

# Subject-Verb Agreement in ESL texts

A corpus-based study of Swedish ESL students' written production

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## **1. Introduction**

In 2018, Sweden was ranked as the most proficient non-native English-speaking country, according to the Education First English Proficiency Index (EPI). The tests are taken by over a million people in 88 countries all over the world. The vast majority, i.e. 92 percent, of the test takers are younger than 40, the median age being 26, and the index shows that people in their twenties are the most proficient speakers (Education First 2018, 10). That Swedish speakers of English rank so high in an international test like this might be related to the fact that the input of the English language is a common cultural feature in everyday life: TV shows and movies are not dubbed but subtitled, music in English is played on a daily basis on national radio channels, there are Swedish workplaces that have integrated English as a business language, et cetera. Then, there is also the fact that English is introduced as a core subject from Grade 1 in compulsory school. In the Swedish regulatory documents, language is portrayed to play an important role in each individual's intellectual and personal development. The following quote can be found in the compulsory school's syllabus for English: "Language is the primary tool human beings use for thinking, communicating and learning" (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011a, 34). Thus, English as a second language (hereafter ESL) has a prominent position in both Swedish society in general and the Swedish educational system in particular. Yet, there are features of English that Swedish ESL learners struggle with. One of them is subject-verb agreement.

Many teachers of English in Sweden claim that subject-verb agreement is a very common mistake for students of ESL (see for example Cunningham 2013, 11). How common these errors are or in what language conditions most errors are elicited is, however, not as clear. The aim of this study is therefore to find out more about how well students in upper-secondary school can be seen to master the use of subject-verb agreement and under what conditions errors are produced (see Section 3). Such a study has the potential to inform our understanding of how to address this problem area, particularly if the results show clear error patterns. To sample data for this study, a close reading of the University-level English (ULE) corpus, which comprises texts written by upper-secondary students, was conducted (see Section 4.1). The method for sampling and sorting the data is presented in Section 4.2, after which the results are presented and analyzed in Section 5. In Section 6, the results are put into the context of expected proficiency level as outlined in both relevant regulatory documents and The Common European Framework, hereafter CEFR (Council

of Europe, 2011). The essay is thereafter summarized in Section 7, in which some conclusions are also presented in relation to the aim and hypothesis of the study.

## **2. Background**

In this background section there are three subsections that present the sociocultural perspective on learning (section 2.1), previous research on subject-verb agreement (section 2.2) and the Swedish regulatory documents (section 2.3).

### **2.1 Sociocultural Perspective**

In this section, a theoretical background of the sociocultural perspective on learning and language will be given, as it can be seen to greatly influence Swedish schools through the curricula all the way from kindergarten to upper secondary school (this is further described in section 2.2).

The sociocultural perspective is usually connected to Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist who formulated theories about how human development is deeply connected with, and influenced by, the cultural contexts they are in (Nationalencyklopedin, 2019). There are three important concepts connected to the sociocultural perspective on learning: *Mediation*, *the zone of proximal development*, and *scaffolding*. *Mediation* is a process in which the learner interacts with other people or cultural tools to internalize their understanding of the world (Panhwar, Ansari & Ansari 2016, 184). The primary tool for mediation between humans is usually held to be language of some kind, and the people involved are co-constructors in the learning process, the product of which is deeper cognitive understanding of the subject that is being mediated. The *zone of proximal development*, hereafter ZPD, is a theoretical concept which practically means that a more competent peer assists the learner to achieve just outside his or her ability's reach (Panhwar, Ansari & Ansari 2016, 184). The idea is that the ZPD expands with the learner's abilities, so that the learner can perform more complex tasks with less help from more competent others. Lastly, *scaffolding* is what is provided by the more competent peer within the ZPD. In the context of language learning, scaffolding usually involves co-operation and interaction between the teacher and the students as well as amongst students. Applying sociocultural concepts in the classroom generally means that the teaching is student-centered and that the focus is on communication and interaction (Panhwar, Ansari & Ansari 2016, 185). This is due to the fact that sociocultural learning

theories are based on the belief that learning is a process that is constructed by people, as well as between people and their understanding of the cultural context.

There are also researchers that claim that human interaction might not always be necessary for scaffolding to take place. Ohta (2005) has applied the sociocultural framework of Vygotsky's ZPD in her research into second language acquisition. She proposes a slightly different definition of the ZPD, which involves that the learner him- or herself can provide the expert assistance that ZPD and scaffolding rely on to be successful, for example via literature. Even though her definition includes learners using books or other materials as their competent peer, the principle is the same:

Whether the ZPD emerges in talk-in-interaction between people, or as more cognitively mature learners interact with L2 artifacts, the fundamental ingredients of the ZPD remain unchanged. That is, that the learner is, with assistance, able to outperform what s/he could do without assistance (2005, 507).

Other researchers in the field of second language acquisition, like van Compernelle & Williams (2013), have used the same framework for their research but prefer to call it the Sociocultural Theory of Mind (abbreviated to SCT). They agree with Ohta's claims but also state that there is, in some sense, a human presence in pedagogical artefacts too:

From the perspective of SCT, then, L2 pedagogy encompasses any form of educational activity designed to promote the internalization of, and control over, the language that learners are studying, whether or not a human mediator (e.g. a teacher) is physically present [...] Human mediators may, after all, be vicariously present through the pedagogical materials, tasks, and technologies used by learners (2013, 279).

Some points of relevance to the current study that can be made from this theoretical background section are: i) If learning is assumed to be a product partly of the interaction between people and partly of the interaction between people and their cultural context, that means that the classroom as a contextual language environment plays a key role in students' language acquisition; ii) As language is the primary tool for mediation and development of cognitive consciousness, it follows naturally that a school system influenced by sociocultural learning has a communicative focus;

and iii) Not only teachers but also student peers, educational materials, spoken production from different sources, pedagogical tasks etc. may function as scaffolders in students' use of the ZPD.

## 2.2 Previous Research on Subject-Verb Agreement

The essential point of the subject-verb agreement rule, hereafter SVA, in English is that the finite verb must agree with the head noun of the noun phrase, which can be in either singular or plural. In actual language production SVA means that the verb changes form depending on the subject's number and person. When the subject is in the third person singular, the verb takes a morpheme *-s* in the present tense: "The dog *needs* a walk" (Estling Vannestål 2015, 195). Should the subject be in the plural, or in first/second person singular, the verb follows in plural without any additional morphemes: "The dogs *need* a walk", or "I/You *need* a walk". However, there are verbs that do not simply take a morpheme *-s* in the singular form, as is the case with auxiliary verbs. The primary three auxiliary verbs are: *Be*, *do* and *have* (Estling Vannestål 2015, 171). These verbs have completely different forms depending on whether the subject is in singular or plural form. For example, the verb "be" has three forms: I *am* (first person singular); he/she/it *is* (third person singular); you/we/they *are* (second person singular/plural and first/third person plural). The verb "be" also has different forms depending on the subject in past tense, which is shown in the following example: "I *was* at home, while you *were* grocery shopping and they *were* at the gym." Looking at these examples, the grammatical rules seem fairly straightforward to apply. However, the difficulty is that even if the rule is learned by heart, that does not necessarily mean it will be applied correctly in language production.

To consistently use SVA correctly the learner has to know how to pick out the head noun of a noun phrase, either intuitively or consciously, as well as how to distinguish between singular and plural in both nouns and verbs. The definition of "subject-verb agreement" as presented by Eberhard (1999) is therefore interesting, because it includes the hierarchy involved in phrase structures: "The term [...] refers to the abstract grammatical relation between the agreeing constituents. The particular relation in English is that a finite verb agrees in number with the highest noun in a hierarchical phrase-structure representation of the clause" (1999, 560). This definition suggests that there might be challenges in SVA production that are connected to identification of the head noun, either in a clause with several noun phrases or in a noun phrase with several nouns. According to previous research, there are mainly two complications that might

occur when dealing with noun phrases in SVA production. Firstly, there are studies that suggest that when the head noun in a subject phrase has one grammatical number and another conceptual number, the errors seem to increase due to what is called *the distributive effect*, as in example (1) (Eberhard 1999, 562):

(1) The picture on the postcards

In example (1), the singular noun *picture* might conceptually be treated as a plural noun, since the same picture is assumed to appear on several postcards, i.e. a grammatically singular noun is distributed on a plural noun which makes it conceptually plural. Secondly, there seems to be an increased risk of getting the verb wrong if the subject noun phrase is followed by a postmodifier, such as a prepositional phrase, that also contains a noun, especially if the head noun and the local noun(s) differ in number. This is usually called *attraction* (Bock and Miller 1991, 52). The general idea of *attraction* is that the local noun, i.e. the noun that is closest to the verb, defines the number of the verb which elicits an error when the head noun and the local noun differ in number, as in example (2):

(2) The bowls in the cabinet

In example (2), the plural head noun *the bowls* has a local singular noun, *the cabinet*, in the postmodifying prepositional phrase. In the case of an attraction error, a singular verb would have been chosen because of the local noun being in singular form.

There have been several studies trying to prove that the distributive effect influences SVA, but the results have been somewhat inconsistent. The distributive effect occurs, as demonstrated above in example (1), when the head noun in a subject phrase differs in grammatical and conceptual number (Eberhard 1999, 562). As a preface to her own research on the subject, Eberhard (1999, 562) mentions a study carried out in 1992 where Bock, Eberhard and Cutting could reliably prove the distributive effect, building upon a previous study carried out by Bock and Miller where the effect was null. Bock et al. had L1 English informants completing phrases with singular head nouns in the form of either a conceptually plural collective noun, such as *the jury*, or a conceptually singular countable noun, e.g. *the judge*, as well as a plural noun in the postmodifier, e.g. *the trials*. Bock et al. found that 21 percent of the errors (a plural verb) were found in completions to phrases such as “The jury for the trials”, which is an example with a conceptually collective noun, “compared to 8% of the completions to the subject phrases with count nouns” (Eberhard 1999, 562).

One problem with the experiments on the distributive effects previous to Eberhard's study seems to be that the nouns were too abstract to prove that the errors were made due to the distributive effect. That is, that the informants made the errors because they consciously chose the verb form with respect to the conceptual number of the distributed noun (i. e. the head noun). Eberhard herself conducted several different experiments to make sure that the effects shown in her study were due to the distributive effect and not to attraction or chance. In one of her experiments, Eberhard used pictorial stimuli to support the distributive relationship between the head noun and the local noun, whereas in the following experiment the same phrases were used without pictures (Eberhard 1999, 564). The comparison between these two experiments, plus yet another conducted with more abstract noun phrases, showed that it is indeed possible to prove that the distributive effect influences SVA. This is how Eberhard herself concludes her study: "The results of the experiments presented here show that the dominant influence of a subject phrase's grammatical number can be overridden by its conceptual number when the phrase is easy to imagine." (1999, 576).

As far as attraction goes, there have been several studies that show that there is a connection between verb errors and agreement with local nouns, i.e. additional nouns within a prepositional complement (or similar) to the head noun phrase, that specifies location or direction (see example (2), pg. 6). The phenomenon is described thus: "There is a tendency for the verb to erroneously agree with other noun phrases that precede it more immediately than the head noun" (Bock and Miller 1991, 52). In as early as 1966, Strang found that SVA errors in L1 English speakers' written production were due to attraction between the plural local noun and the verb in 83 percent of the cases (cited in Bock and Miller 1991, 53). Bock and Miller (1991, 60) show in their sentence fragment completion study, that more SVA errors are produced when the head noun and the local noun mismatch in number, as in the example: "the bridge to the islands", where *the bridge* is the head noun, and *the islands* is the local noun. In this study, 90 percent of the errors were produced in the cases where the head noun and the local noun mismatched in number; the majority of errors found when the phrase to complete had a singular head noun and a plural local noun (Bock & Miller 1991, 60).

Furthermore, Bock and Miller (1991, 61) applied different sentence structures in the experiments, to conclude under what further conditions the errors are most likely to appear. In the overall comparison between relative clauses and prepositional phrases as postmodifiers, 68 percent

of the errors were made in the cases with prepositional phrases. When the errors of control conditions were excluded, in which the head noun and the local noun matched in number, 72 percent of the errors could be shown to appear under conditions with a singular head noun, a prepositional postmodifier and a plural local noun in close proximity to the verb error produced (Bock and Miller 1991, 61).

From a teacher's perspective, SVA is viewed as a challenge for many second and foreign learners of English. Cunningham, an English teacher and lecturer at Stockholm University, describes it as one of her "pet hates" and states that subject-verb agreement is "a very common problem for Swedish speakers using English" (2013, 11). Estling Vannestål agrees, in stating that it is "one of the most typical grammatical mistakes made by learners of English" (2015, 88). The immediate explanation that comes to mind is that this is due to the fact that the need for agreement between subject and verb in a clause or sentence no longer exists in the Swedish language. However, Krashen's proposal of morphemes' natural acquisition order in regard to L2 learners shows that the third person singular is acquired quite late "irrespective of the learners' language backgrounds, of their age, and of whether the medium is speech or writing" (Ellis 1994, 94). It does, in fact, happen later than the morphemes of plural forms, auxiliaries and irregular past tense verbs (Krashen's model from 1977 cited in Ellis 1994, 94). This implies that this is a problem not only for Swedish learners of English, but something that all second language learners struggle with, regardless of having or not having SVA structures in their native language.

In summary, SVA errors are likely to appear in language produced by many second language English learners, even relatively proficient ones, since the morphology involved is acquired later than other grammatical features. Two common models of error explanation are the distributive effect and attraction, which are both produced in mismatch conditions when the head noun and the local noun differ in number. An additional complication seems to be postmodifiers which decrease the proximity between the subject and the verb.

### **2.3 The Subject of English in the Swedish Educational System**

Teachers in Swedish schools must base their teaching content on the curriculum and the syllabus for each subject. This study of SVA in texts produced by students therefore requires a reference to what is regarded as important in the regulatory documents in order to understand what the students can be expected to know at a certain level. The curriculum contains general guidelines of moral

and educational values that all Swedish schools should uphold, whereas the syllabi specify the teaching content and knowledge requirements for each subject respectively. However, the regulatory documents imply a certain degree of interpretation, since neither the curriculum nor the syllabi include any directions as to what extent the different parts of the core content should be taught. The syllabus that is relevant to this study is the one for English 6 in the upper secondary school, but it might also be relevant to see what content the students should have met before this course. This will require a look at the core content and knowledge requirements stated in the syllabi for English that the students have met earlier in their education.

In the curriculum for compulsory school, language proficiency is described as playing a key role in both learning and interacting (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011a, 7). This is also stressed in the syllabus for English, grades 1-9, stated as follows: “Language is the primary tool human beings use for thinking, communicating and learning” (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011a, 34). Although this exact phrasing is not present in the syllabi for English in upper secondary school, the commentary for English in upper secondary school clearly states that upper secondary courses are closely connected to the courses of compulsory school (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011c, 4). There is a steady progression through all the courses, which means that one course builds upon the content and knowledge requirements of the previous one. That language is ascribed such importance in Swedish education is highly relevant to this study because of two reasons: i) The curriculum and syllabi in the Swedish educational system can be viewed to reflect a sociocultural perspective on learning, and ii) There is a communicative focus in language teaching, which could possibly mean that less focus is directed towards teaching explicit grammar.

There is nothing that explicitly connects to grammar knowledge or use in the syllabus for English 6. In the commentary connected to the syllabi for English 5, 6 and 7, however, the following section can be interpreted to involve correct grammar use: “There are increasing demands regarding content and form through the courses. These demands may for example concern [...] style, word choice, and level of correctness” (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011b, 7; my translation). The last criteria, which concerns increasing level of correctness in language production, can be interpreted to involve increasingly correct use of grammar. In the compulsory school’s syllabus for English, the following can be found under the heading “production and interaction” in the core content for years 7-9: “Language phenomena to clarify,

vary and enrich communication such as pronunciation, intonation and fixed language expressions, grammatical structures and sentence structures” (Swedish National Agency for Education 2011a, 37). This should without doubt incorporate some teaching of SVA, in the form of verb conjugation depending on subject, as well as syntax. Otávio (2019), who is a teacher educator, implies that verb conjugation tables or references thereof is the most common method when teaching SVA: “When clarifying or eliciting subject / verb agreement rules, we tend to emphasize the use of the third person S after the pronouns *he, she, it*. However, **subject-verb agreement usually causes more problems when the subject of the verb is a noun**” (emphasis in original). He also expresses that students might encounter difficulty in connecting subjects given in names or abstract referents to pronouns, even at proficiency level B1 (see further explanation of the CEFR levels in next paragraph).

Apart from the syllabi, the CEFR might provide some insight as to what the learners can be expected to have mastered at a certain level. Although the CEFR is “deliberately ‘underspecified’ with respect to key linguistic features that teachers or assessors look for in a learner’s L2 production when they seek to assign a particular proficiency level” (Council of Europe 2011, 9), it is still quite revealing to look at the different proficiency levels, since they are “indicative” of what the typical learner can perform at a certain level based on corpus research of L2 English (Council of Europe 2011, 12). The proficiency levels are ranged from A2-C2, and English 6 corresponds to the B2 level. Both B-levels are classified as “independent” levels, whereas the A-levels are “basic”, and the C-levels are “proficient”. Some of the characteristic features of the B2 level when it comes to grammar are the use of *to*-infinitive phrases after constructions of *it* + verb, such as “it should be fun to study grammar”, and the use of *wh*-clauses as subjects. At this point a lot of grammatical features are expected to be in place from previous levels, such as the use of complex auxiliaries, several modal constructions, *that*-clauses and the relative pronoun “*what*” as a subject or object in a clause (Council of Europe 2011, 11). Overall, SVA production is hardly mentioned in the CEFR material, but it is stated in the error improvement tables that SVA errors “improve significantly between C1 and C2 levels” (Council of Europe 2011, 30).

To sum up, an overview of the regulatory documents for Swedish education and the CEFR suggests that SVA as a grammatical feature is taught quite early in Swedish schools, but that the errors of it do not significantly decrease until the proficiency levels of C1-C2. The fact that SVA

is not mentioned in any of the key linguistics tables describing the different levels in the CEFR suggests that students are expected to “know how to” even at A2 levels. The errors may, however, be so insubstantial that it is hard to specify the frequency until C1-C2 level where the use stabilizes in its correct form. Considering Otávio’s (2019) claims about the fact that most students find it hard to make the connection between nouns and pronouns, nouns as subjects can be added to the list of challenges even for independent level students.

### **3. Aim and Hypothesis**

The aim of this study is to find out to what extent Swedish learners in upper secondary school have learned to master the use of SVA in English. This is interesting since the grammatical errors of SVA may be cemented early in the educational system, English being introduced as a core subject from Grade 1. Should there be clear error patterns in material produced in upper secondary school, this might indicate where teaching efforts are needed earlier in ESL students’ education.

Since the level of the students’ proficiency in my material should reflect the B2 CEFR level, and the majority of students did prove to fall into the B2 category or higher, the use of SVA should be somewhat consistently correct (Council of Europe 2011, 112; Walker and Allan 2018, 199; 202). According to the Swedish regulatory documents, the use of auxiliaries should be quite steady, especially when the subject is a pronoun. Considering previous research, the hypothesis for this study is that errors might occur more frequently in cases where the head noun and the local noun differ in number, as well as when the subject is a noun rather than a pronoun. The research questions for this study are:

- To what extent can the students be seen to master the use of SVA in written production?
- In the case of errors, what conditions seem to have elicited these?

### **4. Method and Material**

In the following sections I will present the ULE corpus, which is the material that was used in this study, as well as the method used for sampling data from the material.

## 4.1 Material

The data for this study is drawn from a corpus consisting of 29 texts, written by upper secondary students in Sweden, which was collected by Terry Walker and Rachel Allan at Mid-Sweden University in Sundsvall. Their project was a collaboration between Mid-Sweden University and an upper secondary school, and the aim of the project was to find out more about the relation between the level of English in upper secondary school and at university (Walker and Allan 2018, 191). In addition, the project provides teacher educators and future teachers with authentic texts for corpus-based research.

The learner texts in the corpus focus on the presidential election in the United States 2016. The upper secondary students were instructed to read an article published in *The Guardian* about the two presidential candidates. The students have then produced texts where they describe if and why they perceive a certain bias in the article. The total size of the corpus is 10,620 words, and the average text length is 366 words (Rachel Allan, email message to author, June 23, 2019). The students were instructed not to use dictionaries while writing. However, the students were allowed to use notes from previous lessons as well as the article in question as support material in their writing process. Of relevance to the reliability of the results in this corpus study is that some of the students finished their assignment at home and may therefore have used dictionaries and/or translate services without the teachers' knowledge (Walker and Allan 2018, 193).

## 4.2 Method

The method used in this study is close reading. In this case, the aim of the close reading was to find all instances of subject-verb agreement in the students' texts and to classify them as either correct or incorrect. Depending on the type of Verb Phrase, the occurrences of SVA have been put into different categories: Verb Phrases that contain two or more verbs with the use of auxiliaries and Verb Phrases with a main verb in the form of either to be/to have/to do or a lexical verb. The Verb Phrases that contained the use of auxiliaries with two or more verbs have been put in the AUX-category. Within the AUX-category, distinctions have been made between Verb Phrases with primary auxiliaries and modal auxiliaries, which have been slotted separately into two subcategories. The Verb Phrases with to be/to have/to do or a lexical verb as the main verb have been put into the MAIN-category. Within the MAIN-category, distinctions have been made between Verb Phrases with to be/to have/to do used as a main verb and Verb Phrases with a main

lexical verb in the present simple tense. All uses of *be*, *have* or *do* as a main verb have been put into the subcategory of “Be/have/do”, whereas the use of a main lexical verb in the simple present tense have been put into the subcategory of “lexical verbs”. The subcategory of lexical verbs contains present tense Verb Phrases only, since this is the one tense where the verbs take a morpheme *-s* in third person singular, as described earlier in section 2.2.

As demonstrated below in Table 1, the categories used for sorting the data contains two slots each, correct/incorrect, for: primary auxiliaries, modal auxiliaries, *be/do/have* as main verbs and lexical main verbs. Examples from the material of the correct and incorrect uses within each category are given below.

- (3a) Primary auxiliary (correct use): *A letter **was released** from the democratic presidential candidate’s campaign [...].*
- (3b) Primary Auxiliary (incorrect use): *This instead of focusing on that *she **have been ill**.**
- (3c) Modal auxiliary (correct use): *[...] until he recently announced that *he **would discuss** his health with Dr. Oz.**
- (3d) Modal auxiliary (incorrect use): *It would not stand things like down here if *the article **should favours** Donald Trump.**
- (4a) Be/have/do as main verb (correct use): *Hillary Clinton **is** a Democrat while *Donald Trump **is** a Republican**
- (4b) Be/have/do as main verb (incorrect use): *The writers **has** probably a purpose with this article.*
- (4c) Present simple lexical verb (correct use): *The article **says** that Clinton chose to tell us about her illness very late.*
- (4d) Present simple lexical verb (incorrect use): *The article **favour** Clinton's campaign, and disfavour Donalds Trump's.*

Table 1. SVA in the ULE corpus

AUX				MAIN			
Primary AUX (be/have/do)		Modal AUX		Be/have/do		Lexical verbs	
Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect
(1a)	(1b)	(1c)	(1d)	(2a)	(2b)	(2c)	(2d)

Since the texts in the corpus refer to an article published in *The Guardian*, all quotes from the article were disregarded. In cases where there are clear implications that the students have quoted the article but failed to use quotation marks, these have also been disregarded; as is the case with the heading of the article since this includes a quotation itself (“Hillary Clinton ‘healthy and fit to serve as president, doctor says’”). This is also the case with another quote from the article, where Hillary Clinton’s doctor claims in a letter that “Hillary Clinton is in ‘excellent mental condition’”. Some students have only quoted “excellent mental condition” but used the entire quote as it is stated in the previous sentence, whereas other students have quoted it in its entirety. The SVA “Hillary Clinton is” has therefore in this particular construction been disregarded, since the entire clause can be viewed as a direct quote from the article, based on the corpus findings. However, the shorter form “Clinton is” and the rephrasing “she is” have been regarded as authentically produced language. No further cross-reference has been made to the article, which means that there might be other sentences that are directly quoted without quotation marks.

There are, of course, challenges involved in conducting a study like this on texts produced by students. In this type of material, there are syntax errors that may complicate the sorting process. Firstly, poor use of punctuation may result either in run-on sentences or sentence fragments. There are, for instance, cases of run-on sentences with comma splices (here in square brackets), as shown in sentence (5):

- (5) Later mentioned in the text there was arguments that shows how the text is even more biased towards Hillary[,] it stated that, Hillary’s health have all been a conspiracy stated that the videos from 2012 which showed Hillary Clinton falling and getting a so called “serious concussion” have all been cooked up to make it so it seems that Hillary Clinton’s health I worse than it seems.

Sentence (5) contains several clauses, both main and subordinate, and a total of 67 words from beginning to full stop. In other cases, there are sentence fragments due to erroneous punctuation that off-sets the subject, as shown in example (6):

- (6) They explained it from a less dramatic perspective. And tend to minimize the occasion. In sentence (5), the problem is that a run-on sentence makes it hard both for writer and reader to keep track of clause elements. In sentence(s) (6), the subject “they” is also the subject of the following fragment, but it is off-set by a full stop. However, features like punctuation and poor choice of conjunctions have been disregarded as long as the structure, or lack thereof, allows the

identification of a subject and a verb. Secondly, there are cases where the choice of pronoun is unwise or the tense of the verb relating to the main verb is incorrect. As long as the agreement is correct in number, however, the other faults have been disregarded. This is further described in the result section where examples are also given.

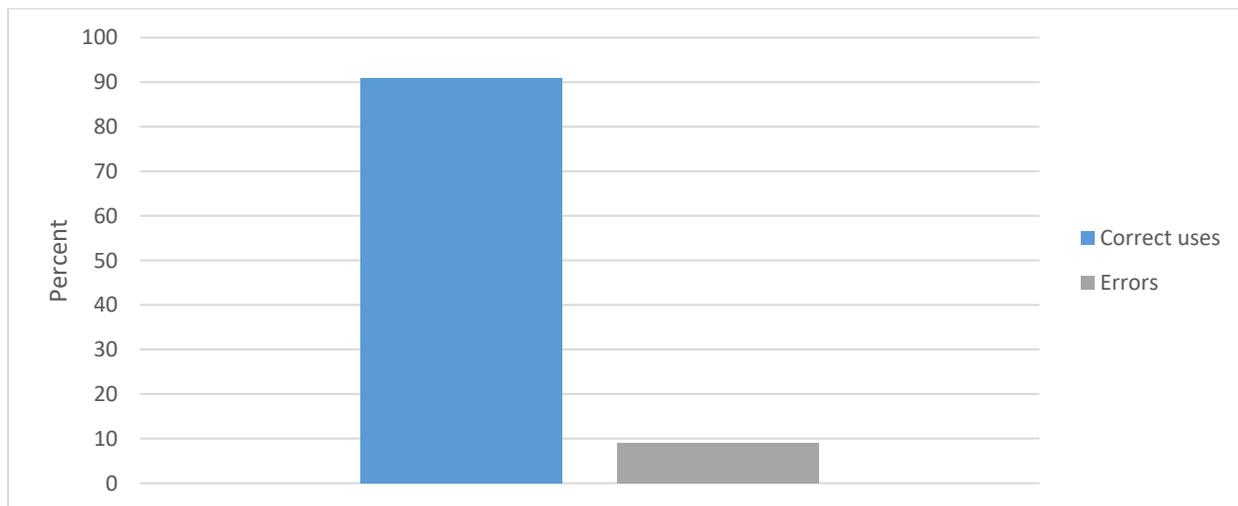
## 5. Results and Analysis

In this section, the results are presented in five subsections. Firstly, a summary of the results is given in Section 5.1. In Section 5.2, the dubious cases are presented. In Section 5.3, the corpus findings are analyzed in relation to the error explanation models that were presented in Section 2.2. In the last two subsections, two error patterns that were found in the material are presented: The unexpected error pattern with primary auxiliary verbs (Section 5.4), and errors with noun subjects (Section 5.5).

### 5.1 Summary of Results

The data collection resulted in a total of 970 relevant Verb Phrases, of which seven were deemed dubious and therefore disregarded from the total count (see Section 5.2). Overall, there were 876 correct uses and 87 errors. This means that 91 percent of all SVA uses found in the material were correct (See Figure 1). Based on this data, the answer to the first research question of this study is that the students can be seen to master the use of SVA quite well.

Figure 1. Correct and incorrect uses of SVA.



A comparison between the two main categories AUX and MAIN shows that 629/963 (65.3%) of all the identified SVA uses consist of a Verb Phrase with only one verb. The most common Verb Phrases in the material, by some 60 uses, were ones where the main verb was *be*, *have* or *do*. Table 2 demonstrates raw figures and percentages for each subcategory.

Table 2. Correct/incorrect uses of SVA by subcategory: raw figures and percentages.

AUX				MAIN			
Primary AUX (be/have/do)		Modal AUX		Be/have/do		Lexical verbs	
Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect	Correct	Incorrect
205	29	98	2	312	22	261	34
87.6%	12.4%	98%	2%	93.4%	6.6%	88.5%	11.5%

The second research question for this study concerned under which conditions the errors might be produced. The number of errors was quite inconsistent throughout the corpus, and with respect to subcategories. Six of the 29 texts had no SVA errors in any of the four categories. Another five texts had only one error in either primary auxiliary, or one of the main verb subcategories. This leaves 18 texts where there were two errors or more. The average error per text was three. However, if the six texts with no errors are left out of the count the number has increased slightly to 3.8. The use of modals generated 2 errors out of the total 100 uses, and the texts that those errors were found in had errors in three out of four subcategories. The highest number of errors in one text was nine and all of them were errors with primary auxiliaries; six made with auxiliary Verb Phrases and three made with *be*, *have* or *do* as a main verb. Of the 234 uses of primary auxiliaries, 12.4 percent were errors. In the subcategory of be/do/have as main verbs, there were 334 total uses and only 6.6 percent were errors. This was the subcategory that elicited the least amount of errors, except for modal auxiliaries. Of the 295 uses of lexical verb constructions, 11.5 percent were errors.

## 5.2 Disregarded Cases

In this paragraph the dubious cases are presented. The context of each example is included, and the relevant Verb Phrase is marked by square brackets. Of the seven cases that were deemed

dubious there were two identical cases where it was impossible to decide whether the subject was intended as singular or plural because of a missing letter, as shown in sentence (7):

(7) [The writes want] to bring out that the republicans are trying to make the people think that Hillarys' is sicker than she is.

In sentence (7), the subject “writes” could have been intended as either *writer* or *writers*, but without guesswork it could not be categorized as either correct or incorrect. A probable guess is that a missing letter is also the cause of incoherence in sentences (8) and (9):

(8) [He as been showing] his paper from his doctor who saying that Trump is the “healthiest individual ever elected

(9) [...] the videos from 2012 which showed Hillary Clinton falling and getting a so called “serious concussion” have all been cooked up to make it so it seems that [Hillary Clinton’s health I worse than it seems].

Based on the assumption that the intended words were *has* and *is* in sentences (8) and (9), the agreement is correct. Since the Verb Phrases are incomplete however, it is impossible to know for certain. In sentence (10) there was a verb in subject position, which means that the number of the subject cannot be determined:

(10) The only thing I find that might cause negativity against republican nominee is that [is thus far has refused] to release the further information about his medical condition [...].

Another sentence contained a Verb Phrase with a preparatory subject followed by the verb *said*, as shown in sentence (11):

(11) But when Donald Trump is mentioned in the article he is talked about in a negative way, for an example [there is said] he has not mentioned the foot problems that kept him from joining the army to fight in the Vietnam war in any public letters or announcements.

In sentence (11), a probable guess is that a strong influence of the L1 Swedish has resulted in a strange choice of the preparatory subject “there (is)” combined with the main verb *said*. The problem with sentence (11) is that the agreement is missing due to the lack of a proper subject after the preparatory filler. The last disregarded case is an incomplete modal auxiliary Verb Phrase, as shown in sentence (12):

(12) The article ends with telling that more is known by Hilary Clinton that almost anyone in public life, and with that means that if anyone else [should should been telling] their health story [...].

Since this Verb Phrase is missing a primary auxiliary it is not possible to decide whether the agreement is correct or not.

### 5.3 Error Explanation Models from Previous Research

Neither attraction nor prepositional phrases can be used to explain any great part of the errors (see Section 2.2). Of all the 87 errors, there are merely three cases where attraction between the local noun and the verb is a possible explanation. There is one case where the head noun is singular, and the local noun is plural, as shown in sentence (13). In the other two cases, the head noun is plural and the local noun is singular, as shown in sentence (14) and (15):

(13) The article is about Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump but focus most on Hillary Clinton [...].

(14) But still the worries about her health as a president keeps escalating.

(15) And its also condescending comments about Donald Trump in the article which shows [...]

In sentence 13, the *the article* is the subject, but the verb *focus* is in the plural. This is possibly due to attraction of the local Noun Phrase of “Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump” in the predicative. In sentence (14) there is a plural subject in the form of *the worries*, but the local noun *president* matches with the incorrectly produced singular verb *keeps*. In sentence (15) there is also a plural subject in the form of *condescending comments*, but the local noun *the article* matches with the incorrectly produced singular verb *shows*.

Prepositional phrases as postmodifiers within the head noun phrase were only found in 5 of the 87 errors (5.7 %), and prepositional phrases were in several cases used successfully without disrupting agreements, as shown in sentence (16):

(16) The title [of the article] is ‘healthy and fit to serve as president’ [...].

The distributive effect can hardly be observed at all in the material, at least not in the sense that Eberhard (1999) describes in her study (See Section 2.2). However, there are a few examples of an error type that may be related, namely using plural verbs with indefinite pronouns such as

everyone and everybody. It is plausible that Swedish learners of English should think of these as “alla” as shown in sentence (17):

(17) The election is in full heat and everybody want to know about the primary participants.

In sentence (17), the conceptual understanding of *everybody* is believed to be several individuals, which makes it conceptually plural even though it should take a singular verb. The reversed principle can be applied with using a singular verb to the plural of person, i.e. people, as is the case in example (18):

(18) [...] they have only asked people about their opinion who is democratic [...].

In example (18), the connection between *one person* and *many people*, which is a tricky one for non-native speakers, might not be made, since the noun *people* in this case has taken a singular verb. However, there are less than five of these errors put together, which means that the errors where students match a verb to a word because of their conceptual understanding of it cannot be used to explain any great deal of the errors found in the material.

#### **5.4 Complex Verb Phrases with Auxiliary verbs**

A common denominator for both subcategories of auxiliary verbs is that both contain complex Verb Phrases. However, the primary auxiliary subcategory elicited a greater proportion of errors than modal auxiliaries, 12.4 and 2 percent respectively. As was mentioned in the Section 4.2, there are cases where the agreement is correct in number, but the choice of pronoun or the conjugation of connected verbs is not entirely correct. There is a total of 12 such cases, of which five each are found in the two auxiliary subcategories. Examples from the primary auxiliary category are given below:

(19) [...] he is one of them who has taking advantage of those conspiracies.

(20) Donald Trump was find giving two letters to Mr Oz .

(21) I have read the article The Guardian who was posted 14 of September 2016.

In examples (19) and (20) the last verbs of the Verb Phrases, *take* and *find*, are incorrectly conjugated. In sentence (21) the relative pronoun *who* is used to refer to the inanimate object *the article*. The agreements are number wise correct, which is why these examples have been categorized as correct even if there are faults in the Verb Phrases. Examples from the modal auxiliary category are given below:

(22) [...] the writer would have choose different words.

(23) In that case it could have sound something like ‘Hillary Clinton are treated [...]’.

In examples (22) and (23) the use of *would have* and *could have* is correct and the agreements have therefore been categorized as such, even if the last verb in these two cases is wrongly conjugated.

The use of complex Verb Phrases did obviously elicit agreement errors (12.4%) in the primary auxiliary category, as in example (24), but there were also several cases where the use of three verbs in a phrase was successful, such as clause (25):

(24) If they wasn’t supporting Hillary Clinton [...].

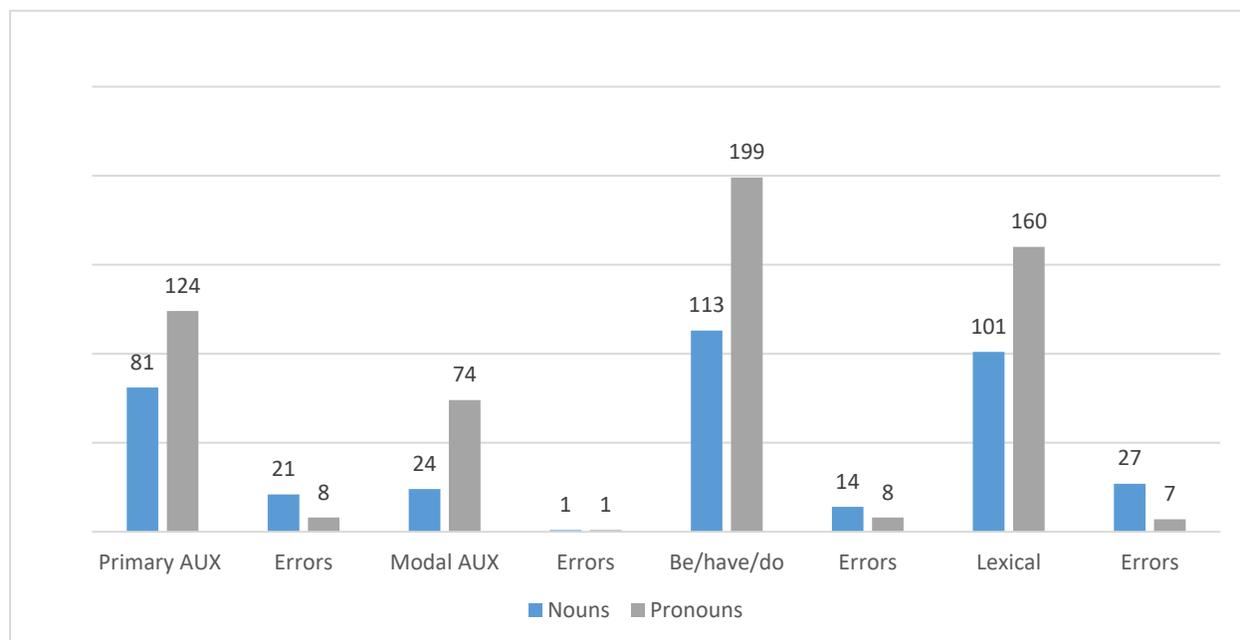
(25) I have been reading.

Examples (24) and (25) are found in the same text. This, together with the fact that the use of primary auxiliaries produced 10 percent more errors than modals. suggests that the use of primary auxiliaries that change form depending on the form of the subject is a bigger challenge than complex Verb Phrases per se.

### **5.5 Challenges with Identifying the Number of Noun Subjects**

The count of nouns and pronouns as subjects revealed some interesting numbers. Of the 205 uses of correctly-produced agreements with primary auxiliaries 124 (60.4 %) of the subjects were pronouns. Of the incorrect uses only 8 (27.6 %) had a pronoun subject, which means that 21 (72.4%) of the errors elicited with primary auxiliaries had noun subjects. In the 98 cases of correctly used modal auxiliaries, the number of pronoun subjects was 74 (75.6 %). There were only two errors in the modal auxiliary subcategory, one of which had a pronoun subject. Of the 312 correctly-produced agreements with *be*, *do* or *have* as a main verb 199 (63.8%) of the subjects were pronouns. Of the 22 incorrect uses in the same subcategory 8 (36.3%) had a pronoun subject, which means that 14 (63.7%) of the errors were made with a noun subject. Of the 261 correctly produced agreements with a lexical main verb 160 (61.3%) had a pronoun subject. Of the 34 incorrect uses, only 7 (20.6%) had pronoun subjects. This means that 27 (79.4%) of the errors elicited with a lexical main verb had a noun subject. In Figure 2, raw figures are presented for each category of correct and incorrect uses with nouns and pronouns as subjects. The pattern for all categories is that pronouns were used to a greater extent in correctly-produced agreements, and that fewer errors were elicited where there was a pronoun subject.

Figure 2. Correct and incorrect uses with noun vs. pronoun subjects



It should be noted that preparatory subjects in the form of *it* and *there is/are/was/were* have been counted as pronouns, since the construction of extraposed subjects with these “fillers” act as a pronoun would, as is the case in sentence (26):

(26) According to The Guardian, [there were also videos] that were ‘falsely spliced together’.

The use of preparatory subjects was in many cases successful, but there was a tendency for errors to occur with *be*, *do* or *have* as the main verb, as in the case with sentence (27):

(27) I think you can see this article from many different angles and [there are no right or wrong].

However, the preparatory subject errors as well as all the different pronoun categories, whether personal, indefinite or demonstrative, were outnumbered by the errors produced in cases where there was a noun subject. Noun subjects made up 63 of the 87 errors (72.4 %). Had the constructions with preparatory and extraposed subjects in those cases been classified as nouns, this tendency would have been even stronger.

Most of the errors that occur in the material are thus made with noun subjects: 72.4 percent of all the errors found in the material. The error percentage for noun subjects range from 50-79.4 percent in all subcategories. The noun subject error rate was the highest in the subcategories of

primary auxiliaries (72.4 %) and lexical main verbs (79.4 %). Examples (28) and (29) are from the primary auxiliary category:

(28) Donald Trump have later seized these so called conspiracies.

(29) [...] Hillary Clinton are treated with antibiotics for her disease.

Examples (30) and (31) are from the category of lexical main verbs:

(30) But there are a lot of things that speaks against her.

(31) The article favour Clinton's campaign and [...].

As was addressed in Section 5.3 regarding attraction and prepositional phrases, postmodifiers with additional nouns cannot be used to explain any greater part of the errors. Examples 28-31 that are given above are representative of most of the errors made with noun phrases regarding proximity between subject and verb. Even though more errors were elicited with noun subjects, there are also several error examples where the proximity between a pronoun subject and the verb is immediate, such as examples 32-34:

(32) "They wasn't"

(33) "She haven't"

(34) "He have"

This then suggests that verb conjugation in general and possibly identifying the number of the subject, especially when the subject is a noun, is a bigger challenge than decreased proximity.

## **6. Discussion**

In this section, the results will be discussed with references to the theoretical background outlined in sections 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3.

Firstly, it should be noted that a total of 9 percent of SVA errors in the material produced by upper secondary students is an encouraging result. With reference to the CEFR, students that take English 6 should generally produce language at the B2 level. As was addressed earlier, it was confirmed by Walker and Allan (2018, 202) that most texts reflected the vocabulary level of B2, even if some texts were deemed to reach the C-levels. The fact that there is a range in the level of correctness in the texts is expected in most groups or classes of students. Based on the findings in the material, this is the case with the use of SVA too. Roughly one third of the texts (11/29) contained one or no errors, but the highest number of errors in one text was nine. Although it is hard to find references to how many errors are average at this level, the CEFR clearly states that

the use of SVA cannot be seen to “improve significantly” until levels C1-C2 (Council of Europe 2011, 30). Even if the six texts with no errors were removed from the average count, the error rate was still only 3.8 incorrect uses per text. Based on this material, the students can therefore be seen to have mastered SVA quite well in relation to the CEFR level that their language production is currently reflecting.

Secondly, the error explanation models that were given in Section 2.2 did not account for many of the errors. Neither attraction nor the distributive effect could be used to explain any great part of the errors, and only 5.7 percent of the errors were cases where prepositional phrases decreased proximity between the subject and the verb. That neither of these explanation models apply to this material may be partly because the studies presented in Section 2.2 were based on experiments where L1 informants were to complete fixed sentences fragments. This is quite a different task to producing language freely, as is the case in the material used for this study. Furthermore, the level of language production of ESL upper secondary students is of course not comparable to language produced by adult native speakers. Constructions with complex noun phrases and long prepositional postmodifiers may simply come more naturally to a native speaker, because of vocabulary range, fluency and syntactic experience. With material like this, where students have produced written language somewhat freely based on a fixed subject, it is probable that avoidance strategies such as rephrasing have been used to avoid as many errors as possible. As far as the distributive effect is concerned, it could be that the level of language in this material is simply not advanced enough for it to be observable.

The occurrence of errors with *be*, *have* or *do* as a main verb is interesting in relation to how early primary auxiliary verb conjugation is taught in Swedish schools. As a middle-school teacher, I know that there are several common teaching materials that contain verb conjugation tables where pronouns are used to illustrate the different verb forms. The occurrence of errors with pronouns and auxiliary verbs as main verbs in upper secondary students’ texts feels quite discouraging from a teacher’s perspective, since there are years and years of input and teaching of this particular construction. There are texts where main verb errors with pronouns like “he/she have” or “they wasn’t” occur and this indicates that these texts were produced by students that have not yet attained the level of language awareness that SVA demands. The number of errors in the *be/do/have* subcategory was 22 of 312 uses. This may not be a very high error rate but considering how early the principal primary auxiliaries are taught, it is still approximately one error in fifteen

uses. The tolerance for such errors may be explained by the fact that there is a strong focus on communicative skills in Swedish schools and, however unfortunate, SVA errors seldom hinder communication.

So far, little attention has been paid to the fact that the modal auxiliary subcategory only contained two errors in 100 uses. As was mentioned in Section 2.3, students of English 6 are expected to be acquainted with several modal constructions (Council of Europe 2011, 30). That the use of modal auxiliary Verb Phrases elicited few errors may be explained by the fact that modal auxiliaries do not take a morpheme *-s* in third person singular, and that when forming the past participle using modals the construction is always modal + *have* + past participle. The risk of confusion in choice between *has* or *have* when using primary auxiliary Verb Phrases or primary auxiliaries as main verbs is therefore considerably lessened. As shown in Section 5.4, there are cases with modals where the agreement is correct, but the verb conjugation of the past participle lexical verb is incorrect, as shown in example (22). Based on the results in the modal subcategory, the agreements with modal constructions seem less challenging than in other subcategories, even if the verb conjugation is not entirely error free.

Since the primary auxiliary subcategory elicited 12.4 percent errors and the use of *be/do/have* as main verbs only elicited 9.3 percent errors, there seems to be some correlation between errors and the use of primary auxiliaries in complex Verb Phrases. As there were only five cases where verbs related to the primary auxiliary were wrongly conjugated in this subcategory, this suggests that students often get the second and third verb of a complex Verb Phrase right. Even in the cases where the auxiliary was incorrect, the trend was that the second and third verb of a complex Verb Phrase were correctly produced. This was exemplified in Section 5.4, with the following clause:

(24) “If they wasn’t supporting Hillary Clinton”

The second verb “supporting” is correctly conjugated, which may indicate that students put a lot of effort in getting the last verb, in many cases lexical, right and lose track of the agreement needed in the auxiliary. However, the difference in errors between the two subcategories was only three percent, so the principal challenge seems to be the use of auxiliaries in both categories.

The strongest trend in the material was that errors were elicited in constructions where the subject was a noun. Again, from a middle school teacher’s perspective, the textbooks usually contain tables for some common present simple verbs too, where pronouns are used to illustrate

the morpheme *-s* in third person singular. That pronouns are so often used in illustrative examples might be a problem, which would possibly explain the thesis that Otávio (2019) presents about students not being able to make the connection between a noun subject and its number, or which pronoun to replace the noun with. The fact that pronouns were correctly used to a greater extent than nouns suggests that students find it more difficult to identify the number of a noun subject. However, the texts in the material used for this study are produced by English 6 students, and at this level the students are expected to produce far more difficult constructions than SVA. Even if there were only 87 errors in 963 uses, the fact that the use of noun subjects constitutes 72.4 percent of all the errors in the material suggests that more attention should be given to teaching students how to connect nouns with numbers and pronouns.

Seen from the perspective of sociocultural learning, the classroom is an important environment for language development. As was presented in Section 2.1, the influence of this learning theory is evident in the regulatory documents and should therefore to some extent be reflected in the classroom. This effectively means that teachers' language output and their interaction with students may be one factor that affects students' language development through mediation and scaffolding. Correct language output from teachers, i.e. main scaffolders, should therefore play an important role in the students' language acquisition. This holds true even if the main focus is to encourage and cultivate communicative skills which perhaps may mean that the room for explicit grammar teaching is lessened, at least in the grades previous to the upper secondary courses.

One limitation of this study is that the corpus roughly consists of 10,000 words. The results show that it is difficult to generalize why errors are elicited, since the conditions vary a lot and no explanation model, except nouns as subjects, seemed to yield a great number of errors. Even if the background suggests that second language learners of English struggle with SVA irrespective of language background, it is impossible to tell whether this material is representative of Swedish upper-secondary students in general, because of the limited material.

## **7. Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to find out to what extent upper-secondary students master the use of SVA, and to find out under what conditions errors were elicited. The hypothesis for this corpus-based study was that more errors might be produced in conditions of mismatch in number between

the head noun and the local noun, as well as when the subject is a noun rather than a pronoun. This was put into the context of the Swedish educational system by addressing what influence sociocultural theory might have on the educational regulatory documents, which in turn affect teaching practices. The possible error explanation models presented in the background were: The distributive effect, attraction and a decrease of the proximity between the subject and the verb by prepositional phrase postmodifiers of the head noun. Additionally, there are educators who claim that many second language learners of English struggle with identifying the number of a subject when it is a noun. This was therefore taken into account in the formulation of the hypothesis.

To answer the research questions a close reading of the ULE corpus was conducted. The corpus contains 29 student-produced texts on an article published by *The Guardian* during the US presidential election of 2016. 970 uses of SVA were found in the material, of which 876 were classified as correct, 87 as incorrect and 7 as dubious. Of the 87 errors, 72.4 percent appeared in cases where the subject was a noun. None of the other error explanation models presented in the background could be applied satisfactorily, except in isolated cases. This means that the hypothesis could only partly be confirmed. However, the accuracy in the use of primary auxiliaries which was expected to be quite robust, seemed to pose a challenge in both auxiliary phrases and in uses with *be*, *do* or *have* as a main verb.

The students represented in the corpus attended English 6 at the time of the material collection. The students are at that point in their education expected to produce language at level B2, according to the CEFR, which most students also did. The CEFR clearly states that the use of SVA cannot be expected to improve significantly until the C-levels. Since there are no clear specifications of how many errors are averagely produced at this level, it is hard to say whether the results of this study are above, on or below average. However, since SVA errors are evidently common among so many second language learners of English, even adults, it seems an average of 3 incorrect uses per text and 91 percent correct uses overall is quite an encouraging result for students at this level.

A recognized limitation of this study is that the corpus only contained approximately 10,000 words. A suggestion for further research, therefore, is to analyze larger corpora of written production. Larger corpora would probably provide a certain variation in text genre, which would possibly generate other patterns. In line with this study, where the sociocultural influence in Swedish schools has been argued to support a communicative focus, it might be interesting to

conduct longitudinal studies where the classroom language environment as a place for scaffolding is put in focus. Since language input is supposed to play a key-role it would be interesting to investigate how teachers and students, i.e. the ones who create the classroom environment, influence students' language production and how the teacher as the main mediator affects the uses of SVA.

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