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SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT IN L2 LEARNER LANGUAGE

A study of compulsory school English in a Swedish
context

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Abstract

Title: *Subject-verb agreement in L2 learner language - A study of compulsory school English in a Swedish context*

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Abstract: This essay examines how Swedish learners of English produce subject-verb agreement errors in written productions. The study uses Error Analysis in order to collect, identify, describe, and finally, explain the occurring errors. The data consists of 75 texts written by students in grades 7 and 8 in a Swedish compulsory school and a total of 140 subject-verb agreement errors were found. The results show that formal grammatical agreement errors with a plural count noun as the subject are the most common. It also shows that subject-verb agreement errors when the subject is a noun or noun phrase are more common than errors with other subjects and that the most common verb associated with agreement errors is *to be*. The difference in the number of errors made by male and female students is shown to be greater than the difference between the grades. Cross-linguistic influence, e.g. transfer from L1 to L2, is shown to be one of the main reasons behind the agreement errors. Another reason is the inherent difficulty of subject-verb agreement in English. The essay includes a discussion of what the pedagogical implications of studying errors in learner language might be.

Keywords: SLA, EFL, error analysis, learner language, subject-verb agreement, concord

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

"Failure is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from his successes."

- John Dewey, 1933

English is taught from an early age in Swedish schools. Since 1939 it has been the first foreign language that Swedes encounter in school and one of the most influential languages in our everyday lives (*Engelskundervisning i Sverige*, Wikipedia, 20/12/2017, [online]). Swedes are generally considered as having a high proficiency in English. However, there are many hurdles the learner must overcome before being able to communicate effectively in this global language. The overall importance and reasons for learning a foreign language are eloquently explained in the curriculum for English, issued by the Swedish Board of Education in 2011:

Language is the primary tool human beings use for thinking, communicating and learning. Having a knowledge of several languages can provide new perspectives on the surrounding world, enhanced opportunities to create contacts and greater understanding of different ways of living. The English language surrounds us in our daily lives and is used in such diverse areas as politics, education and economics. Knowledge of English thus increases the individual's opportunities to participate in different social and cultural contexts, as well as in international studies and working life (*Skolverket*, 2011, p. 32).

It is stated that English teaching in Sweden should give the students the resources to develop their understanding and interpretational skills of spoken and written English and be able to express themselves in communicative situations. The students should be able to use different strategies, adapt their language depending on context and be given the opportunity to reflect on the living conditions, social and cultural situations in different contexts where English is used. The focus of English as a foreign language, hereafter EFL, in Swedish schools is on communicative skills, which is made clear in the aim for English in compulsory school:

Through teaching, pupils should be given the opportunity to develop all-round communicative skills. These skills involve understanding spoken and written English, being able to formulate one's thinking and interact with others in the spoken and written language, and the ability to adapt use of language to

different situations, purposes and recipients. Communication skills also cover confidence in using the language and the ability to use different strategies to support communication and solve problems when language skills by themselves are not sufficient (Skolverket, 2011, p. 32).

The influence that research on second language acquisition, henceforth SLA, has had on language teaching and education planning has increased in recent years. However, in my personal experience, there is still little knowledge about SLA within the teacher collective, perhaps since theories on SLA are not prioritised in language teacher-training. By expanding on the field of research that is SLA, this study hopes to bring the theories closer to the everyday reality of English teaching and learning.

From my experience as a teacher, and when discussing EFL learning with other teachers of English in Swedish secondary schools, it is clear that that subject-verb agreement is something that EFL learners have great difficulties with. The teachers I have spoken to all mention that the verb *to be* is especially difficult to master and that the most frequent errors that the EFL learners make are the ones concerning grammatical agreement when this verb is used.

The previous research made on learner errors, and agreement errors in particular, is either slightly outdated or made on older learners' texts than in the present study. The present study also focuses explicitly on subject-verb agreement with the hope to further explain a phenomenon that eludes both students and, to some extent, teachers in Sweden. By looking at the errors made by EFL learners, we could get a glimpse of what structures we as teachers should consider already acquired and what needs more attention for the student. Svartvik (1973) stated that "errors constitute a valuable feedback in the teaching process" and should therefore not be dismissed but rather embraced and encouraged since it shows what the learner knows and that he/she is trying to learn. This study is an effort to shine some light on the errors made by EFL learners in the Swedish compulsory school and tries to explain some of them.

1.2 Research aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to broaden the view of EFL education through an analysis of the language use of EFL learners in Swedish secondary school. By analysing errors made by the learners in written compositions, the proficiency of the learners is examined and discussed. Subject-verb agreement in English is a fundamental grammatical structure which has been proven difficult for Swedish EFL learners and gives an indication as to the proficiency level

and linguistic ability of the learner. But what are the most common types of errors made when it comes to subject-verb agreement? And what are the possible reasons behind the errors made? These are the questions that this essay attempts to answer.

2. Theoretical Framework

English and Swedish are quite closely related within the Germanic language group. The two languages share many grammatical constructions and large parts of the vocabulary. However, showing grammatical number through agreement between the subject and verb is not required in Swedish. Furthermore, the grammatical agreement between subject and verb in English might be construed as redundant in some cases. For example, in the sentence **He live with his wife*¹, the number of the subject is conveyed by the pronouns *He* and *his*, so the intended message of a singular subject is not affected by the agreement error. For the Swedish EFL learner, this grammatical concept might be hard to grasp and takes time to master.

2.1 Subject-verb agreement

Agreement is a grammatical feature of language where the related words in a clause or sentence change depending on the number, gender, case and person of the determining word, usually the subject. In English, agreement occurs between subject and verb when it comes to person and number. If the subject of the clause is in the singular, the verb needs to reflect this through agreement. A singular subject results in the singular verb ending *-s*, e.g. *he/she writes, the dog barks*, while a plural subject results in no added ending, e.g. *we/they write, the dogs bark*.

There are only a few instances of gender and case agreement in English which occur between the subject and its modifiers but they are not very important aspects in English. This is also true for grammatical gender which follows the natural gender in English, and case agreement only rarely occurs with pronouns. For example in *the train reached its stop* or *the woman went to her house* we can see gender agreement and an example of case agreement is found when comparing *Who came first – he or his brother?* vs. *Whom did you see – him or his brother?* This study focuses on the more common types of subject-verb agreement with person and number.

¹ An asterisk is used to show an ungrammatical construction.

Modern Swedish does not have subject-verb agreement in any tense. In Swedish, the same verb form is used for the present tense, past tense, future construction, etc., regardless of the subject's number and person. There is, however, agreement between adjectives and the modifying nouns when it comes to number and gender, something which is not found in English. Agreement with gender is, for example, found in *den blinde mannen* (*the blind man*) or *den blinda kvinnan* (*the blind woman*). This type of agreement is marked less frequently since the feminine form is more common and more acceptably used in agreement with masculine words. Agreement with number could be demonstrated with the following examples:

- 1) (a) *en röd bil* (*a red car*)
(b) *två röda bilar* (*two red cars*)
- 2) (a) *Den här kakan är god* (*This cookie is nice*)
(b) *De här kakorna är goda* (*These cookies are nice*)

Because of the lack of subject-verb agreement in Swedish, the non-transferable construction could be one of the main reasons why Swedish EFL learners often produce errors with subject-verb agreement when speaking or writing English. It is simply harder to acquire a completely new grammatical structure than building on already known ones.

Another main reason could be that subject-verb agreement in English is usually a formal, grammatical, concept. Even though the verb agrees or not with the subject, the interpretation of the clause in which the subject and verb occur is not affected. For instance, the two sentences *She is my sister* and **She are my sister* would probably be interpreted the same, even though the second sentence is considered ungrammatical.

Although subject-verb agreement may not have any effect on the meaning or interpretation of some sentences (and subject-verb agreement could possibly seem pointless from a Swedish EFL learner's perspective) it does not mean that subject-verb agreement in English can be completely ignored. Native speakers of English might react strongly against subject-verb agreement errors, in the same way as native speakers of Swedish might react to erroneous sentences such as **Barnen var stort*. (*The children were big*) where the plural noun *barnen* clashes with the singular adjective *stort*. Even if subject-verb agreement errors normally do not make the message difficult to comprehend, the errors may distract native speakers from the message.

Notional agreement, as opposed to formal grammatical agreement, happens when the semantic meaning of the words results in differing agreement depending on how the speaker views the subject, e.g. in American English it is more common to treat the noun phrase *the United Nations* as a singular, rather than as a plural which it formally is (*On Notional Agreement*, Merriam-Webster, 05/01/2018, [online]).

There is a distinction in how a referent is cognitively perceived, namely as countable or as uncountable. This is salient in speakers' experience of 'things'. This distinction is made in other languages, but we could never assume that it is perceived the same in different languages. E.g. *news* in English is defined as a singular uncountable noun. It cannot take the countable forms **one news*, **many news*, without a countability marker, such as *a piece of* or with the help of a compound word *item*, e.g. *a piece of good news*, or *a news item*. However, in Swedish the translation would result in a countable noun; *en nyhet, flera nyheter* (Downing & Locke, 2006). This phenomenon is found within the collected L2 learner examples and could cause confusion whether a singular or plural verb is appropriate or not, e.g. *the grass and a tree starts catching fire*. In this instance, an uncountable noun (*grass*) is combined with a countable noun (*tree*) in the subject noun phrase and the verb is given the singular form (*starts*).

Some nouns such as *team*, *group*, *band*, *family* and *class* imply the involvement of several people, but are singular nouns because they refer to collective entities. These nouns and other collective nouns give rise to problems when it comes to agreement since they can be cognitively perceived as semantically different by different people, and it also depends on what dialect the speaker prefers.

When the subject is realised by a collective noun, concord depends on how the referent is visualised by the speaker:

The committee is sitting late. (seen as a whole)

The committee have decided to award extra grants. (seen as a number of members) (Downing & Locke, 2006, pp.43-44).

Agreement with countable or collective nouns is quite challenging in English and apparently takes time to master for EFL learners. For instance, the learner must try to decide whether to use American or British English, since the two dialects treat countable and collective nouns differently. Furthermore, there are different types of agreement, and agreement errors, and the ones studied here are divided into four categories: **grammatical**, **notional** and **proximity**

agreement (*Agreement*, Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar, 2014) as well as **distance agreement errors**.

Grammatical agreement is the most formal between the subject and the verb when it comes to, most notably, person and number, especially concerning subject-verb agreement. It also occurs in relation to gender and case, but these are not significant features in English and are excluded from this study.

With **notional** agreement, the agreement is with the notion of what the noun means, rather than the strict grammatical form of the noun, e.g. *the band **are** popular, the group **are** evil, the family **eat** breakfast*. The agreement with a plural verb form happens because of the notion intended, i.e. **the members of** the band/group/family etc. This is more common in British English than in American English and it is hard to define when a learner has attempted to use notional agreement or not. The errors including these kinds of words could also come out of the fact that the learner simply does not know whether the word is collective or not.

Proximity agreement is when the subject consists of one noun that is countable and another that is uncountable or collective and the agreement is made with the noun/pronoun closest to the verb, e.g. *either the pebbles or the sand is hot* vs. *either the sand or the pebbles are hot*. The principle of proximity could affect subject-verb agreement, but mostly in informal speech. With proximity agreement, the verb to agree with the closest noun/pronoun, even though it is not the head of the subject noun phrase. It is therefore quite difficult to discern when a proximity agreement error has occurred since it might be the intention of the writer/speaker to appear in an informal manner.

Distance agreement errors occur when the modifying subject is found far from the finite verb, or when the subject comes before a relative clause in a sentence and the finite verb is found after. In the present study, an error is defined as a distance agreement error if the number of words between the subject and the verb exceed four.

2.2 Second Language Acquisition

The study of learning another language that is not a learner's first language is called the study of Second Language Acquisition or SLA and is also used to describe acquisition of a third or fourth language. SLA can be divided into two categories; formal learning, also called instructed learning, and informal learning, or naturalistic learning. Formal learning is usually instructed in

a classroom setting with the aim to teach a second language (L2). Informal learning, however, happens in more natural contexts, for example when someone is living in or visiting a foreign country and is submerged in the culture and is taught language in communication with others (Saville-Troike, 2012). According to Ellis (1994), formal learning "focuses on some aspect of the language system" (Ellis, 1994, p.12), e.g. word order, whereas informal learning focuses on communicative ability. Second language acquisition, however, might occur in both formal and informal contexts.

Ellis (1994), defines SLA research as a means to describe linguistic or communicative competence and explain how learners acquire and develop a second language. Researchers examine learners' proficiency by collecting and analysing certain data. For example, analysis of learner's errors when writing in a L2 as in the present study.

According to Taher (2011), there is a ongoing discussion whether SLA research provides teachers with useful information on how to teach a second language or not. Some might say that SLA research does not provide teachers with information on what to teach but rather serves as a guide on how to teach. Even so, research on SLA is pivotal in order to develop methods for L2 teaching and learning since it expands on how languages are acquired. By delving deeper into the pool of knowledge that is SLA research, teachers could see the benefits of looking closer at their students' grammatical competence and improve on their second language teaching.

The study of second language acquisition is based in the study of first language acquisition and shares its theoretical background. The classical grammar-translation method, in which written translation was believed to be the key to SLA, gave way to the direct method in the beginning of the 20th century. The direct method emphasised the importance of oral communication in language and was the foundation on which Hymes (1979) built his theory of communicative competence. Teaching both first and second languages have always been influenced by the current research and the behaviorist ideas in the 1950's and 60's, that language is learned through habit formation, gave way to a long-lasting methodology within the Swedish teacher collective. Up until the 1980's, repetition, rote learning and translation were at the center for EFL teaching.

In the 1970's, SLA research developed a mentalist view towards language as a reaction against the static system of the habit formation in previous behaviorist theory. Nemser (1971) described what he called an approximate system, which is a language system separate from the

learner's first or native language (L1 or NL) and the second or target language (L2 or TL), which is constantly evolving, in which learners of similar proficiency levels will have similar systems. This has been further developed by Selinker (1972) who calls the system an *interlanguage*, i.e. "a continuum between the L1 and L2 along which all learners traverse". The interlanguage applies to the same basic rules as natural language but is unique for each individual learner since it consists in between the learner's native and target language.

More recent studies are still based in the belief that language acquisition is a mentalist process². Gass & Selinker (2008) add that "adopting a cognitive view and incorporating a strong role for the NL [native language] is the prevailing view in current SLA research" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 135).

2.3 Approaches to grammar in education

When it comes to teaching grammar, there are two main approaches; the form-focused and the Zero Option. The form-focused approach is based on explicit grammar instruction and the Zero Option favours uninstructed grammar acquisition. Researchers of pedagogy and SLA might disagree as to which approach is the most effective. Some argue that to be able to reach higher levels of proficiency, and to be able to construct more advanced grammatical constructions, grammar instruction is required for the second language learner (Ellis, 1997). Supporters of the Zero Option, on the other hand, argue that teaching grammar is a waste of time and since we all have acquired our first languages without specific grammar instruction, the focus should be on natural communication instead. Through immersion techniques and by continuously using the second language without having to think about the grammaticality of it, the L2 learner will acquire grammar (Thornbury, 1999).

Both approaches have merit, although there is research that suggest that form-focused grammar teaching brings higher results and that learners show more progress compared to those who do not get the same instructed grammatical education (Ellis, 2006, p.85). The conclusion could be made that instructed grammar teaching can be of great importance in second language acquisition. However, it is important to take into account the language teacher's knowledge of what grammatical aspects to focus on and what pedagogical implications the proficiency level of the students have.

² Mentalist processes indicates cognitive awareness, as opposed to something that 'just happens'.

According to Ellis (2006), it is in the knowledge of the learner that teachers should base their choices when selecting which grammatical constructions to focus on. Therefore, it is important to identify the learners' errors and with the help of error analysis try to find the source for them in order to improve the learners' English and help them acquire grammatical knowledge. According to Hymes's (1979) model of communicative competence, the grammaticality of an utterance affects understanding. If a sentence is perceived as ungrammatical, it will be understood differently or not at all.

2.4 Error Analysis

In the dawn of SLA research and analysis of learner errors, the preferred method was based in Corder's (1967) Error Analysis. As in the present study, many SLA researchers still use Error Analysis in order to study learner language. Error Analysis describes errors in learner language but is not always viewed as a sufficient analytical tool in itself. It is often combined with contrastive analysis, pragmatics, or discourse analysis (Köhlmyr, 2001).

The theories behind Error Analysis are based on the belief that language acquisition is a mentalist process and that the errors made by a learner gives an insight as to what is already acquired and what is not. Previously, the errors made by learners were considered a problem that needed to be eliminated and they were merely viewed as the product of flawed learning or were attributed to the interference of the learner's native language. With EA, the errors "are to be viewed as indications of a learner's attempt to figure out some system, that is, to impose regularity on the language the learner is exposed to. As such, they are evidence of an underlying rule-governed system" (Gass & Selinker, 2008, p. 102).

When using Error Analysis for the present study, the identification of the errors was one of the more difficult tasks at hand. In order to properly define an error, there are a few delimitations that are necessary. First of all, it is necessary to define what an error actually is. In this essay, the definition of an error is that of Corder (1967) who differentiates between an **error** and a **mistake** as follows; a **mistake** is purely a random inaccuracy in performance whereas an **error** is proof of a lack of linguistic competence (Corder, 1967). In many cases, this distinction is impossible to make since a single lapse in performance, e.g. one occurrence of incorrect spelling, could be interpreted as a spelling mistake or a grammatical error, if the incorrect spelling happened to occur with a verb ending and the researcher is looking for errors

regarding tense. In the present study, no distinction has been made between errors and mistakes, unless it is obvious that the inaccuracy is the result of a slip of the pen or the handwriting makes it impossible to discern what is intended. Therefore, all grammatically incorrect sentences regarding subject-verb agreement have been included in this study. However, all identified errors are not included, only the ones specifically concerning subject-verb agreement.

Furthermore, there is also the problem of finding where the error lies. For example, in **We[...]starts to eat breakfast* there is more than one possible intended meaning from the author. The inaccuracy could be in the subject-verb agreement, the verb form, a missing auxiliary or in all of the above. In these difficult cases it is usually the context that decides whether an error occurs or not. If the identification proves too difficult, the occurrence is either excluded or only briefly discussed here.

Error analysis is defined as "a set of procedures for identifying, describing and explaining learners' errors" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p.51). Although, it is important to note that Error Analysis is not only about identifying and detecting errors but also trying to explain the reasons behind the errors. According to Ellis & Barkhuizen (2005), it is often more fruitful to collect samples of learner language when investigating second language acquisition through learners' errors. Written productions are especially suitable, since they can reveal the learner's grammatical knowledge and provide an indication as to what grammatical features to focus on.

The process of error analysis follows the steps **collection**, **identification**, **description** and **explanation**. Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, describes the steps as follows; When **collecting** samples of learner language, we need to consider the aim and purpose of the study in which the data will be analysed and make sure that the data is relevant. In the **identification** of errors, the definition of what composes an error needs to be defined. This requires an established norm based in previous research or perhaps native speakers, as references. In addition, if the data is oral production the researcher needs knowledge about what types of English the learner is exposed to and what, if any, accent he/she prefers. The **description** of errors requires that the researcher specifies how the errors differ from the norm. A categorisation of the errors is therefore needed. The examples 1-5, mostly from Ellis & Barkhuizen (2005), show different kinds of grammatical errors that can be used as categories in error analysis;

1. Errors of omission: when a word has been left out, e.g. **My sister happy*.

2. Errors of addition: when a word or an incorrect ending has been added to another word, e.g. **I have eated*.
3. Substitution: when the wrong form of a morpheme or structure is used, e.g. when the wrong preposition in a sentence such as **It was the hardest time **in** my life* is used.
4. Misordering: when a word or morpheme is incorrectly placed in a grammatical construction such as the word order in **Christmas day start usually in the morning*.
5. Blends: when the learner is uncertain of which word to use and blends two different phrases e.g. **The only one thing I want*.

Although these categories seem quite clearly defined it could still prove problematic to discern which type of error has occurred. Therefore, the definition of the type of error is dependent on the researcher's reconstruction of the sentence. Additional categories might be necessary for the sake of the study. If needed, the errors could be divided by word class and then into groups within the classes. Errors concerning verbs could, for example, be divided in errors of tense and aspect, etc. (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

Error Analysis tries to **explain** which factors might affect the learner and what, therefore, may lead to an error. However, it may prove complicated to distinguish between an error and a mistake (as discussed above), making the explanation of errors even more difficult. In addition, when researchers try to explain second language learners' errors they often use different factors to categorize the different types of errors. Some factors applicable in the present study are, for example, cross-linguistic influence, overgeneralisation and avoidance. Cross-linguistic influence occurs when the learner's native language affects production in the target language and the learner uses a construction from the native language which leads to an error. Overgeneralization and avoidance happens if the same type of grammatical rule or structure is overused by the learner, and by doing so creates the wrong grammatical structure, or avoids using a concept he/she does not fully comprehend.

When an EFL learner produces a sentence which is perceived to resemble Swedish, or the assumption that the resemblance must be incorrect, it may manifest itself in non-occurrence or avoidance (Schachter, 1974 and Kleinmann, 1977). For example, the pronunciation of *are* resembles the pronunciation of the Swedish *är* and it is often used in translations from Swedish to English, mainly because the words mean the same. However, since the subject-verb agreement in English might change the verb *to be* into different forms, depending on the person

and number of the subject, the Swedish EFL learner could overgeneralise, e.g. in the sentence **Battlefield are an online game*, or avoid using the form *are*. Lastly, Error analysis seeks to evaluate and draw conclusions from the gathered results. This last step helps differentiate between the errors that need more attention in the grammar education and the ones that the learner will cope with on his/her own.

Transfer and interference, in early behaviorist theories, explain errors and were viewed as negative processes that needed to be limited. Cross-linguistic influence, according to Gass & Selinker (2008), has replaced and incorporated the theories of transfer and interference into a broader view of how languages are learnt. Cross-linguistic influence includes **avoidance** of certain unfamiliar structures, **language loss** of L1 due to L2 influence, **different rates of learning** because of the impact of L1, **different learning paths** that changes because of L1 structures, and **overproduction** of previously learned structures. These factors all affect SLA in some way or another (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

2.5 Previous Studies

A substantial amount of research has been made within the field of SLA. According to Taher (2011), the majority of the research has been made on English L2 learning, since it is a large language that is used around the world. Even so, most of the research has studied L2 learners' knowledge of English in general, and not specifically their grammatical knowledge. One study which focuses specifically on Swedish learners' grammatical errors in English, is Köhlmyr (2001). In her dissertation, Köhlmyr uses Error Analysis and Contrastive Analysis on approximately 400 samples of learner produced texts. Her aim is to identify the 16-year old learners' errors and to explain what causes could be behind the errors made.

Similarly to the present study, Köhlmyr's study aims to discuss the pedagogical implications of analysing errors and also tries to help teachers in their development of grammar education. The material for her study consisted of almost 400 written productions collected from the Swedish National tests from the years 1992 and 1995. Köhlmyr's study showed that errors concerning verbs, nouns and articles, agreement and prepositions were the most commonly made errors by the Swedish 16-year olds. She also found that the factors that caused the errors were overgeneralisation, simplification, blending and another unknown factor. The dominating factor was overgeneralization with 50% of all errors. Transfer errors followed by

with 40%, simplification 8%, blending 1%, and with the last 1% there was no defining cause for the errors.

In Köhlmyr's discussion, she states that the progression of the learners may be due to useful feedback from the teacher. But, she argues, some teachers may believe that feedback can harm and discourage students rather than encourage them. The fear is that teachers constantly correcting students' texts will make the students more cautious and keep them from trying out more complex grammatical constructions, and therefore hinder their learning. And, according to Köhlmyr, there are studies that suggest that teachers who give bad feedback, or are continuously pointing out the grammatical errors their pupils make, do not inspire improvement in the learner's language (Köhlmyr, 2001). Instead, she proposes that teachers make aware the problematic structures and not the grammatical errors themselves. By doing this, teachers can help learners without damaging their confidence even if they do not fully comprehend the grammatical structure right away, they will hopefully be able to master it soon enough.

Köhlmyr concludes her study with stating that grammatical instruction, feedback and grammatical awareness all are important for efficient EFL acquisition. She says that proper and efficient feedback is crucial for L2 learners' language development.

The results give rise to a discussion of actual performance vs. goals set in the curriculum, correctness vs. communicative competence, the role of instruction and feedback, as well as other pedagogical implications including the importance of language awareness and learners' LI competence in relation to second/foreign language learning (Köhlmyr, 2001, abstract).

Another similar study is that of Thagg-Fisher from 1985. The study is based on two types of test from the 1960s, translation and free composition, made by Swedish EFL learners. It was found that the difference in occurrence of agreement errors is not as clear between spoken and written language as it is between creative and non-creative text production. Agreement errors in translation texts can depend on the choice of words and sentence structure in the source text, whereas Swedish EFL learners might avoid making agreement errors in creative text production (Thagg-Fisher, 1985).

The study also shows that learners make errors because of the so called *one –s principle*, which states that the final -s of a singular noun could be construed as a plural morpheme, e.g. *graphics*, *mathematics*, etc. According to Thagg-Fisher, Swedish EFL learners experience difficulties with irregular and unmarked plural nouns. She finds that when plural

nouns lack the regular –s morpheme, Swedish learners tend to make agreement errors. In addition, the study shows that Swedes also have problems considering non-countable nouns, since these types of nouns can be classified differently in English and Swedish.

Collective nouns are especially problematic since they could be interpreted differently by different people. Furthermore, Swedes have to know whether the noun is regarded holistically, as one entity, or atomistically, as members of a group, as agreement depends on whether a collective noun is regarded as a single undivided body or a collection of individuals. Pronouns are difficult as well; sentences with, *everybody*, *every*, *none*, *some* and *each* can result in agreement errors (Thagg-Fisher, 1985).

In a BA study by Johansson, from 2012, the previous research of SLA and subject-verb agreement is discussed through the analysis of texts written by students and teachers at the University of Gothenburg. The study concludes that even though Swedish learners of English are constantly in contact with the English language, which results in fast progress, the difficulties of subject-verb agreement still linger. Johansson states that there are several reasons behind the problems for Swedish learners of English with agreement, and that the errors made may be connected to interlingual and intralingual factors. Johansson concludes that the Swedish language and its grammatical rules may affect Swedes' command of English in a negative way. She also states that since Swedish no longer has subject-verb agreement the interference creates further problems for EFL learners.

Another recent BA study by Grant, from 2016, analyses essays written in English by Swedish EFL learners in an attempt to chart the most common errors made in written communication. The grammatical features analysed were prepositions, articles, verb forms, subject-verb agreement and word order. Furthermore, Grant categorised and ranked the errors according to the Obligatory Occasion Analysis³ in order to assess learners' proficiency and aid teachers in the development of grammar education.

3. Methods & Material

This study is a cross-sectional study with a qualitative text analysis of written learner language in texts by students in compulsory school. It focuses on what kind of subject-verb agreement

³ A methodology created by Roger Brown, in 1973, in order to analyse developmental sequences in L2 learner language.

the EFL learners make and in what context. The study is also quantitative in the sense that the learners' inaccurate use of subject-verb agreement is collected and categorised in order to establish what types of errors are most commonly made and in what context these errors occur.

The data collected is analysed through a functional approach towards second language acquisition and the steps of Corder's (1967) Error Analysis are followed (see section 2.3). The benefits of a combined qualitative and quantitative study are found within the stages of Error Analysis, especially in the last stage of explanation and the pedagogical implications that follow. Some of the data has been analysed through a contrastive analysis of the data found in L2 learners' texts where the cross-sectional process, type of error and the cross-linguistic influence were analysed through the different stages of error analysis: **collection**, **identification**, **description**, and **explanation** (as described in section 2.3).

The errors were identified and placed in different categories in two stages of description. The first stage consisted of the different categories of the types of agreement errors analysed; grammatical, distance, notional and proximity agreement errors. In the second stage, the errors were categorised based on whether the subject was a noun, noun phrase, pronoun or a proper noun. The subject and the corresponding verb was then sub-categorised as singular or plural to see which configuration was more common: an agreement error with a plural subject and a singular verb or the opposite. When the subject was a personal pronoun, the sub-categories of person were applied. The errors were then analysed quantitatively and, in a select number of cases, qualitatively in an effort to explain why these errors occur in the learner language.

The texts were written by Swedish students in a compulsory school located in the locality Alingsås in Västra Götaland County. All of the students are learning English as a second language and have gone through the Swedish school system, meaning that they have been taught English since the start of compulsory school. They all have approximately eight years of English studies and texts from students who do not meet these criteria have been omitted from the study beforehand by their teachers.

The data collected consist of written assignments produced in a classroom situation. Overall, 75 texts, written by 75 different students, from grades 7 and 8 in compulsory school are included. They differ in text type, length, and level of proficiency. The five assignments also differ in the amount of instruction given and the level of freedom available in the compositions. The samples include the names of the students and an assumption has been made

concerning their gender. For the sake of comparability in this study, the students have been assigned the gender that their names indicate, i.e. male or female, since they were never asked as to which gender they identify. The student body provided for this study is comprised of 33 girls and 42 boys.

The selection of analysed data was made from a set of texts made available by teachers of English in the selected school. The texts were produced at different points in time and were not part of any assignment created for the sake of this study. The assignments have been parts of the regular education and assessment in English and they all have in common that the students were asked to write texts completely or partially based on their own experiences.

The first assignment, given in year 7, was to describe a video game with very little instruction as to what to include (7:1). These seven samples were written on a computer. The second task was to write a response to a letter from the teacher introducing herself and including questions to answer (7:2). These 19 samples were handwritten. In the first assignment from year 8, students were to discuss the content of a short text from a textbook (8:1). The seven samples were written on computer. In the second assignment from year 8, the students were asked to discuss and compare the content of a text with their own experiences and were given quite detailed instructions on what to include and how to write, with a list of useful words and phrases for a comparative text on the topic (8:2). These 22 samples were handwritten. For the last task, also from year 8, the students wrote a review of a novel, of which they had recently seen a film adaptation (8:3). These 20 samples were also handwritten.

In none of the collected samples have the errors been corrected by the students before being collected by the teachers, nor has any student been given more or less time than another to finish their text. The collection of the data was made after the teachers' assessment and grading of the texts, but before the students were able to correct any inaccuracies. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that no mistakes or errors were omitted before collection.

4. Results

In the sample texts, there are 140 occurrences identified as inaccurate use of subject-verb agreement. Out of these 140 errors, 98 are classified as errors of grammatical agreement, 13 distance agreement, 27 notional agreement, and 2 proximity agreement. This means that 70% of the agreement errors concern grammatical agreement, 9% distance, and 19% notional agreement errors. Only 1% of the errors have been identified as proximity agreement errors.

Table 1: Occurrences and frequency of agreement errors by group and category.

| | Grammatical | Distance | Notional | Proximity | Total |
|-------------------|-------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Task 7:1 (7) | 14 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 14 |
| Task 7:2 (19) | 13 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 15 |
| Task 8:1 (7) | 9 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 11 |
| Task 8:2 (22) | 18 | 3 | 15 | 1 | 37 |
| Task 8:3 (20) | 44 | 8 | 11 | 0 | 63 |
| Total (75) | 98 | 13 | 27 | 2 | 140 |
| Percentage | 70% | 9% | 19% | 1% | 100% |

The samples show that the most common agreement error made by the EFL learners in this study is when the subject of the clause is singular and the verb is given a plural form (*the game cost different*). As seen in table 2, 72 occurrences of this type were found. There are 55 occurrences of errors of the opposite configuration where the subject is plural and the verb singular (*these boys is scouts*). In addition, 13 occurrences of other types of configurations are also found. These include subjects where the modifiers take different number, e.g. a singular first person pronoun and a plural noun (*me and my sisters celebrates Christmas*), or the modifiers are of the same number, e.g. two singular proper nouns, and the verb is in the singular form (*Jack and Ralph starts to fight*). The distance agreement errors include an equal number of both singular and plural noun phrases and pronouns as the subject (*he is very selfish and try to talk to them*). The most common nouns/pronouns which cause problems for the learners include *family, everyone/someone/anyone, some/some of, people, group (people is selfish)*. The errors found with these words are categorised as notional agreement errors. Furthermore, the verb *to be* is inaccurately used 46 times in relation to subject-verb agreement.

Out of these 46, only 5 occurrences are agreement errors with a pronoun subject (*they was coming*), the rest are with a noun or noun phrase subject (*the cat and the dog is black*).

As seen in Table 2, errors with a noun or noun phrase used as a subject account for 73 of the instances of agreement error. If the proper nouns are included, the total would be 88 occurrences. Out of the 73 nouns and noun phrases, 51 have been categorised as count nouns and 22 as non-count nouns. Moreover, 39 of the errors include a pronoun as the subject, 22 include a third person singular pronoun, most commonly *he*, in contradiction with a plural verb, 7 first person singular, usually *I*, 4 first person plural and 6 third person plural. Furthermore, 13 instances of other types of subjects are found. These include *there* as a grammatical subject and incorrectly produced interrogative clauses as well as incorrect uses of contractions, e.g. **it's take me six minutes*, or the modifying subject is missing altogether.

Table 2: Occurrences and frequency of agreement errors by number and subject category.

| | Noun | Noun phrase | Pronoun | Proper noun | Other | Total |
|-------------------|-------------|--------------------|----------------|--------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Singular | 12 | 16 | 29 | 15 | - | 72 |
| Plural | 16 | 29 | 10 | 0 | - | 55 |
| Total | 28 | 45 | 39 | 15 | 13 | 140 |
| Percentage | 20% | 32% | 28% | 11% | 9% | 100% |

When it comes to the differences in occurrences of agreement errors made by either male or female learners, as seen in Table 3, a larger amount of the errors are made by male students than by female students. There are nine more male learners' texts, but they tend to be shorter than the females'.

Table 3: Occurrences of agreement errors by gender.

| | Grammatical | Distance | Notional | Proximity | Total | Percentage |
|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------|-------------------|
| Girls (33) | 37 | 7 | 11 | 1 | 56 | 40% |
| Boys (42) | 61 | 6 | 16 | 1 | 84 | 60% |
| Total (75) | 98 | 13 | 27 | 2 | 140 | 100% |

The main difference found is in the grammatical agreement errors where the female students more commonly err in their use of agreement with noun phrases, whereas male students more often inaccurately use agreement with personal pronouns. The overall difference of 24 errors

might be negligible, but could be compared to the relative difference i.e. errors per 100 words (see table 4).

Table 4: Relative occurrence of agreement errors by gender and year. The errors are given per 100 words.

| | Girls year 7 | Girls year 8 | Boys year 7 | Boys year 8 | Total year 7 | Total year 8 |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| | 1,4 | 0,9 | 1,3 | 1,8 | 1,4 | 1,3 |
| Total | 1,1 | | 1,7 | | 1,3 | |

Table 4 shows an estimate of the number of agreement errors made per 100 words. Comparing the relative occurrence of errors made by boys and girls, there is a difference overall, but especially in year 8 where the female students make fewer than one error per 100 words whereas the male students generate almost two errors per 100 words. The relative difference from year 7 to year 8 is not very remarkable. There is a slight decline in agreement errors in year 8, but not enough to make some sort of generalisation. The texts from year 7 were significantly shorter, and fewer, than the ones from year 8 which could be the main reason for the lack of errors.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

The results show that the most common type of agreement error made by the EFL learners is a grammatical agreement error with a plural count noun, or noun phrase consisting of a count noun, as the subject with a singular verb. The verb most commonly involved in an error is *to be* and the error is most commonly made by a male student.

The second most common agreement error is made with notional agreement, and especially with collective nouns such as *family* or *group*. The learners could be confusing the notion of *family* and *group* as sets of individuals rather than as collective nouns could be one of the reasons behind the errors. They could also be ambivalent, or ignorant, in their choice between American and British English.

Distance errors require long sentences and are thus naturally less common in texts in which short sentences dominate. However, within the sample texts, there are few long sentences and only a handful of relative or subordinate clauses. This might be due to the proficiency level of the learners and may indicate avoidance of distance agreement. A study of

the language proficiency of the learners in their native Swedish could shed some light on the issue, since the proficiency of the L1 has been shown to affect the L2.

Proximity agreement is barely visible in the data. Since it is a quite informal type of agreement, the written, and more formal, context could explain the absence. The use of proximity agreement might indicate a higher level of proficiency and the incidences of proximity agreement error could be interpreted as an attempt to reach above one's own potential.

The relative difference between male and female learners' errors indicates that female learners tend to be more accurate in their writing compared to male learners. The attitudes towards grammar, and perhaps education itself, could prove that female students are more inclined to write correctly whereas the male students are more encouraged to write just anything at all. If the teachers view male and female students differently, it is reasonable to assume that it affects the way the students view themselves and in the end affects the learning.

In a few cases in this study, the reason behind the errors might stem from a confusion between plural -s and a contraction of *is* i.e. 's. The learners who continuously make this kind of error could be overusing a previously learned concept which they do not fully comprehend. If the learner is struggling with contractions and the genitive case, then the acquisition of subject-verb agreement might be affected.

The study confirms the general belief that subject-verb agreement is difficult for Swedish learners of English as a foreign language and that the verb *to be* is one common difficulty for learners of the studied age or level. The reasons what might be behind this difficulty, could either be emanating from the learners' native language Swedish, the target language English, or the traditional approach towards grammar in Swedish EFL teaching.

Nevertheless, what is so special about the verb *to be* that makes it stand out within the errors made by EFL learners? This study shows that the verb is used incorrectly in relation to subject-verb agreement 46 times out of the total 140 errors found, more than any other. However, it is a very common verb and so the relative frequency of errors with any form of *to be* might actually be similar to the relative frequency of errors involving other verbs. Since *to be* occurs so often in English, errors involving the verb are bound to happen more frequently than with others.

Another reason could be the irregular properties of the verb *to be*, not many other verbs appear in different forms in different contexts. The cross-linguistic influence is another of the

possible explanations for the agreement errors with *to be*. For example, the present tense form of the verb, *are*, could create further problems for the Swedish EFL learner since it sounds a lot like the Swedish correspondent *är*.

The main underlying factors to contemplate when trying to explain the errors are the inherent difficulties within the English language, as well as cross linguistic influence. In the example **Christmas day start usually in the morning*, produced by a student in year 8, the entire sentence seems to be a direct translation from Swedish, i.e. *Julafton börjar vanligtvis på morgonen*. Here, it is not only the inherent difficulty of English subject-verb agreement that complicates the production, but also the cross-linguistic influence from Swedish word order and idiomatic expressions.

The study by Köhlmyr (2001) showed that the most frequent errors concerning subject-verb agreement were made when pronouns functioned as the subject and the learner tried to match it with the correct verb form. However, in the present study, the number of errors which include a pronoun as the subject is not the most frequent. The differing results may be due to the size of the data analysed. The study by Köhlmyr was made from a large set of standardised tests which favoured communication within the setting of a letter. This might have influenced the occurrence of pronouns as subjects and therefore the occurrence of errors with the same. The present study was made by analysing different types of texts with different characteristics.

Another significant finding Köhlmyr made was that errors with a subject plural count noun, or noun phrase, in combination with a plural verb form gave rise to many agreement errors. The results of the present study indicate the same, as most of the agreement errors were made with plural nouns and most of the nouns were countable. She also mentions that the verb *to be* causes problems for the learners studied, just as the previous discussion about the verb shows.

Thagg-Fisher (1985) discusses whether free composition or translation would generate more errors. Her study showed that influence from the original text in translations could lead to fewer agreement errors. The texts in the present study are not as distinctly different as the ones in Thagg-Fisher's. Here, the data consists of mixed text types and some of them have tendencies of both free compositions and translation. A problem with studying different text types is that the variables are increased. However, within the scope of a BA-essay there is little room for organising field-testing with a fixed set of instructions for the studied students.

In the cases of errors concerning contraction of *is*, and other words, in the present study, Thagg-Fisher's results could help explain some of them. She discusses the ending morpheme *-s* as the culprit of many learner errors where, in some cases, the irregular plural nouns lack the regular *-s* morpheme and the learner mistakes it for a singular noun. This could also lead to errors made with contractions.

Thagg-Fisher's study also dealt with collective nouns and how they present the learners with difficult choices when producing grammatically correct English. Results from the present study also suggest that words like *group* and *family* are difficult to handle for the EFL learners.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

In this section, the pedagogical implications of the present study is discussed. However, a continuous discussion about EFL education can be found throughout the essay. The subject-verb agreement should perhaps be more prioritised in teaching EFL, as it seems to be one of the more difficult grammatical rules in English to master. As a result of the study of second language acquisition and the subject-verb agreement in L2 learner language, the pedagogical implications may change the common traditional view on teaching English as a foreign language. Learning grammatical rules or systems by heart, without context, in a sort of imitative way (rote learning) seems obsolete and time-consuming.

The focus on communicative strategies and the role of grammar in EFL teaching is made clear by the curriculum in English. This may limit the freedom of the formation of grammar education, albeit still acknowledging the importance of grammar. If teachers become more aware of the errors made by their students and the possible reasons behind them, grammar instruction could prove more efficient and perhaps feel less tedious. Error analysis in EFL teaching could help the learners appreciate that acquiring a language is a more cognitive process than they otherwise might realise and that the errors they make are not simply the results of their incompetence, but provide opportunities to further their knowledge of the target language. Afterall, failure really is instructive and it is through our errors that we can truly appreciate our success.

5.2 Further research

The comparison between male and female students has given quite inconclusive results. The difference in error frequency is small and could be due to the length and volume of the collected material. In a more controlled setting, or with the use of standardised tests, the variables would be fewer and the results more reliable. In a larger and more exhaustive study, the errors made by male and female students might constitute the foundation for a comparison between proficiency level, communicative competence and the teachers' assessment of the student. The differences between grades 7 and 8 are similarly difficult to discern since the texts differ so much in length and distribution.

Another interesting and relevant topic for further research is how the learners' attitudes towards EFL learning and teaching affect the acquisition process. Interviews and surveys might be able to show that students who come in contact with English more in their daily lives, e.g. through online games or social media, are more inclined to learn English and therefore are more careful in producing accurate grammar. The socio-economic background of the students could be studied as well in order to find out whether the proficiency in English is affected by the learners' background, their parents occupation or what implications e.g. living in a larger urban area might have. The teachers themselves might also have some influence over how EFL learning is perceived by the students. If the teachers share the same attitudes towards grammar and if those attitudes spread to the students, it could alter the conditions for a learning environment at the school.

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Appendix

Here follows copies of the assignments given to the students, and the amount of instruction therein, in order to show the level of expected freedom in the learners' texts. The only instructions available are the ones for the letter in year 7 and the comparative text about Christmas in year 8.

"Assignment 2", year 7

25th August

Dear student,

Most welcome to [redacted]. My name is [redacted] and, as you know by now, I'm your English teacher. I'd like us to get to know each other better. That's why I've written a letter to you.

Let me tell you about myself. I was born in [redacted] and I've lived here all my life. I went to university in [redacted] for four and a half year otherwise I've lived in [redacted] all the time.

What about you? Have you lived near [redacted] all your life?

It takes me about five minutes to go to school with my bike. How do you get to school?

I have two children, two daughters. They are 18 and 20 years old. We have two pets, a cat and a dog. When I was younger I had a horse also but now I don't have the time. Have you got any pets?

I like reading and watching movies. When I was younger I practised horseriding and karate but now I just walk the dog:) What do you like to do? Are you interested in any sport?

When I'm not in school I think it's nice to meet friends but during the week-days I don't have any spare time. What do you do on your spare time?

I think [redacted] is a friendly school and I hope you will enjoy it here. Please write and tell me about yourself. I look forward to reading your letter.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

19 st nik 7


"Assignment 2", year 8

Written task: Christmas in Sweden vs. Christmas in Australia

Now that you have read the text about Christmas in Australia and understood it, it's time to write. You'll write a handwritten text about Christmas in Sweden and Australia and all the writing will be done in class (English-lessons).

- Write about how we normally celebrate Christmas in Sweden. (winter, presents on December 24th, watch Donald Duck, eat meatballs and ham etc.)
- How do you normally celebrate Christmas? Do you have your own traditions?
- What do you think about Christmas celebration? Do you think it's fun or do you think it's boring/annoying?
- Compare Sweden to Australia and write about both countries when you do the comparison. E.g "We normally have snow during Christmas in Sweden, unlike Australia where they celebrate Christmas in the summer." "Instead of having a plastic Christmas tree like they do in Australia, most Swedes have a real Christmas tree. Just like people in Australia we decorate our trees with coloured lights and other ornaments."

Don't forget to use the linking words and phrases when you write.

Good Luck! 

WORDS AND PHRASES THAT ARE GOOD TO USE WHEN YOU DISCUSS

When you want to express your opinion:

If you ask me...
I think...
In my opinion...
I believe...

LINKING WORDS

Sequence

First / firstly, second / secondly etc
Next, last, finally
In addition, moreover
Further / furthermore
Another
Also
In conclusion
To summarise

Emphasis

Undoubtedly
Indeed
Obviously
Generally
Admittedly
In fact
Particularly / in particular
Especially
Clearly
Importantly

Reason

For
Because
Since
As
Because of

Comparison

Similarly
Likewise
Also
Like
Just as
Just like
Similar to
Same as
Compare
compare(d) to / with
Not only...but also

Result

So
As a result
As a consequence (of)
Therefore
Thus
Consequently
Hence
Due to

Addition

And
In addition / additionally
Furthermore
Also
Too
As well as

Example

For example
For instance
That is (ie)
Such as
Including
Namely

Contrast

However
Nevertheless
Nonetheless
Still
Although / even though
Though
But
Yet
Despite / in spite of
In contrast (to) / in comparison
While
Whereas
On the other hand
On the contrary