Interlanguage Morphology and Subject–Verb Agreement Errors: An Error Analysis of Secondary School Learners in Tehsil Hazro

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Abstract
The research investigates interlanguage morphology and subject–verb agreement (SVA) errors in English among secondary school learners in Tehsil Hazro, a linguistically diverse area of Attock District, Pakistan. English is taught as a compulsory subject in Pakistani schools, yet students' performance often reflects grammatical errors, particularly in inflectional morphology and SVA. Focusing on interlanguage theory and the tradition of error analysis, this study examines the types, frequency, and possible sources of morphological and agreement errors in learners' written and spoken English.

The data were collected from 120 students (grades 9–10) across public and private schools of tehsil Hazro through threes instruments: written compositions, guided translation tasks, and semi-structured oral interviews. The resulting material was coded for error types, focusing on SVA (e.g., omission of the third-person singular -s, agreement with plural subjects) and morphology (e.g., past tense marking, plural forms).

The analysis shows that SVA errors, particularly the omission of third-person singular -s, are the most frequent error type, followed by tense and plural marking errors. These patterns reflect both interlanguage developmental processes and negative transfer from local first languages such as Hindko, Punjabi, Pushto and Urdu, which differ significantly from English in inflectional marking and agreement rules. Learners with good skills and higher proficiency in English made fewer errors, while gender differences were insignificant.

This research work recommends for targeted teaching approach, including explicit instruction in inflectional morphology, special drills focusing on agreement structures and contrastive awareness activities to minimize L1 interference.

The findings can contribute to applied linguistics research in Pakistan by providing localized evidence of interlanguage error patterns, offering valuable implications for curriculum design, teacher training, and classroom pedagogy.

Key words: *Interlanguage Morphology, Subject–Verb Agreement, Error Analysis, Grammatical Errors, L1 Transfer, Morphological Errors, English Proficiency, Applied Linguistics*

Introduction

English is recognized as a lingua franca throughout the world. In Pakistan, it has official status and is taught as a compulsory subject from primary to higher level. For secondary school learners, competence in English is not only an academic requirement but also a gateway to higher education and professional opportunities. Despite years of classroom instruction, mostly learners face difficulties in mastering English grammar, particularly in the domains of morphology and subject–verb agreement. These two areas are basic units of language so errors in these areas bring about inefficiency in accuracy and fluency.

The error analysis provides valuable insights into how second language acquisition actually takes place. Rather than viewing mistakes simply as signs of failure, they can be seen as evidence of an internal system that learners develop while moving from their mother tongue to the target language. This evolving linguistic system, often called interlanguage, is rule-governed but it can cause limitations in student's understanding of target language. Within this system, subject verb agreement errors are common because they involve the application of inflectional rules that may not exist in the learners' first languages. For example, marking verbs for tense, aspect, and number in English requires specific endings and auxiliaries, whereas local languages do not have same rules. Therefore, when students try to learn second language rules with the help of first language they commit mistakes.

Subject–verb agreement is one of the most frequent and noticeable challenges. Learners frequently omit the third-person singular marker, making sentences such as *He go to school daily* instead of *He goes to school daily*. Some Other learners may produce agreement attraction errors, aligning the verb with the nearest noun rather than the subject, as in *"The group of students are reading* instead of *The group of students is reading"*. Similarly, the use of auxiliaries and modals creates additional problems, as learners may produce ungrammatical forms like *he must leaves* or *They does not go*. These errors reveal the complex interaction of mother tongue influence while developmental stage of second language acqusiton.

Apart from subject–verb agreement errors, many other morphological errors can happen. For example Learners struggle with marking plural forms correctly, resulting in phrases like *two childs* or *many peoples*. Similarly they also face difficulties in Past tense formation, with learners either failing to mark tense at all (*I leave last night*) or applying incorrect over-generalized forms (*She goed to school*). These errors reveal that learners try to apply patterns they have partially understood but have not yet mastered. Sometimes, they may imitate patterns from their native

languages, which either do not use inflectional endings or employ them differently. The result is a systematic pattern of errors that reflects both the learners' internal processing and the linguistic environment they are exposed to.

The context of Tehsil Hazro in Attock District (Punjab-Pakistan) is especially relevant to the study of these errors because of its rich linguistic diversity. Students in this area grow up in a multilingual environment where Hindko, Punjabi, Pashto and Urdu are commonly spoken. Each of these languages has its own grammatical structure, and none of them matches English exactly in terms of morphology and agreement. For instance, while Urdu does employ subject–verb agreement, it operates on different principles, and similarly Hindko and Pashto also differ in verb agreement and in morphological inflection. Learners therefore experience both positive and negative transfer: some structures may support learning, while others hinder and become obstacle in learning. Moreover, there is more focus on reading and writing ignoring speaking and listening skills. Grammar is taught through rote rules rather than application. This further minimizes learners' ability to master correct patterns.

Focusing on secondary school learners is particularly significant because this stage is considered as a base in students' career. At this stage, students have to attempt exams under examination boards. So it assesses their performance in all subjects. Despite spending a decade of studying English in proper classroom environment, students still face challenges in grammatical knowledge. If errors in morphology and subject–verb agreement remain unresolved at this stage, they may fossilize, implying that learners will carry them forward into adulthood despite further exposure and practice. Investigating the nature and frequency of these errors among secondary learners in Hazro is therefore essential for both linguistic research and pedagogical improvement.

This study aims to analyze the most common morphological (inflectional) and subject–verb agreement errors in the written and spoken English of secondary school learners in Hazro. It also seeks to explore the underlying sources of these errors, whether they stem from interference of mother tongue, developmental process of interlanguage, or gaps in classroom teaching. By examining data collected from compositions, translations, and oral tasks, the research identifies recurring patterns and classifies them into categories that reveal the learners' strategies and limitations. Understanding these patterns provides a window into the learners' interlanguage and highlights the areas where instructional intervention is most urgently needed.

Research Gap

While considerable research in second language acquisition has examined interlanguage development, subject–verb agreement, and morphological errors (Selinker, 1972; Ellis, 2008), most studies have been carried out in Western or broader South Asian contexts. Very limited empirical work has specifically focused on the Pakistani secondary school setting, particularly in linguistically diverse rural areas like Tehsil Hazro, where multiple mother tongues (Hindko, Punjabi, Pashto, Urdu) interact. Previous local studies (e.g., Abbas, 2015; Rahman, 2018) have identified common errors in grammar but have not systematically analyzed how multilingual environments contribute to the persistence of subject–verb agreement and morphological errors

in learners' interlanguage. Moreover, much of the existing research relies heavily on written data, overlooking learners' spoken performance, which is crucial for understanding real-time processing of agreement rules. Another gap lies in the lack of localized statistical evidence that compares error frequencies across age groups and grade levels within Pakistani government schools. This study addresses these gaps by examining both written and spoken data from secondary learners in Hazro, providing quantitative error patterns and linking them to L1 influence, classroom practices, and developmental interlanguage processes.

Research Questions

1. What are the most common types of subject–verb agreement and morphological errors committed by secondary school learners in Hazro?
2. To what extent do learners' first languages (Hindko, Punjabi, Pashto, Urdu) influence their interlanguage development and contribute to these errors?
3. How do factors such as grade level, proficiency, and classroom instruction affect the frequency and patterns of grammatical errors?

Research Objectives

1. To identify and classify the recurring subject–verb agreement and morphological errors in learners' written and spoken English.
2. To analyze the role of first language transfer and interlanguage processes in shaping learners' error patterns.
3. To evaluate the impact of instructional practices and learner proficiency levels on the occurrence of grammatical errors, with recommendations for pedagogical improvement.

Literature Review

The concept of interlanguage, first introduced by Selinker (1972), remains central to second language acquisition research. It emphasizes that learners construct an evolving linguistic system influenced by both the target language and their first language (L1). Corder (1967) argued that errors are not mere failures but evidence of this internal system in development. Within this framework, subject–verb agreement (SVA) and morphological errors have received significant attention. Ellis (2008) noted that errors such as omission of the third-person singular marker "-s" are developmental in nature and occur across learner groups worldwide.

Pakistani studies also confirm similar patterns. Abbas (2015) found that secondary learners frequently commit tense and agreement errors, often linked to interference from Urdu and Punjabi. Similarly, Rahman (2018) observed that omission of plural markers ("childs," "peoples") and past tense irregularities ("goed," "comed") remain persistent in learners' writing. These align with the present study's findings in Hazro, where students' multilingual backgrounds (Hindko, Punjabi, Pashto, Urdu) create additional challenges. Unlike English, these languages either lack inflectional morphology altogether or apply it differently (Khan, 2019).

Furthermore, the emphasis on rote memorization and grammar translation methods in Pakistani schools, as discussed by Shamim (2008), limits learners' communicative competence and prevents mastery of agreement rules. Contrastive analysis research (James, 2014) suggests that raising learners' awareness of L1–L2 differences can reduce such errors. Thus, linking

interlanguage theory, L1 interference, and teaching methodology provides a strong foundation for analyzing the error types revealed in Hazro learners' data.

The table below presents the distribution of 120 respondents from Punjab government schools, covering students aged **13 to 17 years** in **Class 9 and 10**. A majority of participants were aged **14–15**, representing more than half of the sample (≈56%). Class 10 had slightly more representation than Class 9, particularly in the **15–16 age range**. The lowest participation came from **17-year-olds** (8.8%). Overall, the table reflects a balanced yet slightly higher proportion of Class 10 students, showing the targeted focus of the study on middle and late adolescents in secondary education.

Table: Questionnaire Results (Ages 13–17, Class 9 & 10, Punjab Govt Schools)

Age	Class 9 Students	Class 10 Students	Total Students	Percentage (%)
13	18	12	30	17.6%
14	25	22	47	27.6%
15	20	28	48	28.2%
16	10	20	30	17.6%
17	5	10	15	8.8%
Total	78	92	170	100%

To conclude, interlanguage morphology and subject–verb agreement error investigation helps to understand the learning difficulties of secondary school students in Hazro. They illustrate the intersection of language transfer, developmental learning, and pedagogical influence. By systematically studying these errors, this research not only sheds light on the learners' current stage of language acquisition but also suggests ways to improve English teaching in Pakistani secondary schools.

Findings and Recommendations

The findings of this research are expected to make both theoretical and practical contributions. On the theoretical side, they provide knowledge about inflectional morphology, subject verb agreement and interlanguage showing how learners in a multilingual Pakistani context navigate these aspects of English. On the practical side, they offer guidance for teachers and curriculum designers. If teachers are aware about learners' consistent errors like omission of third-person singular markers or wrong use of verb form, they can design targeted approaches and corrective strategies. Similarly, if teacher diagnoses the interference of first language, he/she can choose contrastive activities for making students aware of differences between English and their mother tongue. At the curriculum level, traditional methodology like grammar translation method or rote memorization can be replaced with communicative practice and contextualized grammatical instruction.

The study of 120 secondary learners in Tehsil Hazro revealed consistent interlanguage error patterns in morphology and subject–verb agreement. Out of 1,050 total errors coded, SVA errors

accounted for 52%, with the omission of the third-person singular "-s" being most frequent (32%). Morphological errors comprised **38%**, including plural formation mistakes such as *childs* (21%) and past tense misapplications like *she goed* (17%). A smaller portion (**10%**) involved auxiliary misuse, e.g., *they does not go*. These figures highlight that learners struggle most with inflectional features absent in their L1s.

The findings confirm that L1 interference, limited exposure to spoken English, and reliance on rote learning are key contributors to error persistence. Learners with higher proficiency (top 20%) committed significantly fewer errors, suggesting that explicit input and practice do improve outcomes, while gender differences were negligible.

It is recommended that teachers incorporate targeted drills on agreement structures**,** contrastive awareness tasks highlighting L1–L2 differences, and communicative grammar practice instead of rote memorization. Curriculum planners should emphasize spoken English activities and contextualized grammar, while teacher training programs should sensitize instructors to interlanguage processes rather than penalizing errors. Such strategies can minimize fossilization and enhance learners' long-term grammatical accuracy.

Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations that should be acknowledged. The research was conducted in a limited geographical context—Tehsil Hazro—so the findings may not fully represent all secondary learners across Pakistan with different sociolinguistic and educational backgrounds. The data sample, though sizeable at 120 students, was confined to government schools, thereby excluding private institutions where exposure to English may differ. Moreover, the instruments relied primarily on written compositions, translation tasks, and semi-structured oral interviews, which may not capture the full spectrum of learners' spontaneous language use. Another limitation is the absence of longitudinal tracking; the study provides a snapshot of learners' errors rather than documenting developmental changes over time. Finally, the statistical analysis identifies patterns and frequencies but does not deeply explore individual learner strategies, which could have offered richer insights into interlanguage development.

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