapai keputusan yang lebih baik daripada kumpulan kawalan. Selain itu daripada sesi temuduga, telah dikenalpasti bahawa pelajar lebih menggemari sesi pembelajaran menggunakan aktiviti 'Snake Attack' kerana ia menyeronokkan dan peraturannya mudah untuk difahami.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF THE STUDY

1.0   Introduction

This chapter discusses the background information of the study. Subsequently previous researches on different methods of teaching grammar are put forward. The research questions designed for this study are also presented.

Languages and symbols are systems for representing and communicating information, experiences, and ideas. People use languages and symbols to produce texts of all kinds: written, spoken, and visual; informative and imaginative; informal and formal; mathematical, scientific, and technological. Symbols teach the observer or reader to stop looking for surface value and to look deeper into the art and the literature. From the researcher's observation after teaching for more than 10 years, she finds that the weaker students need more than just exercises and drilling in grammar to make them grasp the rules; at least the basic ones. She decides to incorporate the use of symbols in her grammar class as symbols can give a greater impact on students compared to written text.

Holt (2011), cited that a symbol can turn an abstract idea tangible. The symbol can be a word or a picture or object and it can be used by others. Examples of basic symbols are the letters of the alphabet and the colours of a traffic light. In writing, symbolism is the use of a word, a phrase, or a description, which represents a deeper meaning than the words themselves. This kind of extension of meaning can transform the written word into a very powerful instrument.

Therefore, she decides to make use of the symbol 'snake' for the letter 's' in writing singular verbs for singular subjects hoping that the visual effect can stick in the students' mind longer.

According to Jackson (1985), in 1637 Ben Jonson writes: "Grammar is the art of true and well speaking a Language". This clearly indicates that grammar plays a vital role in language teaching and learning. According to Siti Rohani (2007), there has been an on-going debate about grammar in ESL teaching and in studies of

second language acquisition. Many second language teachers are experimenting and exploring the best and suitable ways to teach grammar to their learners. Siti Rohani (2007) asserts that teaching methods used to teach grammar rules has a significant influence on the development of language teaching practice. Therefore different outlook, approaches and methodologies to grammar teaching have emerged for ESL teachers to choose to suit their own learners' proficiency level and classroom environment.

Jackson (1985), stated that the study of grammar is often subdivided into syntax and morphology, which the former dealing with the structure of sentences and the latter with the structure of words. Unquestionably, the use of grammar teaching in the field of second language acquisition has been well deliberated. Many researches were conducted on 'Traditional Grammar Teaching', 'Communicative Language Teaching', 'Implicit versus Explicit Teaching of Grammar Rules' and 'Inductive versus Deductive Method of Teaching Grammar'. Second language teachers are often confused with which teaching approach is the best and suitable to teach learners the grammar rules in the target language. Brindley's research (1984) on Adult Migrant Education in Australia has found teachers put more favour of communicative activities while learners prefer traditional method of learning grammar.

According to Ellis (2008), Grammar teaching involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it.

Hence, this paper lays out a research conducted to find out which method works best in teaching grammar (to be precise, for the teaching of Subject-Verb-Agreement (SVA)) among a group of intermediate proficiency level students of a secondary school chosen; traditional or creative method?

1.1   Background of the Study

The researcher has the experience in teaching English in secondary schools and particularly the upper forms (Form 4 and Form 5) for approximately 12 years. Being an English teacher in a non-English speaker environment is tough. The students, if not all, most of them do not see the importance of learning the second language and lackadaisically sit through the English lessons because they have to sit for the tests and examinations. Outside the English lesson they do not use the language at all whether in reading or speaking. When they do not practice using the language, they face a lot of problems in writing too, especially in building grammatically correct sentences.

The researcher is passionate about grammar and always starts her language classes at the beginning of the year by introducing basic grammar lessons. She feels that she cannot do without the grammar lessons as they act as the guideline for students in writing or speaking. However she finds that grammar lessons always frighten her students. They find it too intimidating as there are complex rules to memorise and format to adhere to. At the end of the day, some if not most of the students, repeat the same mistakes in their writing over and over again. Those who do understand the grammar rules and are able to write correctly may not sustain the accuracy for long. After a while they will forget and produce the same errors in their writing again. Hence, she is always contemplating on how to go about teaching grammar lessons? Can she do without the grammar lessons and hoping that the students will one day grasp the rules through other language lessons when they read other reading materials? So, which one will help; teaching grammar as a major lesson, teach grammar once in a while when there is an urgency to do so or not to teach at all?

From the researcher's observation, her students are very weak in Subject-Verb-Agreement (SVA). They are always confused whether to put or not to put the letter 's' at the end of the verb. It seemed to be very difficult for them to understand when and where to put the letter 's'. They cannot seem to grasp the rule of Singular Subjects are followed by Singular Verbs (verb + 's') and Plural Subjects are followed by plural Verbs (verb with no 's'). As a result, they just simply write it where they want to, without knowing whether it is right or wrong.

Personally, the researcher believes that SVA is the fundamental rules that all students must master in order to be able to write grammatically correct sentences. Therefore she always likes to start off her grammar lesson at the beginning of the year by carrying out this particular topic. This is to ensure that they will grasp the rules and will not face the problem in writing sentences in the upcoming writing classes. Unfortunately it is to no avail. After explaining the grammar rules to the students in one or two lessons, if not immediately, after a while they seem to forget. She discovers this when giving them an exercise after the explanation of the rules. As a result she would end up feeling depressed.

There's an English saying that goes, "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink". The same could be said about teaching grammar; you can teach the students rules but you can't make them learn them. There are many reasons for this. The students may simply not understand the rules. Grinder (1989), concludes that some people process, store and recall information more easily if it is presented visually, while others prefer auditory or kinaesthetic (movement and touch) modes. Stevick (1989), suggests that teachers have to make the texts and the language in them, as memorable as possible.

With this in mind the researcher comes up with the activity called 'S'nake Attack; Symbolism in English Grammar. As this activity is conducted differently from the normal dull traditional grammar lessons, using talk and chalk, it is hoped that it will give a positive result by enabling students to develop their writing skills. If the activity works, it would be a breakthrough for her to share with the other teachers to apply it in their grammar lessons. What most important is that this will bring up the percentage of passing in the school tests and examinations and similarly in the public exams.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Many research studies had been conducted to examine English language learning in Malaysian schools. Some of these studies are discussed here.

Marlyna Maros, Tan Kim Hua, and Khazriyati (2007), explore interference effect of Bahasa Malaysia as an important inhibiting factor in the acquisition of English literacy among Form One students. Using error analysis and contrastive analysis, the study examines errors made by 120 students from 6 rural schools in Pahang, Selangor and Melaka. Based on the errors in the students' essays, the study concludes that the learners have difficulties in using correct English grammar in their writings. Three most frequent errors are wrong use of articles, subject-verb agreement, and copula 'be'. The study claims that a large number of errors identified suggest interference of the Malay grammar.

In a related work, Nor Hashimah Jalaludin et al. (2008) examined the morphological and syntactical differences between the Malay language and English, and concluded that the linguistics differences are shown to be one of the major factors influencing students' inability to successfully acquire English literacy. A study conducted on 315 Form Two students showed that the most obvious weaknesses of the students' language ability lay in the area of grammar, particularly in the aspects of morphology and syntax. The study showed that students have problems with affixes and plural inflections as these linguistics variables do not exist in Malay language. The study also confirmed that the differences in the syntactical structures between the Malay and English language contribute to the wrong use of copula 'be', subject-verb-agreement and relative pronouns.

Saadiyah Darus and Kaladevi (2009) analyzed 72 written essays by Form Four students in one semi-urban secondary school. The finding of the study indicates that students generally have problems in applying correct grammatical rules in their writings. This study is in agreement with two previous studies that identify common grammatical errors made by the students are Subject-Verb agreement and wrong use of singular and plural forms. In addition, wrong application of verb tense, inappropriate word choice and prepositions are common among the participants. Findings of this study imply that students have not yet mastered basic grammatical structures even though they have gone through 10 years of learning English.

From the findings of the researches that were conducted, it is proven that students in general are weak in English grammar. One of the identified topics is Subject-Verb-Agreement (SVA). Therefore this research is carried out in attempt to find out how well can students build grammatically correct sentences (in terms of SVA); putting the letter 's' at the end of the verbs for singular subjects, when they are taught with a creative method; using the 'S' symbol as a 'Snake' compared to the traditional method, the explicit teaching of grammar rules.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to discover whether the students are able to write correct verbs for the singular / plural subjects after they are taught Subject-Verb-Agreement using the 'S' symbol as a 'Snake' in the activity called 'S'nake Attack. How well will they do? Would they score higher in the post-test compared to the pre-test?

From the research conducted, it is also aimed to find out which method works best; the traditional or creative teaching of grammar?

At the end of the day if the finding is favourable towards the Snake Attack activity, it would be suggested to the English teachers to implement this method in teaching learners the topic 'Subject-Verb Agreement' in their grammar lessons. If it is found otherwise, an improvisation has to be made in the activity until it meets the purpose of being an aid for the English teachers to use in their grammar lessons.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this research are:

i)   To investigate if the grammar lesson for Subject-Verb Agreement using 'Snake' symbol representing the letter 's' for singular verbs is understood and the rules are retained by the students.

ii)   To discover students' perceptions on the activity called 'Snake Attack' using the 'Snake' symbol representing the letter 's' for singular verbs in learning the grammar lesson for Subject-Verb Agreement.

1.5   Research Questions

This research attempts to answer the following research questions:

1)   Would the students be able to understand and retain the grammar rules of Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA) in teaching the lesson using the 'Snake' pictures symbolising the letter 's' for singular verbs?

2)   What are the students' perceptions of learning grammar (SVA) using the snake symbol in the 'Snake Attack' activity?

1.6   Significance of the Study

The Ministry of Education Malaysia has long been carrying out various English programs for students in the country. This is intended to improve their skills in mastering the subject. The recent program that is being carried out is the MBMMBI (Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia & Memperkukuh Bahasa Inggeris) program or in English is UBMSEL (To Uphold Bahasa Malaysia & To Strengthen the English Language) program.

The Johor State Education Department is working hard to improve the English proficiency level of the students in the state by introducing a number of English programs to be carried out in schools. Among them are the EW20 (English Within 20 minutes) program and A Word A Day program for the students. On the other hand for the English teachers, the LET (Learn English Together) program was suggested and it is to be carried out every Thursday of the week. In the LET program, the English teachers are to sit together and share teaching techniques that work for them in their English lessons, solve any issues regarding their Teaching &

Learning (T&L) sessions for English or even discuss the problems of their students that they encounter in class and how to overcome them.

In most of the discussion sessions, the teachers always talked about the weakness of students in writing skills. Because of the disability in writing grammatically correct sentences, it is hard for them to achieve good results in tests and exams. Even during the English lessons in class, when the students are asked to write an essay, they have to struggle to construct the sentences.

There is no doubt that they have a lot of ideas in their mind, unfortunately they cannot express it well on paper. Albeit the message they want to convey is understood, sometimes it is hard to find even one grammatically correct sentence from the whole essay.

There is no point if the problem continues to be discussed without looking for the solution that might work. The researcher finds it very crucial that it is to be tackled right from the grass root.

For her Form 4 classes, the researcher has taught them the SVA explicitly before (that is by laying out the rule for SVA), but they do not seem to grasp the grammar rules. Even if they do understand the rules during the lesson and are able to fill in the blanks with the correct verbs, it seems as if they have a short term memory. When they are asked to write sentences the following day, they keep making the same mistakes again and again. She feels like she had come to her wits end.

As Willis (2012) quoted that 'writing is a trade in which every educated man, woman, and child should be skilled. Writing is a trade, which anyone can master if he goes about it in the right way', and as Pazaver and Wang (2009) point out that teacher's classroom practices when teaching grammar rules are relatively influential to learners, she figured out that she has to come up with a technique that can be applied to teach her students SVA.

Therefore her primary goal of conducting this research is to find out whether her brain child activity, the 'S'nake Attack works. If the students are able to grasp the

rules of SVA after she implemented the technique, she would like to recommend to the other teachers to utilize it as well.

1.7   Scope of the Study

This research mainly embraces the students' ability in writing the correct verbs (whether to add the letter 's' in the verbs or not) next to the subjects (Singular Subjects / Plural Subjects) in sentences. Since the researcher's students' fluency level ranges from intermediate to low, she finds it most suitable for her to carry out a study on their basic grammar skills and specifically the Subject-Verb-Agreement topic.

1.8   Definition of Terms

Definitions of terms used in the study are given below.

1.8.1   A Symbol

A symbol is the use of one object or action to represent or suggest something for an intended meaning. It can be a material object or a written sign used to represent something invisible.

Using language, texts and symbols for example a snake, is about working with the codes in which knowledge is expressed. Languages and symbols are systems for representing and communicating information, experiences, and ideas. People use languages and symbols to produce texts of all kinds either written, spoken, and visual; informative and imaginative; informal and formal; mathematical, scientific, and technological.

Holt (2011), quoted that good symbols, no matter how they are used, are those that make you look at an object or idea in a new way. Take for instance the snake. Without any education, the student immediately responds to the image with

either fear or disgust. This emotional response makes it perfect for symbolism. Therefore the idea of using a snake in this study is suitable for not only the students will remember the gruesome notion of a Singular Subjects will be attacked by a snake, coincidently the snake also resembles the letter 'S' that will ring the students' bell to insert the letter 's' at the end of Singular Verbs.

1.8.2 English Grammar

All the languages in the world are governed by specific rules as guidelines on how it should be used correctly. In generative linguistics, 'grammar' is the term for the system that constitutes our knowledge of a particular language. We each have the grammar of at least one language in our mind/brain. (Schutze, 2010)

Similarly, English grammar refers to the formal analysis and description of the rules of the language. According to Leech, Deuchar, & Hoogenraad (1982), "Grammar can be briefly described as a set of rules for constructing and analysing sentences'.

Kinsey (2004) noted that, linguists make a distinction between 'descriptive' and 'prescriptive' grammar. Prescriptive grammar refers to the traditional meaning of "grammar," i.e., what is taught in schools, prescribing how one *should* speak and write. On the other hand, the descriptive grammar consists of a complicated, interrelated set of unconscious rules that are naturally acquired by children.

Kolln and Funk (2009) listed down three definitions of grammar:

Grammar 1: The system of rules in our heads. It is a subconscious system of rules which is our "language competence".

Grammar 2: The formal description of the rules. It is the branch of linguistic science concerned with the formal description of language, the subject matter of books which identify in an objective way the form and structure and the syntax of sentences.

Grammar 3: The social implications of usage, sometimes called "*linguistic*

etiquette." This definition could be called do's and don't's of usage rather than grammar.

Chitravelu, Sithamparam and Soo Choon (1995:196) define grammar as "the rules of a language, concerning the way in which words are put together to convey meaning in different contexts".

1.8.3   Traditional Grammar Teaching

Traditional grammar or known as 'prescriptive' grammar, analysed the sentence as the main unit and placed the emphasis on the student's ability to form correct sentences. Grammar rules are given prominence which they are taught explicitly and learning is seen as a mainly cognitive process. According to Hillocks (1986), prescriptive grammar emphasizes learning the proper terms of grammatical elements, such as nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives. In addition it also emphasizes learning the many rules of English grammar. The most common forms of exercise type are gapped sentences and sentences for transformation, reflecting a form-based, rather uncontextualized view of grammar and an extremely passive role on the part of the learner.

Newby (1998), cited that traditional grammatical descriptions began by setting up form categories, only then looking at meaning; as a result, syllabuses were defined, and teaching materials organised, according to forms (present progressive, definite article, gerund etc.).

1.8.4   Creative Grammar Teaching

The word 'creative' as defined by Oxford Dictionary (2012) is 'relating to or involving the use of the imagination or original ideas to create something. In addition to that Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2012) gives definition for the word 'creative' as 'having the quality of something created rather than imitated'.

Students love to try something new or different. Therefore in creative grammar teaching, through exciting activities, not only the students are able to have fun participating actively in the different environment of the classroom, but their imagination, humour and creativity are stimulated. Gerngross, Puchta and Thornbury (2006), stated that grammar teaching does not have to be dull. The creative grammar teaching should be incorporated as it provides an opportunity for a deeper and more meaningful acquaintance with the grammar items, always in an extended context and always with an element of individual creativity.

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