Do Students Who Continue Their English Studies Outperform Students Who Do Not? A Study of Subject-verb Concord in Written Compositions in English by Swedish University Students

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Abstract

This essay deals with subject-verb concord in written compositions by Swedish students at Uppsala University. The essay investigates the possibility that students who continue studying English beyond the A level at the university make fewer errors than students who do not continue.

In order to minimize the influence of the students’ gender and first language, only essays written by female students were included in the study; in addition, all students included had Swedish as their first language, and so did their parents. 25 essays by students who continued their studies and 25 essays by students who may not have done so were chosen. All 50 essays were examined for both correct and incorrect instances concerning concord between subjects and verbs in the present tense. The primary verbs to be, to do and to have were analysed as well as regular and irregular verbs.

The results show that the 25 students who continued beyond the A level made fewer errors than the 25 students who may not have continued. The results also indicate that subject-verb concord is not a serious problem for Swedish learners.

Key words: subject-verb concord, error analysis, transfer, interference, motivation, contiguity
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1 Introduction

Swedish learners have a reputation for having a good knowledge of English. In fact, in a study that was carried out by Lewis and Massad where Swedes were compared to other Europeans, Swedes proved to be the most successful group in the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking (Lewis and Massad 1975, cited in Linnarud 1986:39). According to Linnarud (1986:39), one of the reasons for their success is that Swedes are forced to learn English at school from the age of nine until they are sixteen. In addition, Swedish learners have an advantage over learners from many other countries since Swedish television programs are not dubbed as they are in many other European countries.

Ruin (1996:18) explains Swedish learners’ advantage by the fact that “Swedish youth culture is permeated with English input in music, films etc.”. Ruin also mentions another reason why Swedes have a good knowledge of English, namely the fact that Swedes travel a lot and many Swedish students work or study in an English-speaking country for an extended period of time (1996:18). Consequently, the school system and the exposure to English from television and music, as well as spending time in an English-speaking community, give many Swedes an advantage in learning English as a second language.

According to Davidsen-Nielsen and Harder (2001:21), another factor which explains why Swedes are good at English is that English is quite easy for Scandinavians to learn. The reason is that both English and the Scandinavian languages are Indo-European and belong to the Germanic branch.

However, this does not make Swedish learners flawless. It is English syntax, rather than pronunciation and spelling, that causes the most problems for Swedish learners (Davidsen-Nielsen and Harder 2001:21). According to Köhlmyr (2001:296), Thagg-
Fisher (1985:186), Ruin (1996:80) and Karlsson (2002:79), subject-verb concord, which is also called agreement, is one of the features of English syntax that Swedish learners find most difficult and it is a common error type in translations as well as in free compositions. This essay deals with subject-verb concord in essays by Swedish students at university level.

Two authentic examples of subject-verb concord errors taken from two different essays by Swedish university students of English on the A level are given below. In the reference within parentheses at the end of each example, the first four numbers reveal the student’s identification number in the USE corpus, from which (1) and (2) were taken, and a means that the essay was written on the A level; 1 stands for ‘the first essay of the term’, 2 ‘the second essay of the term’ and so forth (Westergren Axelsson 2003:6). The correct form is given in brackets after the error, which is italicized.

(1) If I have a discussion with a person that speak [speaks] excellent English it is favourable (0206, a1)

(2) Lack of inspection, few grades of the scale, and vague or no grading guidelines: these are the three main issues that leads [lead] to an unfairness in our grading system (0122, a2)

In example (1), the student makes a so called third person -s error. The -s in speaks is omitted. In example (2), the student has a third person -s when there is not supposed to be a third person -s since the subject is plural.

According to Quirk et al. “concord of 3rd person number between subject and verb” is “the most important type of concord” (1985:755). As Quirk et al. state, there is a
basic rule to follow: a singular subject takes a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb (1985:755).

However, this rule is not always as easy to follow as it seems. The fact that Swedish learners make errors regarding subject-verb concord can be explained in many ways. Davidsen-Nielsen and Harder state that “there is no inflection for person or number in Scandinavian languages” (2001:30). Ruin supports this (1996:80) as does Köhlmyr (2001:260), and they all suggest that errors in subject-verb concord are examples of transfer from the learner’s first language. According to Gass and Selinker (2001:66), transfer is when prior knowledge of the first language is carried over to the target language, i.e. the language being learned. Positive transfer or facilitation occurs when the learner produces correct target-language forms because of his/her first language; negative transfer or interference occurs when the learner produces incorrect forms because of his/her first language (Gass and Selinker 2001:67).

Learning a second language is a process that involves different stages of acquisition. A learner of a second language is bound to make errors at some point in the learning process (Ellis 1997:20). However, according to Ellis (1997:15) making errors is not to be seen as something bad; on the contrary, it is when the learner makes mistakes and corrects them that the learner becomes aware of his/her own language system. This system, which is unique to every learner, is called his/her interlanguage (Ellis 1997:33) and is influenced by both the native language and the target language. But “there are also elements in the interlanguage that do not have their origin in either the native language or the target language” (Gass and Selinker 2001:12).

An example of interference is when Swedish learners forget the third person -s because in Swedish the verb is not inflected for third person singular as it is in English. Consequently, the verb in Swedish is in the same form regardless of person and number. See the invented examples (3), (4) and (5):
Examples (3)-(5) illustrate that the present-tense form of the Swedish verb *spela* is the same regardless of person and number, but in English the verb *play* changes.

As mentioned above, formal education in a second language and exposure to the language via television and music or extended visits to countries where it is spoken as a first language are certainly important factors in second-language acquisition. Nevertheless, there are also several other factors that may make the learning process successful; attitudes and motivation are two examples of such factors. Gass and Selinker (2001) propose that it is difficult to prove in what way motivation and learning are related, since “the exact nature of motivation is not so clear” (2001:349). Lightbown and Spada (1999) suggest that even though a great deal of research has been done in this area of individual differences, the exact relation between them has not yet been established (1999:56). However, “the overall findings show that positive attitudes and motivation are related to success in second language learning” (Gardner 1985, cited in Lightbown and Spada 1999:56).

In this study, I will investigate if students who continued their English studies beyond the A level made more or fewer subject-verb concord errors than students who
may not have continued (see section 4 for a discussion of how the groups were selected). This factor is indirectly related to motivation, as motivation is one of the factors that may influence a student’s choice to continue his/her English studies. I will compare two groups of students: one group whose members continued to study English at Uppsala University, and one group whose members may not have continued.

2 Previous Research on Subject-verb Concord in Swedish Learners’ Production

There are numerous studies of subject-verb concord errors among Swedish learners. A selection will be accounted for briefly in this section. In the 1970s Thagg-Fisher carried out an extensive study where translations, compositions and spoken English at university level were investigated. The study demonstrates that most subject-verb concord errors (henceforth “S/V concord”) occur in speech and in essays. Thagg-Fisher proposes that in speech and in essays the learner focuses more on content than on form and is therefore likely to make errors (1985:101). In Ruin’s (1996) study, however, fewer S/V concord errors were found in essays than in translations and tests. According to Ruin, there are fewer errors in essays because the students use simpler sentence structures and thus avoid the more difficult ones that can cause errors (1996:32).

Karlsson’s (2002) investigation included compositions and translations written by Swedish students at Lund University from A to C level. Like Ruin, Karlsson (2002:80) observed more S/V concord errors in translations than in free compositions.

Bergström (1987) carried out a study on spoken and written material produced by Swedish students in upper secondary school. Her findings were that more errors were made in free compositions than in elicited data and she is also in agreement with Thagg-Fisher’s conclusion that students focus on content when writing essays and hence focus less on form (1987:46-47).
Consequently, there is disagreement as regards why S/V concord creates problems in previous studies. But these studies are in agreement regarding the fact that S/V concord generates troubles for Swedish learners in one way or another.

3 Aim and Scope

The first aim in this essay is to find out the frequency of S/V concord errors in two groups of Swedish students’ essays at university level. I will compare a group of students who continued beyond the A level with a group of students who may not have continued. The reason why I chose this specific topic for my essay is that previous research has shown S/V concord errors to be among the most frequent ones for Swedish students (Karlsson 2002:79). My research question is as follows: do Swedish-speaking students who go on beyond the A level make fewer S/V concord errors than students who may not have continued studying English?

My hypothesis is that students who continue to study English beyond the A level make fewer S/V concord errors than those who may not have continued. The basis for this hypothesis is that students who continue at least to the B level often have a specific purpose for their studies. Many students who continue studying beyond the A level may do so because they aim to become teachers of English or to get another job in which an extensive knowledge of English is needed. There is also a possibility that the students continue studying simply because they enjoy studying English and that they are highly motivated and therefore get good results. The students who only study English at the A level, on the other hand, may be less motivated. For instance, English may have been a less important part of their studies. If these students are not as motivated, they may therefore not get as good result as the students who are more motivated.
However, differences in motivation are only one of the reasons why some students choose to continue their English studies, while others choose to not do so. For some students there may not even be a choice: they may not be allowed to continue because they failed too many exams. In this case, the frequency of errors in their English may thus be part of the reason why they did not continue. Any connections between motivation and continued studies must therefore remain tentative.

The second aim in this essay is to investigate if students find the primary verbs *to be*, *to do* and *to have*, regular verbs or irregular verbs most difficult with regard to S/V concord. Needless to say, finite verb forms are considered in this study, since the finite verb form is the only verb form where a concord error may occur (Karlsson 2002:44). The third aim in this essay is to examine which types of subject-verb concord errors are the most frequent in the students’ essays and the reason why they occur.

The scope of this study is 50 essays written by Swedish students at Uppsala University during the years 1999-2001. An error analysis is carried out on all essays in order to calculate the error density, which is the average number of errors per 1000 words, and the error potentiality, which is the number of incorrect instances compared with the number of correct instances. In addition, different types of S/V concord errors are examined. This study is consequently both quantitative and qualitative. This investigation regarding S/V concord errors is limited to the present tense. Modal auxiliaries, past-tense verb forms, and non-finite verb forms were not included in this study for the reason that, except for the past tense of the verb *to be*, they do not have agreement marking.
4 Material

The primary material used for this essay is The Uppsala Student English corpus (USE), which was compiled by Margareta Westergren Axelsson and Ylva Berglund between 1999 and 2001. The USE corpus consists of 1489 essays written by Swedish students of English at Uppsala University, most of whom studied on the A level. The corpus is available on the Internet at http://www.ota.ahds.ac.uk/. (Westergren Axelsson 2003:10)

The students whose essays make up the corpus all agreed to participate voluntarily and all participants are anonymous. Instead of a name, each essay is equipped with an identification number. The total number of words in the USE corpus is 1,221,265, and the average length of a first-term essay is 777 words (Westergren Axelsson 2003:3).

The topics of the essays in USE vary and there are personal as well as argumentative essays. The essays were written with a time limit of two to three weeks as well as length limits of 700-800 words (Westergren Axelsson 2003:3). Furthermore, the students wrote these essays in their own time, outside the classroom without supervision (Westergren Axelsson 2003: 3, 6).

All the 440 contributors in the USE research project were asked to fill in a questionnaire in order to participate. Their answers to the questions in the questionnaire are given in the USE database, which provides information about each student’s background, such as sex, age, previous grade in English, first language and so forth (Westergren Axelsson 2003:7).

The essays used for this study were selected as follows. First, a pilot study was carried out. In order to investigate if there were S/V concord errors in the essays in the USE corpus an error analysis was performed on fifteen A-level essays, called “English, My English”. This is a descriptive essay that the A-level students have to write, in which the student evaluates his/her own skills in reading, writing, listening and speaking. In these essays, S/V concord errors were rare: about one error occurred in
every third essay. In fact, Westergren Axelsson (2000:297) made the same discovery: there were fewer errors in the essays on the four skills. Consequently, I started looking for other essay types which might contain more errors.

In order to find more errors in the students’ essays I looked at the second essay assignment on the A level, which is an argumentative essay where students are given a topic to argue for or against. A comparison of the two groups of essays showed that the students used simple language with simple sentence structures when they wrote about the four skills, compared with when they wrote argumentative essays. Instead of finding one error in every third essay, I found at least one error in every argumentative essay. The hypothesis that fewer errors occur when learners avoid complicated sentence structures is supported by Ruin (1996:32) and Westergren Axelsson (2000:297). Furthermore, Thagg-Fisher (1985:101) and Bergström (1987:46) suggest that more errors occur when learners focus on the content and not on form, which is relevant to the argumentative essay type, where topics such as the death penalty and abortions are discussed vividly. Consequently, the argumentative essay type was selected for my investigation.

I included essays by female students only, so that gender differences would not influence the results. Moreover, in order for the comparison between students to be valid I selected participants who had Swedish as their first language and whose parents’ first language was also Swedish, so that the participants all have the same first-language background.

The material was divided into two groups. I will call the first group continuation: this is the group with essays written by students who chose to continue studying English beyond the A level. The other group, which I will call no continuation, is the group with essays written by students who may not have continued to study English.
It is possible that members of the no continuation group did continue their English studies, but after 2001 when the USE project was over, or at another university. Another explanation may be that they continued studying at Uppsala university, but did not want to submit their essays to the corpus after the A level. The basis for classification was that, unlike the continuation group’s essays, the no continuation group’s essays were only found at the A level in the USE corpus, and neither on the B level nor the C level. The fact that I do not know for certain that members of the no continuation group did not continue studying English may be considered a weakness in this study.

The total number of relevant essays for the continuation group was 25. In the continuation group all relevant essays were chosen. However, in the no continuation group I had to limit the number of essays, since there were more than 25 participants that met the criteria. I therefore selected every third essay from 1008 in the a2 directory on. 25 essays from the no continuation group were selected, which makes 50 essays in total for this study. The word count for the continuation group is 18,999; the word count for the no continuation group is 18,381. The total number of words is 37,380, which makes an average of 748 words per essay.

5 Method

Every relevant verb phrase in the 50 essays selected for this study was examined manually for both correct and incorrect instances of agreement between the subject and the verb. The primary verbs to be, to do and to have were investigated as well as all regular and irregular verbs in the present tense; with regard to primary verbs, both auxiliaries and main verbs were included. All relevant verb forms were marked as correct, incorrect or indeterminate (see below).
In addition, I decided to look at contiguity in the structures where S/V concord errors occurred since this phenomenon is mentioned by Thagg Fisher (1985:92), Westergren Axelsson (2000:299) and Karlsson (2002:72). In contiguous structures the verb is adjacent to the subject head as for example in the constructed example *the woman smile[s]*. In contrast, in a non-contiguous structure the verb and the subject head are separated. The subject head and the verb may be broken up by a phrase or by a number of words or even by one word as in the constructed example *the woman, who smile[s]*. Following Thagg-Fisher (1985), I count errors where a relative pronoun occurs between the verb phrase and the antecedent of the pronoun as non-contiguous. According to Thagg-Fisher, “… non contiguity creates concord difficulty” (1985:97). Consequently, all S/V concord errors found in this study will be categorised as contiguous or non-contiguous.

When I analysed the 50 essays selected for this study, I came across cases where either singular or plural concord was possible, in other words they could not be wrong, such as example (6). I removed these verbs from the counts and placed them in an indeterminate category.

(6) …Since almost none of the members of the muslim society of our town

\[ live \] near enough to hear it anyway (1021, a2).

In example (6), both *live* and *lives* are possible. Svartvik and Sager (1996:354) state that the pronouns *neither* and *none* often give the writer freedom of choice regarding whether he/she wants the verb in the singular or in the plural.

A special case concerned collective nouns in English. After a collective noun the verb can be either in the singular or in the plural (Quirk et al. 1985 cited in Levin 2001:11). According to Svartvik and Sager (1996:150), collective nouns define a group
or a gathering and are often treated as singular in American English and as plural in British English, but singular verb forms also occur. According to Levin (2001:120) such nouns include government, couple, family and group. In order to make this study as accurate as possible these cases were taken away from the counts. Examples of structures with collective nouns that occurred in the essays selected for this investigation are given in (7), (8) and (9) below:

(7) The royal couple are not totally aware of what is happening throughout the nation (0187, a2)

(8) The Government have been taking the responsibility to give all children a good basic education where nutrition and physical training have been important parts (3065, a2)

(9) The Swedish royal family has a lot of contacts abroad, mainly with other royal families… (0187, a2)

According to Levin (2001), plural concord with the government, as in example (8), is more common in either highly formal written British English or informal spoken British English (2001:38). A total of 15 occurrences of collective nouns as subjects of relevant verb phrases were found among the 50 essays and they were all excluded from this study.
6 Results

The quantitative results of this study are given in tables. Tables 1a and 1b deal with error density, measured as the total number of errors per 1000 words in the two groups, continuation and no continuation. Table 2, 3a and 3b present error potentiality, i.e. the number of correct instances related to the number of incorrect instances. Ruin (1996) and Karlsson (2002) used both error density and error potentiality. In contrast, Thagg-Fisher (1985) used only error density. Ruin (1996), Karlsson (2002) and Westergren Axelsson (2000) agree that error potentiality is needed to get a valid result.

6.1 Quantitative Results

6.1.1 Error Density

Table 1a demonstrates the number of S/V concord errors made by the two groups continuation and no continuation. The table reveals that in the 50 essays chosen for this study, 65 errors were found in total for 37 380 words. Table 1b shows the average ratio of errors per 1000 words (word counts are given in section 4).

Table 1a: Number of errors in the two student groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuation</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Continuation</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1b: Average ratio of errors/1000 words in the two student groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuation</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Continuation</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1a and 1b illustrate that the continuation group made fewer errors than the no continuation group. The results thus show that students who continued their English studies produced more correct English in this regard, which suggests that motivation might possibly have an effect on the number of S/V concord errors made by the students whose essays were included in this study.

6.1.2 Error Potentiality

Table 2 reveals the total number of relevant S/V concord instances for all 50 essays selected for this study. Both correct and incorrect instances are thus presented.

Table 2: The number (N) and percentage (%) of correct and incorrect instances of primary verbs as well as regular and irregular verbs in the present tense for the two student groups taken together

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TO BE</th>
<th>TO DO</th>
<th>TO HAVE</th>
<th>REGULAR VERBS</th>
<th>IRREGULAR VERBS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correct</td>
<td>1259</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>185</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>323</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total occurrences</td>
<td>1271</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>330</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total number of occurrences of S/V concord for primary verbs as well as regular and irregular verbs in the present tense was 2750. There were 2685 correct instances and 65 incorrect instances; 98% of the cases were thus correct and 2% incorrect. The
lowest error rate was found with to be followed by to do and to have. A higher percentage of errors was found with regular verbs, and the highest with irregular verbs.

In table 3a and 3b the two student groups are compared.

Table 3a: The number (N) and percentage (%) of correct and incorrect cases of primary and regular verbs as well as irregular verbs in the present tense in the continuation group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TO BE</th>
<th>TO DO</th>
<th>TO HAVE</th>
<th>REGULAR VERBS</th>
<th>IRREGULAR VERBS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuation Correct</td>
<td>662</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3b: The number (N) and percentage (%) of correct and incorrect cases of primary and regular verbs as well as irregular verbs in the present tense in the no continuation group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>TO BE</th>
<th>TO DO</th>
<th>TO HAVE</th>
<th>REGULAR VERBS</th>
<th>IRREGULAR VERBS</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Continuation Correct</td>
<td>597</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorrect</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>602</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results in Table 3a and 3b highlight the differences between the two groups. The continuation group have a better result than the no continuation group, with a 2% error rate compared to a 3% error rate. The most significant difference between the groups concerns the verb to do and irregular verbs. When comparing these results it is also worth mentioning that there are more occurrences per 1000 words in the continuation group than in the no continuation group, 77 compared to 71. This may
indicate that the no continuation group have used more modals and past-tense phrases than the continuation group have, thus avoiding inflecting the verb for person and number. This interpretation would support Ruin’s claim that students may avoid difficult structures in essays in order to get round S/V concord errors (1996:32).

6.1.3 Discussion of Quantitative Results

In this study Swedish learners of English master S/V concord fairly well. Westergren Axelsson also came to the conclusion that “…students’ problems with S-V concord are not so great as often assumed” (2000:302).

As regards the primary verbs, to be does not seem to cause many problems among Swedish learners in this study even though the total number of occurrences of to be were as many as 1271. The verb to be is the most frequent verb in the material as a whole and yet there are only 12 incorrect forms of to be in 50 essays: 7 errors were found in the continuation group and 5 in the no continuation group. The primary verb to do occurred 188 times in the students’ essays and 3 errors were found in the no continuation group. However, in the continuation group there were no incorrect cases at all of to do, which was quite surprising. The primary verb to have, which had the highest error ratio in Westergren Axelsson’s study (2000:302), did not cause as many errors in this study; out of 330 occurrences there were only 7 errors in total.

Irregular and regular verbs caused most trouble for the Swedish students in this study and particularly irregular verbs in the no continuation group. A total of 18 errors occurred for both groups taken together with regular verbs and 25 with irregular verbs. A remarkable difference between the continuation and no continuation groups was discovered in the proportion of errors with irregular verbs: 3% in the continuation group versus as much as 8% in the no continuation group. The suggestion that more errors occur with regular and irregular verbs than with primary verbs is something that Karlsson (2002:55) confirms in her study, as does Jurkowski (2005:18). A hypothesis
could be that the primary verbs are more frequent than regular and irregular verbs and therefore the students may acquire the more frequent forms with greater accuracy.

The results indicate that the students in the *continuation* group may have been more motivated than those in the *no continuation* group. It seems as if students who continue studying English at university level, at least those students selected for this study, reach better results than students who may not have continued. One of the factors behind this difference may be the students’ level of motivation. However, for some verb categories the raw frequencies of errors were low, which may mean that the results are not entirely reliable. Moreover, not all verb categories proved to be more difficult for the *no continuation* group. The *no continuation* group had the same proportion of errors as the *continuation* group with regular verbs as well as the primary verbs *to be* and *to have*.

### 6.2 Typical Subject-verb Concord Errors

In this section some of the most frequent S/V concord errors that occurred in the students’ essays will be presented. An interesting starting-point is whether errors with plural subjects such as *they likes* or errors with singular subjects such as *she like* are more common.

In my material the type *she like* was more common with 34 occurrences, as compared to the type *they likes* where 31 occurrences were found in the students’ essays. This result can be compared to Westergren Axelsson’s result (2000:299), where plural subjects with singular verbs made up 53% of the errors and singular subjects with plural verbs made up 47%. Surprisingly, the *continuation* group accounted for most of the errors, 20 out of 31, with plural subjects and singular verb phrases, in contrast to the *no continuation* group, who accounted for most of the errors, 26 out of 34, with singular subjects and plural verb phrases.
Contiguity should also be mentioned in this section. As revealed in section 5, the subject and the verb phrase can be either contiguous or non-contiguous. According to Thagg-Fisher (1985:61) it is the distance between the subject and the verb in non-contiguous structures that makes them difficult for the Swedish students. Totally, in this study, there were 21 contiguous S/V concord errors, which make up 32% of the 65 errors in this study. Examples (10) and (11) are contiguous structures from the same essay where the subject is singular.

(10) …because exercise give [gives] the pupils more energy (2046, a2)

(11) Unfortunately, research show [shows] that many children… (2046, a2)

There were 44 non-contiguous S/V concord errors, which make up 68% of the total number of errors. Worth mentioning is Westergren Axelsson’s study (2000:299) where contiguous S/V errors constituted 27% compared to 73% non-contiguous errors. In contrast, in Thagg-Fisher’s study (1985:93) 55.1% of the errors in the written compositions were contiguous and 44.9% non-contiguous. This result was also in contrast to Karlsson’s study (2002:71) and Jurkowski’s study (2005:20-21) where the non-contiguous error score was much higher than the contiguous error score.

Two examples of non-contiguous structures are presented below in (12) and (13). Example (12) is a structure where the adverbial also is the intrusive element between the subject and the verb. Example (13) is a relative clause with a relative pronoun as its subject. In this study there were 22 S/V concord errors in relative clauses, which corresponds to 34% of all errors.
(12) Few grades also *leads* [lead] to large variation of the students achievements within the same grade (0122, a2)

(13) …it is important that we keep the right to free abortion, which *have* [has] been legislated in Sweden since 1975… (1008, a2)

_People_ as subject head occurred many times in this study and most of the time no S/V concord errors were involved. However, in 6 cases, which is 9% of all the errors in the 50 essays selected, this noun was involved in errors, as in (14) and (15):

(14) People that *is* [are] affected by a loss… (0175, a2)

(15) People that *advocates* [advocate] death penalty maintain that… (0175, a2)

Examples (14) and (15) are both relative clauses with one element in between the antecedent and the verb, in other words following Thagg-Fisher (1985) they are non-contiguous. As can be seen, the two examples were written by the same author. In Westergren Axelsson’s study (2000:302) of S/V concord errors _people_ was the subject head in 31 out of 326 occurrences. The reason why Swedish students have problems with _people_ as subject is explained by Thagg-Fisher (1985:95) as interference, since _people_ is a countable noun in Swedish, but an unmarked plural noun in English.

In Thagg-Fisher’s study (1985:96) it is mentioned that learners’ problems increase with the number of elements between the subject and the verb. Example (16) contains a more complicated sentence structure with more than one element between the head noun and the verb:
The non-contiguous structure in example (16) can cause problems for Swedish students. Ruin (1996:81) suggests that when there are many elements between the subject and the verb it is easy to misinterpret the structure and therefore make errors. Furthermore, Ruin (1996:82) argues that it is not always the singular/plural inflection in itself that causes the problems, but rather a misunderstanding of the complex structure by Swedish learners. According to Thagg-Fisher (1985:96) native speakers of English also find non-contiguous structures difficult. In Thagg Fisher’s (1985) corpus, with only native speakers of English, “of 127 errors, only seven (5.5%) occur in contiguous S-V constructions, whereas the remaining 120 (94.5%) are non-contiguous” (1985:23).

7 Summary and Conclusion

The first aim in this study was to examine the frequency of S/V concord errors that occurred in written compositions by one group of students who continued studying beyond the A level compared with a group of students who may not have done so. The results show that the continuation group who continued beyond the A level made fewer errors than the no continuation group.

In the continuation group 28 errors were made in 25 essays. 98% of the cases were thus correct and 2% incorrect. In the no continuation group 37 errors were made in 25 essays. 97% of the cases were correct and 3% incorrect. In the two student groups taken together the average ratio of errors per 1000 words was 1.7. In the continuation group 1.5 errors occurred per 1000 words and in the no continuation group 2.0 errors per 1000 words. The second aim in this study was to find out if the students found primary verbs, regular verbs or irregular verbs most difficult with regard to S/V concord. The
third aim was to examine which types of S/V concord errors that were the most frequent in this study and the reason why they occur.

As regards which types of verbs caused the most problems in these 50 essays, the primary verbs did not seem to have caused any major problems, whereas regular and irregular verbs were more problematic for the Swedish students in written compositions. The most significant difference between the groups concerned the verb *to do* and irregular verbs. In the **continuation** group and in the **no continuation** group the result concerning regular verbs was the same, 4% incorrect instances in both of the groups. But concerning irregular verbs, the **continuation** group had a proportion of 3% incorrect instances compared to 8% in the **no continuation** group.

The most frequent types of S/V concord errors in the students’ essays were found in non-contiguous structures. In this study 68% of the errors found were non-contiguous, whereas 32% of the errors were contiguous. Of the non-contiguous errors, 22 occurred in relative clauses, which corresponds to 34% of all errors.

It is a fact that S/V concord errors still create problems for Swedish students. However, the percentage of correct instances regarding all essays together is 98, which means that S/V concord is not a serious problem, at least not in this study.

The results also imply that motivation may be an important factor when learning a second language. As hypothesized the **continuation** group made fewer errors than the **no continuation** group and one reason for this may be that the **continuation** group was more motivated. Even though, as mentioned in studies involving motivation and second language learning, it is hard to prove how motivation and learning are related (Lightbown and Spada 1999:56), I believe that motivation has an impact on accuracy in written compositions.

There may be several reasons why Swedish learners make S/V concord errors. One reason could be transfer, in other words that Swedish learners’ interlanguage contains
elements from their native language (Gass and Selinker 2001:12) and since there is “no inflection for person or number in Scandinavian languages” (Davidsen–Nielsen and Harder 2001:30) it is possible that students have used incorrect forms in these compositions owing to interference. Ruin, (1996:80) on the other hand, suggests that when it comes to Swedish learners, S/V concord errors at first sight appear to be due to interference from the native language, but when looked at more closely “it is the plural or singular status of the subject” that makes the Swedish learners misunderstand the structure and therefore make concord errors. Ruin (1996:81) also suggests that Swedish learners have difficulty “identifying the subject due to distance between the subject head and the verb”, which is also supported by Thagg-Fisher (1985:61).

This study involved Swedish students at university level. However, it would be interesting to do another study in the future investigating essays by native speakers of English and their ability to handle S/V concord to investigate whether or not English students make the same S/V concord errors as Swedish students. If so, there may be a possibility that Swedish students make S/V concord errors not because we do not have number inflection in Swedish, but rather because the students misunderstand complex structures and therefore make errors as suggested by Ruin (1996:82).
References


