

Chinese Learner Challenges in English Subject-Verb Agreement

Qian Zhang

School of General Education, Wenzhou Polytechnic, Wenzhou, Zhejiang 325000, China

Abstract: The second language learners are experiencing manifold challenges when acquiring a new language. English is one of the most prevalent languages nowadays. The English speakers hail from around the world. Therefore, English has become a compulsory course in China since the late 1980s. As Chinese is my first language and English is the second, I can intermittently perceive the learner challenges especially the English grammar. Grammar is the set of rules in fields of phonology, morphology, and syntax, often complemented by phonetics, semantics, and pragmatics. Chinese grammar differs from English to a great extent, including subject-verb (S-V) agreement. It is sometimes really hard to compose grammatically correct sentences due to the influence of Chinese grammar patterns as well as the sociocultural context. Consequently, the aim of the paper is to define the challenges that the learners face whose first language is Chinese and seek for answers to this problem in second language acquisition.

Keywords: Learner Challenge; Chinese ELL; Subject-Verb Agreement; English Language Learning.

1. Introduction

There is a heated debate on the importance of learning English grammar over years. In the early of 16th century, the grammar- translation method was first raised to teach Latin for communication (Mella, 1998, p. 68). The students learn grammar rules by translating sentences between the target language and source language. This method emphasizes the language drilling. The reform movement in late 1800s overturns it. Countless scholars have put forward theories of learning and teaching grammar. The Communicative Language Teaching and the Task-based Language teaching are most prevalent methods nowadays. However, the studies of grammar tend to decrease in recent 20 years. As a result, I chose this research topic so as to draw more attention on the grammar study.

With regard to completely different religions, cultures and values, Chinese and English are two distinct languages. Chinese and English belong to two language families. Chinese is part of Sino-Tibetan family while English is Indo-European (Smith & Swan, 2001, p. 310). Because of the disparate origins, the two languages have significant differences in grammar, syntax and morphology. In the aspect of grammar, Chinese does not include singular and plural forms as well as the verb tenses compares to English. In other words, Chinese is a non-inflected language. What English achieves by changing verb forms, Chinese expresses by means of adverbials, word order and context (Smith & Swan, 2001, p. 315). Therefore, English inflection is a crucial part for Chinese in learning English S-V agreement. It is a grammatical rule that English Language Learners (ELLs) must follow to combine words into phrases and sentences. According to Celce-Murcia and Freeman (1983), "In spite of the early introduction and superficially simple rules of the subject-verb agreement, they still pose problems for ESL learners at all levels or proficiency"(p. 232). Because there is no rule such as S-V concord, it makes learning English a challenge for Chinese ESL (English as a Second Language) learners.

2. Linguistic Analysis

2.1. S-V Agreement in Chinese

On the basis of the completely different religions, cultures and values, Chinese and English are two distinct languages. From the Table 1, we can see that in English, the verb "work" changes its form basing on the singular and plural subjects. In contrast, the verb in Chinese 工作 (means work in English), does not change no matter what the subject is.

Table 1. S-V Agreement in Chinese

Language	First Person	Second Person	Third Person
Chinese	我在晚上工作。	你在晚上工作。	他 / 她在晚上工作。 他们在晚上工作。
English	I work at night.	You work at night.	He/she works at night. They work at night

2.2. S-V Agreement in English

To analyze the problems that the Chinese English learners confront, the Chinese ESL learners always divide the S-V agreement in English into three categories and compare them with Chinese.

2.2.1. Grammatical Concord

The first category is the grammatical concord (Zhang, 2014, p. 103). This rule can be employed in most cases. The implication is that the subject and verb should be consistent in grammar forms. The subject in the sentence determines the verb form. The specific case in English is that when the subject is in the singular form, learners should use the singular verb. The plural subject and verb are in a similar vein. This example is provided both in English and Chinese:

The book helps you learn English.

这本书帮助你学英语。

The book is a singular form; therefore, it should be followed by a singular verb *helps*. However, in Chinese there are no inflections, so *help* (帮助) doesn't change in forms

(Qiu, 1999, p. 93).

2.2.2. Notional Agreement

The second point to note is the notional agreement (Zhang, 2014, p. 103). In this principal, the learners need to focus on the meaning of the subject. The meaning of the subject decides the verb form. Even if the subject is used in the plural form, the verb form will be singular. Take these two sentences as examples:

The teacher, with all his students, is going to have a picnic this weekend.

老师打算这个周末与学生们一起去野炊。

Although the subject is plural in form, it is singular in meaning. It emphasizes a teacher who is going to have a picnic. There for is applied in the sentence. In Chinese, however, this expression has no transformation in forms (Qiu, 1999, p. 93).

2.2.3. Principle of Proximity

Thirdly, principle of proximity is also frequently employed in S-V agreement (Zhang, 2014, p.104). This principle follows that the predicate verb should be consistent with the nearest subject instead of the central subject. This rule has certain specificity. It is a principal that usually comes along with the conjunctions such as *not only... but also...* and *either... or...* Here is the example:

Neither his family nor he knows anything about it (Li& Tang, 2005, p. 32).

他全家人和他都不知道那件事。

His family and he are plural subjects. But it is connected by *neither... nor...*, thus the verb should be in accordance with the subject *he* due to the principle of proximity. There are no proximity rules in Chinese. As a result, the third person singular should not be applied.

3. Analysis of Anticipated Challenges

Subject-verb agreement is a computation that is often difficult to execute perfectly in the first language (L1) and even more difficult to produce skillfully in a second language (L2) (Hosino, Dussias & Kroll, 2010, p. 89). Although the S-V consistent rules are systematic to some extent, the English learners in Chinese are still in face of various difficulties in the practice due to the lack of inflections in Chinese. The first language exerts a great impact on the second language acquisition. Since S-V agreement is not functional in Chinese, the Chinese ELLs as well as the teachers have to take more efforts to master and teach this grammar rules. Although they are aware of the grammatical rules of the S-V agreement, they can easily make mistakes both in oral practice and academic writing.

Secondly, the inflectional morpheme is another challenge. According to Curzan and Adams (2012), in English, meaning changes as the root adopts each suffix: -s indicates third-person singular present tense, -ing indicates the present participle or the progressive mood, -ed indicates the simple past tense or the past participle (p. 105). There are multiple verb forms. The ELLs have to remember load of verb forms, including regular verbs and irregular ones. That can be perplexing for the ELLs.

In addition, the acquisition of the S-V agreement is intricate as well. The acquisition and the application of the rules are difficult. Despite the fact that the learners get a glimpse of the grammar rules of the S-V agreement, they do not possess the ability to apply these principals automatically. The English learners confuse the three principals of the S-V agreement.

For example, the exercises are extremely difficult, but half of the class have finished them ahead of time, although half of the class is a singular form, it lays an emphasis on each member in the class. Therefore, the verb should be in the plural form. However, English learners may confuse and make mistakes by mixing up the rules of grammatical and notional concord

4. Connection to Prior Experience

I have started learning English since third grade. The S-V agreement is always a complicated grammatical rule for me. When I first knew about this rule, it took me a long time to memorize all the principals and the exception cases. Although I basically master the rule of S-V agreement now, I frequently make mistakes both in oral and written English. I also find it is a common phenomenon that the Chinese students have difficulties in mastering the S-V agreement since I have taught middle school students in China. I notice that they easily forget to use inflections after the verb form. These problems can be mainly showed in their writings. To summarize, the S-V agreement can be a tricky task for the Chinese ESL students to deal with.

5. Suggestions for Classroom Practice

Due to the challenges that the Chinese learners of English may encounter, it is of great importance to come up with some suggestions. To begin with, teachers are suggested to provide various activities for the students in order to conquer these challenges. Instead of rote learning, the intriguing and interesting activities can evoke the students' enthusiasm towards remembering the grammatical rules about the S-V agreement. For example, teachers can use songs and tongue twisters to deepen the students' impressions of the rules.

Moreover, teachers need to offer more opportunities to the students to practice the rules both in oral and written English. For example, the group discussion and presentation will give the learners more chances to speak in public. These will help them practice and develop the awareness of the rules about S-V agreement. Additionally, the teacher can give concrete feedback to the students' writing. By pointing out their mistakes, the students may pay more attention on the S-V agreement in the subsequent academic writings.

Last but not least, the learners themselves should make some efforts to overcome the challenges as well. Doing appropriate and sufficient exercises is a prerequisite. What's more, peer review is another powerful tool for them to avoid such mistakes. The students can form study groups that specially focus on the S-V agreement. They can offer feedback to each other.

6. Conclusion

In a nutshell, there are three principals of English S-V agreement: grammatical concord, notional agreement and the principle of proximity. While in Chinese, the S-V agreement does not exist. Hence, the Chinese ELLs are confronted with challenges in speaking and writing in English. With the purpose of helping Chinese English learners, the teacher has to formulate specific plans for the students.

References

- [1] Curzan, A., & Adams, M. (2012). How English works: A linguistic introduction (3rd ed.).

- [2] Hartsuiker, R. J., Kolk, H.H., & Huinck, W. J. (1999) Agrammatic production of subject-verb agreement: The effect of conceptual number. *Brain and Language*. 69(2), 119-160. doi: 10.1006/brln.1999.2059 H. Poor, An Introduction to Signal Detection and Estimation. New York: Springer-Verlag, 1985, ch. 4.
- [3] Li, J. Q., & Tang, G. L. (2005). Ying han yu yan ji ben zu zhi gui lv dui bi yan jiu. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching Journal*, 5(8), 30-34.E. H. Miller, "A note on reflector arrays (Periodical style-Accepted for publication)," *IEEE Trans. Antennas Propagat.*, to be published.
- [4] Hoshino, N., Dussias, P. E., & Kroll, J. F. (2010). Processing subject-verb agreement in a second language depends on proficiency. *Biling (Camb Engl)*, 13(2), 87-98. doi: 10.1017/S1366728909990034.
- [5] Murcia, M. A., & Freeman, D. L., (1998). *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course*. Independence, KY: Heinle ELT.
- [6] Qiu, G. P. (1999). Ying yu ju zi zhong de zhu wei yi zhi yuan ze ji ying yong. *Henan jiao yu xue yuan xue bao*, 2(6), 92-108.M. Young, *The Technical Writers Handbook*. Mill Valley, CA: University Science, 1989.
- [7] Swan, M., & Smith, B. (2001). *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other*.
- [8] Zhang, B. B. (2014). Qian xi ying yu zhu wei yi zhi de san yuan ze. *Journal of Hubei University of Science and Technology*, 34(8), 103-104.R. W. Lucky, "Automatic equalization for digital communication," *Bell Syst. Tech. J.*, vol. 44, no. 4, pp. 547-588, Apr. 1965.