



An Evaluation of Grammatical Concord in Written Assignments of Level 100 Students in a South African University



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of grammatical concord in the written assignments of first-year students at a South African university. Using purposive sampling and Critical Discourse Analysis, selected student texts were analysed to assess proficiency in grammatical concord, with a particular focus on subject-verb agreement, tense concord, and concord with relative pronouns and specific expressions. The findings reveal a general lack of proficiency, which is attributed to weak language foundations acquired during primary and secondary education. The study recommends that more engaging and context-based pedagogical methods, such as grammar instruction in context, use of substitution tables, and consistent practice, be adopted to enhance students' mastery of English grammar.

Keywords: Grammatical Concord, Subject-Verb Agreement, ESL, Pedagogy, Error Analysis, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a multilingual nation with twelve officially recognized languages, reflecting its cultural and linguistic diversity.¹ Despite this diversity, English continues to dominate education, administration, and media.² Within higher education, English serves as the principal language of instruction and academic discourse. While this linguistic dominance facilitates access to global scholarship, it also poses challenges for many students whose home languages are African languages and who received limited exposure to English in their schooling.

The predominance of English in tertiary education creates a paradox. On one hand, it provides a common linguistic platform for national and international participation; on the other hand, it hinders epistemic access for students from previously disadvantaged educational backgrounds.³ These students often struggle to express complex ideas in academic English, particularly in writing tasks that demand syntactic precision and coherence. As a result, grammatical competence—especially in the use of grammatical concord—becomes a key determinant of academic success.

¹ Mlamli Diko and Adelheid Bechtold Celliers, "Revisiting the Challenges of Teaching and Learning Indigenous South African Languages," in *Forum for Linguistic Studies*, vol. 6, 2024, 254–67.

² Jie Zeng and Jianbu Yang, "English Language Hegemony: Retrospect and Prospect," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, no. 1 (2024): 1–9.

³ Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis and Otilia Chiramba, "Access and Success in Higher Education: Fostering Resilience in Historically Disadvantaged Students in South Africa," *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education* 17, no. 2 (2025): 759–71.

Grammatical concord, or agreement, refers to the harmonious relationship between grammatical elements such as subjects and verbs in number, person, and tense. For example, ensuring that a singular subject is followed by a singular verb is a basic rule of English syntax. However, this fundamental concept continues to challenge many English Second Language (ESL) learners. The persistent misuse of grammatical concord among university students is not merely a technical issue but a symptom of deeper educational and linguistic deficiencies.⁴ These errors often result in incoherent sentences and hinder effective communication in academic writing.

Studies have shown that while subject-verb agreement forms the core of English grammatical concord, other types, such as tense concord, notional concord, proximity concord, and agreement involving relative pronouns, are often neglected in classroom instruction.⁵ Teachers, constrained by time and limited grammatical training, tend to focus only on surface-level rules, leaving students with fragmented understandings of grammatical structure. Consequently, learners enter university with weak grammatical foundations, and their writing frequently reflects fossilized errors developed over years of insufficient instruction.

The problem is compounded by systemic factors within South Africa's education system. Many learners, particularly those from rural or under-resourced schools, are taught English by educators who themselves lack sufficient training in grammar pedagogy. As a result, grammar instruction is often reduced to error correction rather than conceptual understanding. At tertiary level, this neglect persists under the assumption that students have already mastered grammatical rules. The cumulative effect is that students continue to struggle with concord errors that impede both their written and spoken English proficiency.

Scholars such as Dulay and Burt have long recognized that errors are an inevitable part of second language learning.⁶ However, the frequency and persistence of concord errors among university students point to gaps in teaching methodology and language exposure rather than mere developmental mistakes. Larsen and Long stress that subject-verb agreement is not a trivial grammatical feature but a fundamental component of meaningful sentence construction.⁷ Similarly, Freeborn and Rifiyanti and Dewi emphasize that grammatical accuracy underpins syntactic coherence and communicative clarity.⁸ In the South African context, therefore, improving students' mastery of grammatical concord is both a pedagogical and social imperative.⁹ The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Why do South African students consistently struggle with grammatical concord in English?
2. What semantic problems arise when students violate the rules of grammatical concord?

This study has direct implications for language policy and curriculum development in higher education. By identifying the specific nature of grammatical concord errors among first-year university students, it provides evidence that can inform the design of more responsive English language curricula. The findings can assist educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in developing targeted grammar instruction and support programmes that strengthen students' academic literacy. Such interventions are vital to bridging the gap between secondary and tertiary language preparation, particularly for students from linguistically disadvantaged backgrounds.

⁴ Nengah Dwi Handayani and I Ketut Wardana, "Assessing the Effectiveness of Interactive Grammar-Based Teaching in Enhancing EFL Learners' Concord Comprehension and Learning Confidence," *Journal on English as a Foreign Language* 15, no. 1 (2025): 30–53.

⁵ D. Freeborn, *A Course Book in English Grammar* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1987); G. G. Corbett, *Agreement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Haruna Shuaibu, Ibrahim Ghali, and Ahmed Baba Mustapha, "Concord Usage in English Grammar: An Overview," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)* 26, No. 9, 2021.

⁶ Heidi C Dulay and Marina K Burt, "You Can't Learn Without Goofing An Analysis of Children's Second Language 'Errors,'" in *Error Analysis* (Routledge, 2015), 95–123.

⁷ O. A. Asra, "An Analysis of Students' Concord Errors a Case Study of Akatsi No. 1 Junior High School in Akatsi in the Volta Region of Ghana" (University of Education, 2019); D. F. Larsen and M. H. Long, *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research* (Beijing : Language and Culture University Press, 2007).

⁸ Freeborn, *A Course Book in English Grammar*; Hafizah Rifiyanti and Dyah Utami Dewi, "Error Types in Subject-Verb Agreement," *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Proficiency* 4, no. 2 (2022): 57–66.

⁹ A. Biney, "The Use of Grammatical Concord and Its Associated Semantic Effects" (University of Cape Coast, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on grammatical concord emphasizes its fundamental role in maintaining syntactic accuracy and semantic clarity in English communication. Concord, often referred to as agreement, denotes the grammatical relationship between elements of a sentence that must correspond in number, person, gender, or tense. Among its various forms, subject-verb agreement remains the most prominent, while other types include tense concord, notional concord, proximity concord, and agreement involving relative pronouns.¹⁰ A failure to observe these grammatical relationships often leads to ambiguity and incoherence, thus undermining effective communication. For English Second Language (ESL) learners, the mastery of grammatical concord remains a major challenge because it requires both structural understanding and semantic awareness.

Dulay and Burt argued that errors are inevitable in second language learning, describing them as natural signs of developmental progress.¹¹ However, when such errors persist, particularly in the area of concord, they point to deeper cognitive and pedagogical deficiencies. Larsen and Long underscore that subject-verb agreement is a foundational linguistic feature that ensures grammatical harmony and meaning.¹² Similarly, Asra maintains that accurate concord is vital for constructing meaningful and coherent sentences.¹³ Errors in this domain are not simply mechanical mistakes but indicators of incomplete acquisition of linguistic structures. Freeborn further explains that grammar provides the rules that enable the organization of words into meaningful expressions, emphasizing that failure to adhere to concord rules compromises both syntax and semantics.¹⁴

In multilingual contexts such as South Africa, these challenges are compounded by the linguistic diversity of learners. The first languages of many South African students do not possess grammatical agreement systems equivalent to English, leading to interference and transfer errors. This linguistic transfer frequently manifests in written English, where learners misapply grammatical rules from their native languages. According to Woldegiorgis and Chiramba, students entering universities from under-resourced schools often lack adequate exposure to English, which restricts their ability to internalize fundamental grammatical patterns.¹⁵ Biney similarly observes that weak foundational grammar training in the schooling system perpetuates language inequality and hinders students' capacity to communicate effectively in academic English.¹⁶

The teaching of grammatical concord also presents pedagogical difficulties. Traditional grammar teaching methods in ESL contexts have relied heavily on rote memorization and isolated rule instruction. Bayiri criticizes such approaches for producing only surface-level understanding that does not translate into actual language competence.¹⁷ Corbett and Rifiyanti and Dewi emphasize the importance of contextualized grammar instruction, arguing that learners must engage with grammatical rules through communicative use to internalize them meaningfully.¹⁸ Al-Mohanna further asserts that even advanced ESL learners struggle with grammatical concord because their learning experiences often prioritize fluency over grammatical precision.¹⁹ The situation is aggravated when teachers themselves have limited formal training in grammar pedagogy, a challenge that remains evident in many South African institutions.

¹⁰ Corbett, *Agreement*; Shuaibu, Ghali, and Mustapha, "Concord Usage in English Grammar: An Overview."

¹¹ Dulay and Burt, "You Can't Learn Without Goofing An Analysis of Children's Second Language 'Errors.'"

¹² Larsen and Long, *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*.

¹³ Asra, "An Analysis of Students' Concord Errors a Case Study of Akatsi No. 1 Junior High School in Akatsi in the Volta Region of Ghana."

¹⁴ Freeborn, *A Course Book in English Grammar*.

¹⁵ Woldegiorgis and Chiramba, "Access and Success in Higher Education: Fostering Resilience in Historically Disadvantaged Students in South Africa."

¹⁶ Biney, "The Use of Grammatical Concord and Its Associated Semantic Effects ."

¹⁷ N. P. Bayiri, "Concord Problems among Students of Senior High School Form One, a Case Study in Kintampo Senior High School" (University of Education, 2018).

¹⁸ Edward J. Malecki, "Chapter 3 Entrepreneurs, Networks, and Economic Development: A Review of Recent Research," in *Reflections and Extensions on Key Papers of the First Twenty-Five Years of Advances*, ed. J. Katz and A. Corbett (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), 71–116, <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1074-75402018000020010>; Rifiyanti and Dewi, "Error Types in Subject-Verb Agreement."

¹⁹ Ayedh Dhawi Al-Mohanna, "Difficulties and Challenges Encountered by Saudi EFL Learners: A Diagnostic Study," *Scholars International Journal of Linguistics and Literature* 7, no. 10 (2024): 288–99.

The types of concord errors most frequently documented in ESL writing include mismatches in subject-verb agreement, tense inconsistency, errors in agreement with relative pronouns, and confusion in complex noun phrases. Freeborn and Sadewi, et.al., highlight that these error patterns reveal learners' difficulties in managing agreement across syntactic boundaries.²⁰ For instance, subject-verb disagreement occurs when learners fail to match singular subjects with singular verbs, as in "He go to school every day." Tense errors often involve inappropriate shifts within sentences, such as "He arrived and tells the teacher." Students also struggle with proximity concord, where they focus on the nearest noun rather than the actual subject, leading to constructions like "The teacher, along with the students, were present." Such recurrent mistakes demonstrate that learners often rely on intuitive understanding rather than grammatical reasoning, leading to systematic inaccuracies.

Bayiri observes that persistent grammatical errors can negatively influence how students' intellectual competence is perceived in academic contexts.²¹ Inaccurate use of concord not only distorts meaning but can also reflect poorly on the writer's credibility. This view is reinforced by Al-Mohanna, who notes that even students at advanced proficiency levels continue to make agreement errors, suggesting that traditional approaches to grammar instruction are insufficient to develop lasting accuracy.²² Sadewi et al. add that English grammar presents unique difficulties because of its numerous exceptions and irregularities, making explicit and sustained instruction essential for learners to internalize complex concord rules.²³

Within the South African educational landscape, the dominance of English as the language of instruction adds another layer of complexity. Although South Africa recognizes twelve official languages, English occupies a privileged position in education, governance, and commerce.²⁴ Consequently, students from non-English-speaking backgrounds face linguistic barriers when expected to perform academic tasks in English. Handayani and Wardana²⁵ note that the problem persists because grammar teaching at both school and tertiary levels is often superficial, emphasizing error correction over conceptual understanding. This neglect leads to fossilized grammatical errors that remain unaddressed throughout students' academic progression.²⁶

The literature consistently indicates that effective grammatical instruction must integrate both form-focused and meaning-based approaches. Scholars such as Rifiyanti and Dewi and Sadewi et al. advocate for explicit grammar teaching embedded within communicative tasks, where students learn rules by applying them in real contexts. Integrating digital tools such as Grammarly and NoRedInk has also been recommended to provide immediate feedback and promote learner autonomy. These strategies are particularly valuable in contexts like South Africa, where large class sizes and diverse proficiency levels limit individualized instruction.

In sum, the reviewed literature demonstrates that grammatical concord remains a persistent challenge for ESL learners, especially in multilingual and under-resourced educational settings. The persistence of concord errors stems from inadequate grammar instruction, insufficient exposure to English, and interference from learners' first languages. The literature further reveals that traditional teaching methods, which isolate grammar from meaning, are ineffective in fostering lasting competence. Instead, there is a clear need for pedagogical models that combine explicit instruction, contextual application, and technology-assisted feedback. These insights form the theoretical foundation for the present study, which explores grammatical concord errors among first-year university students in South Africa through a qualitative discourse-analytic approach.

²⁰ Freeborn, *A Course Book in English Grammar*; NKAD Sadewi, IGNAW Mahardika, and M W Mahendra, "Challenges Faced by English Education Students in Mastering Vocabulary through Online Learning Systems," *Journal of English Education Program* 5, no. 2 (2024): 144–54.

²¹ Bayiri, "Concord Problems among Students of Senior High School Form One, a Case Study in Kintampo Senior High School."

²² Al-Mohanna, "Difficulties and Challenges Encountered by Saudi EFL Learners: A Diagnostic Study."

²³ Sadewi, Mahardika, and Mahendra, "Challenges Faced by English Education Students in Mastering Vocabulary through Online Learning Systems."

²⁴ Diko and Celliers, "Revisiting the Challenges of Teaching and Learning Indigenous South African Languages"; Zeng and Yang, "English Language Hegemony: Retrospect and Prospect."

²⁵ Rifiyanti and Dewi, "Error Types in Subject-Verb Agreement"; Sadewi, Mahardika, and Mahendra, "Challenges Faced by English Education Students in Mastering Vocabulary through Online Learning Systems."

²⁶ Handayani and Wardana, "Assessing the Effectiveness of Interactive Grammar-Based Teaching in Enhancing EFL Learners' Concord Comprehension and Learning Confidence."

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, which enabled the researcher to explore and interpret the nature of grammatical concord errors in students' academic writing in depth. The design was chosen because qualitative methods allow for detailed examination of linguistic patterns and their contextual meanings rather than numerical measurement. The study was underpinned by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a framework that facilitates the investigation of how grammatical structures influence meaning and reflect underlying linguistic competence. CDA, as outlined by Van Dijk, emphasizes the relationship between language use, cognition, and context, making it well suited for analysing students' written discourse for syntactic and semantic accuracy.²⁷ Unlike traditional Error Analysis (EA), which primarily focuses on categorizing linguistic errors, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) goes beyond surface-level description to interpret how grammatical choices shape meaning, coherence, and communicative intent. CDA allows the researcher to explore how learners' grammatical patterns reflect not only linguistic competence but also underlying cognitive and contextual factors. By applying CDA, this study connects structural grammatical errors with broader issues of meaning-making, language exposure, and educational inequality, thereby offering deeper insights into the pedagogical and communicative implications of grammatical concord in ESL writing.

The study population comprised first-year university students enrolled in foundational English language modules at a South African university. These students were English Second Language (ESL) learners who entered university with diverse linguistic backgrounds, predominantly from rural or under-resourced schools where exposure to English was limited.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants whose written assignments exhibited authentic and naturally occurring instances of grammatical concord errors. This non-random selection ensured that the data were information-rich and directly relevant to the research objectives.²⁸ A total of 40 student writing samples were selected for detailed analysis, representing a cross-section of common grammatical patterns observed in the larger cohort.

Data were collected from students' written assignments, which formed part of their continuous assessment in the foundational English language module. Permission to use these assignments was obtained from the course instructors and the institution's ethics committee. The use of naturally occurring texts ensured the authenticity of the data and provided insight into how students apply grammatical rules in real academic contexts. Each script was coded to remove identifying information, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process.

The collected scripts were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), guided by Van Dijk's cognitive approach to discourse processing.²⁹ The analysis focused on identifying, categorizing, and interpreting instances of grammatical concord errors within students' written texts. The process followed these steps:

1. Initial reading and familiarization: Each assignment was carefully read to identify recurring concord-related issues.
2. Coding of concord types: Errors were categorized into four principal types: subject-verb agreement, tense concord, concord with relative pronouns, and concord involving additive or modifying expressions.
3. Error interpretation: Each identified error was analysed for its syntactic and semantic implications, determining how it affected sentence clarity and coherence.
4. Thematic interpretation: Patterns were examined to establish underlying causes, such as instructional deficiencies or language transfer issues, and linked to theoretical insights from the reviewed literature. This analytical procedure enabled the development of a typology of concord errors and provided an interpretive understanding of their pedagogical and linguistic implications.

²⁷ Teun A. Van Dijk, "Discourse Meaning and Memory," *Journal of Reading Behavior* 8, no. 1 (March 1, 1976): 89–110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10862967609547168>.

²⁸ C. H. Meydan and H. Akkaş, "The Role of Triangulation in Qualitative Research: Converging Perspectives," in *Principles of Conducting Qualitative Research in Multicultural Settings* (IGI Global, 2024), 98–129.

²⁹ Van Dijk, "Discourse Meaning and Memory."

The study adhered strictly to ethical research principles. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university's research ethics committee prior to data collection. Participants' identities were protected through anonymization of all written materials. Data were used solely for academic purposes and securely stored to maintain confidentiality. Students' participation was voluntary, and they were informed that their academic performance would not be affected by inclusion in the study. The research process upheld principles of respect, integrity, and academic honesty in accordance with institutional and national ethical standards.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The analysis of the written assignments revealed a high frequency of grammatical concord errors among first-year university students. These errors appeared consistently across different types of concord, indicating that they were not isolated slips but signs of deeper grammatical and pedagogical challenges. Students' writing displayed persistent problems with subject–verb agreement, tense consistency, relative pronoun agreement, and constructions involving collective nouns and modifying expressions.

The most dominant pattern of error appeared in subject–verb agreement. Students often failed to align singular subjects with singular verbs and plural subjects with plural verbs. Examples such as “*The government have failed to protect its citizens*”, “*It help people to communicate*”, and “*The results shows improvement*” illustrate this recurring difficulty. In these instances, learners selected verb forms based on proximity or assumed plurality rather than grammatical rules. The error patterns suggest that students had not fully internalized the principle that English verbs must agree with their subjects in both number and person. In many scripts, plural verbs were incorrectly used after singular subjects, and vice versa, indicating an incomplete understanding of the concept of grammatical control in sentence structure.

Equally noticeable were errors related to tense concord. Many students demonstrated inconsistency in maintaining uniform verb tenses within a single sentence or paragraph. For instance, examples such as “*He arrived and tells the teacher what happened*”, “*Yesterday we are writing our test*”, and “*The experiment was successful and it shows good results*” show inappropriate shifts between past and present tenses. These irregularities affected narrative coherence and reflected confusion about temporal relationships. Such errors were not isolated; they appeared repeatedly across numerous scripts, revealing that students lacked the linguistic awareness required to maintain tense harmony in extended pieces of writing.

Errors involving relative pronouns also appeared frequently. Students struggled to ensure agreement between antecedents and verbs in clauses introduced by *who*, *that*, or *which*. Sentences such as “*One of the problems that affects the students is poverty*”, “*She is among the few learners who studies hard*”, and “*He is one of the players who has improved*” were common. In each of these examples, the verb form incorrectly agrees with the nearer noun rather than the actual antecedent. This confusion suggests that many learners are guided by word proximity rather than syntactic logic when forming sentences. Such findings confirm that students often lack awareness of grammatical relationships within complex clauses, a difficulty noted by Corbett in his theory of controller–target relationships in agreement structures.³⁰

Another recurring error type involved modifying or additive expressions such as *along with*, *together with*, and *as well as*. Students frequently allowed the verb to agree with the nearest noun instead of the subject. For example, sentences like “*The teacher, along with the students, were present*” and “*The president, together with his ministers, have announced the decision*” were widespread. In both examples, the verb is plural even though the true subject is singular. These cases reveal that learners often rely on semantic cues rather than grammatical rules when determining agreement. This tendency illustrates the influence of notional and proximity concord, which are less explicitly taught in grammar instruction but commonly affect learners' writing accuracy.

A further pattern observed in the data concerned collective nouns and quantifiers such as *team*, *committee*, *everyone*, *each*, and *none*. Students frequently wrote sentences like “*The committee are meeting today*,” “*Each of the students have submitted their work*,” and “*None of the information were correct*.” These sentences reveal confusion between grammatical and notional concord. Learners

³⁰ Corbett, *Agreement*.

appeared to be influenced by the plural sense of collective nouns or quantifiers rather than adhering to grammatical rules that require singular verb forms. This kind of error was particularly common among students who viewed agreement as a matter of meaning rather than grammatical form, an issue that reflects limited formal instruction in complex concord principles.

Overall, the analysis of the written assignments revealed that grammatical concord errors are pervasive and systematic. The frequency and consistency of these errors across different grammatical structures indicate that students' challenges stem from gaps in explicit grammar instruction and limited opportunities for corrective feedback. Many of the sentences produced by the students reflected a developing interlanguage, shaped by first-language interference and the absence of sustained grammatical reinforcement during their earlier schooling. These findings underscore the need for targeted pedagogical interventions that emphasize explicit teaching of grammatical concord within meaningful communicative contexts.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study revealed that grammatical concord errors remain widespread among first-year university students, confirming that challenges with subject–verb agreement, tense consistency, and other forms of concord are deeply rooted and systematic rather than incidental. The frequency and variety of these errors reinforce the argument advanced by Dulay and Burt that errors form part of the natural process of language development.³¹ However, the persistence and repetition of these errors among tertiary students suggest that they stem from structural and pedagogical deficiencies rather than developmental stages alone. Many of the identified patterns indicate that students enter university without an adequate foundation in English grammar, particularly in the area of concord, which is essential for syntactic accuracy and semantic clarity.

The most frequent errors in subject–verb agreement support earlier research by Larsen and Long, who emphasize that subject–verb concord forms the basis of coherent sentence construction.³² In this study, students regularly mismatched singular and plural forms, using sentences such as “*It help people to communicate*” and “*The results shows improvement.*” These findings demonstrate that learners have not fully internalized the rule that verbs must agree with their subjects in number and person. Instead, many appear to rely on intuitive judgments rather than grammatical reasoning. This aligns with Freeborn's view that grammar serves as the structural framework through which meaning is conveyed, and that without mastery of grammatical concord, communication becomes ambiguous and imprecise.³³

The numerous instances of tense inconsistency found in the data correspond with Rifiyanti and Dewi's observation that tense concord poses ongoing difficulties for ESL learners.³⁴ Students' frequent shifts between past and present tenses within single sentences, as seen in “*He arrived and tells the teacher what happened,*” reflect limited awareness of temporal sequencing and its impact on coherence. These patterns suggest that students may not view tense as part of the concord system but rather as a stylistic feature, highlighting the need for explicit instruction that integrates tense consistency within the broader context of grammatical agreement.

Errors involving relative pronouns, such as “*One of the problems that affects the students is poverty,*” reveal further gaps in learners' understanding of grammatical control relationships. According to Corbett's framework, the agreement relationship between the controller (subject) and the target (verb) must be governed by syntactic, not proximity-based, principles.³⁵ Yet many students in this study made the verb agree with the nearest noun rather than with the true subject, confirming Shuaibu et. al.'s assertion that learners often lack the sensitivity that grammar teaching often neglects deeper structural understanding, resulting in learners who can recall isolated rules but cannot apply them accurately in authentic writing contexts.³⁶

³¹ Dulay and Burt, “You Can't Learn Without Goofing An Analysis of Children's Second Language 'Errors.'”

³² Larsen and Long, *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*.

³³ Freeborn, *A Course Book in English Grammar*.

³⁴ Rifiyanti and Dewi, “Error Types in Subject-Verb Agreement.”

³⁵ Corbett, *Agreement*.

³⁶ Bayiri, “Concord Problems among Students of Senior High School Form One, a Case Study in Kintampo Senior High School .”

The confusion surrounding additive or modifying expressions such as *along with*, *together with*, and *as well as* further supports Sadewi et.al., observation that proximity concord and notional concord are among the least understood and least explicitly taught aspects of grammar.³⁷ Students' tendency to write "*The teacher, along with the students, were present*" instead of "*was present*" suggests that they interpret the plural noun in the modifying phrase as the controller of agreement. This indicates that they process sentence structure semantically rather than syntactically, which is consistent with Corbett's claim that semantic features often interfere with grammatical agreement in second-language learning.³⁸ The same pattern was observed in students' use of collective nouns such as *committee*, *team*, and *each*, where learners produced plural verbs due to the notional plurality of the subject, as in "*Each of the students have submitted their work.*"

Collectively, these findings corroborate studies by Al-Mohanna and Woldegiorgis and Chiramba, which show that ESL learners in multilingual contexts face persistent difficulties with grammatical accuracy due to limited exposure to English and inadequate formal instruction.³⁹ The findings also support Handayani and Wardana's view that the teaching of grammar in South African classrooms often emphasizes mechanical correction over conceptual understanding.⁴⁰ Most of the students' errors reflect this educational trend, where learners may have memorized rules without developing the analytical ability to apply them across varied linguistic contexts. The superficial treatment of grammar in schools, especially in under-resourced settings, continues to disadvantage learners who must later perform complex academic writing tasks in English.

In addition, the study's results confirm that fossilized errors persist when corrective feedback and explicit grammar instruction are absent. Many students' recurring mistakes in subject-verb and tense concord suggest that they have developed interlanguage patterns that remain unchallenged. This finding supports Bayiri's contention that repeated exposure to uncorrected grammatical errors can lead to their internalization as acceptable forms.⁴¹ The consistency of these error types across scripts implies that these learners have had limited opportunities to engage with grammatical explanations or to receive meaningful corrective feedback during their prior schooling.

The persistence of grammatical concord errors among first-year university students thus reflects broader systemic and pedagogical issues within South Africa's education system. Despite the country's multilingual context and policy emphasis on language equity, English remains the primary medium of instruction and assessment in higher education.⁴² For many students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, this linguistic dominance translates into an academic disadvantage. Their written work reveals not only linguistic weakness but also a lack of confidence in academic expression, as grammatical inaccuracies distort meaning and obscure intended ideas. The findings underscore the need for more integrated grammar instruction that goes beyond error identification and instead fosters deep structural understanding through contextualized practice.

In summary, the study's findings affirm that grammatical concord remains a critical area of difficulty for ESL learners, and that these challenges are perpetuated by inadequate pedagogical approaches. The recurrence of concord errors, particularly in subject, verb agreement and tense consistency, indicates the need for a pedagogical reorientation that combines explicit grammar teaching, communicative application, and consistent feedback. Without addressing these fundamental issues, students will continue to face barriers to academic success and effective participation in the English-dominated discourse of higher education.

³⁷ Sadewi, Mahardika, and Mahendra, "Challenges Faced by English Education Students in Mastering Vocabulary through Online Learning Systems."

³⁸ Corbett, *Agreement*.

³⁹ Al-Mohanna, "Difficulties and Challenges Encountered by Saudi EFL Learners: A Diagnostic Study"; Woldegiorgis and Chiramba, "Access and Success in Higher Education: Fostering Resilience in Historically Disadvantaged Students in South Africa."

⁴⁰ Handayani and Wardana, "Assessing the Effectiveness of Interactive Grammar-Based Teaching in Enhancing EFL Learners' Concord Comprehension and Learning Confidence."

⁴¹ Bayiri, "Concord Problems among Students of Senior High School Form One, a Case Study in Kintampo Senior High School."

⁴² Diko and Celliers, "Revisiting the Challenges of Teaching and Learning Indigenous South African Languages"; Zeng and Yang, "English Language Hegemony: Retrospect and Prospect."

RECOMMENDATIONS

To effectively address the persistent challenges of grammatical concord among ESL learners, this study recommends a comprehensive approach that repositions grammar instruction as a core element of language education. First, grammar, especially concord, should be systematically integrated into the curriculum, not treated as an isolated skill. Early diagnostic assessments are essential to identify students' weaknesses and inform targeted remedial support. Teachers must receive ongoing professional development in grammar pedagogy to enhance their instructional effectiveness.

Instructional methods should move beyond rote memorization and instead embrace communicative, contextual strategies that allow learners to apply grammar rules meaningfully. Technology tools such as Grammarly and NoRedInk should be incorporated to provide instant feedback and promote autonomous learning. Furthermore, cultivating a strong reading culture will expose students to accurate grammatical structures in authentic contexts.

Peer collaboration and reflective practices, such as editing exercises and grammar journals, should be encouraged to deepen understanding. Assessment practices must explicitly evaluate grammatical accuracy, with feedback focused on helping students recognize and correct concord errors. Lastly, institutional support and policy reform are necessary to ensure that grammar instruction is prioritized, resourced, and sustained over the long term.

Collectively, these measures can significantly enhance students' grammatical proficiency, improve the quality of academic writing, and foster clearer, more confident communication in English.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the persistent challenges surrounding grammatical concord in the written assignments of first-year university students in a South African academic context. The analysis revealed consistent and wide-ranging difficulties across multiple concord types, most notably subject-verb agreement, tense concord, concord with relative pronouns, and concord involving additive or interrupting expressions. These findings point to systemic instructional gaps, insufficient foundational grammar training, and a general lack of emphasis on the nuanced dimensions of grammatical concord in both basic and tertiary education settings. The evidence gathered in this study confirms that grammatical concord is not merely a technical requirement of English grammar but a critical element in achieving clarity, coherence, and precision in academic writing. When students violate concord rules, the communicative integrity of their writing is compromised, resulting in sentences that are ambiguous, syntactically flawed, or semantically incoherent. It is clear from the findings that many ESL students arrive at university without the grammatical competence required to succeed in academic discourse. This situation is compounded by the lack of targeted remediation and the continued marginalization of grammar instruction within language curricula. The results underscore the urgent need for a pedagogical shift that prioritizes grammar, specifically concord, as a foundational component of academic literacy. Furthermore, the study reiterates the crucial role of language teachers, who must be both linguistically competent and pedagogically well-equipped to address the diverse grammatical needs of their learners. Teachers' understanding of complex concord rules must go beyond surface-level instruction to include the ability to explain, contextualize, and reinforce grammar through meaningful activities. Only then can students begin to internalize the rules and apply them accurately in both written and spoken English. In light of these findings, a set of practical and context-sensitive recommendations has been proposed to guide stakeholders in reshaping the teaching and learning of grammatical concord in ESL environments.

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