

**I SPY 5 STARFLOWERS: INNOVATING TEACHING & FACILITATING
LEARNING OF SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT AND PLURAL NOUNS**

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ABSTRACT

Subject-verb agreement (SVA) is one grammatical element that second language learners often find challenging because they need to be aware of the subject in a sentence and it has to agree with the verb that comes after it. Countable nouns, on the other hand, have a plural form and they are generally formed by adding 's', 'es' and 'ies' to the singular. However, some nouns have no singular number and others are plural in form but singular in use and meaning. Students find these formations difficult and often get confused, leading to mistakes and errors especially in their writing. In the interest of increasing awareness on the use correct SVA and plural forms, an action research was conducted at a state sports school. A total of 264 students from 9 classes were involved in a pre-test and post-test to measure the effectiveness of I SPY 5 Starflowers. The first phase was on SVA which saw 35.15% increase in scores while the second phase, focusing on plural nouns, showed an increase of 77.32% in scores. Hence, this action research suggests the use of I SPY 5 Starflowers as an additional tool in promoting the mastery of SVA and plural forms.

Keywords: *Nouns, I SPY 5 Stars, Labuan, school, effectiveness*

INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that users of the English language should have reasonable competency to allow them to express themselves meaningfully and confidently. For effective communication to take place, be it written or spoken, correct and appropriate use of the target language is deemed necessary. Incomprehensible input and output may send wrong messages, leading to misunderstanding and miscommunication. Added with errors and mistakes, meaning can be distorted and become ambiguous.

Looking back at the start of teaching the English language in Malaysia, the said language was made compulsory in then Malaya before 1957. It was the official language for about ten years, between 1957 to 1967, for administrative importance. Today, English is formally taught as a second language, from primary to tertiary education. Unfortunately, a number of students are still struggling in learning the English language for they do not have strong foundation in the language. One of the main reasons for code-switching in the English language classroom is due to the inability to express themselves well in the target language (Lee, 2010).

Throughout the years, a number of teachers and researchers (Samuel and Zaitun, 2008; Nor Hashimah, Norsimah and Kesumawati, 2009) have been expressing their concern over matters relating to students' inability to grasp and use correct grammar in their writing. Students seem to make similar mistakes even though they have been repeatedly taught and told to rectify them in previous lessons. Being second language learners and not denying the fact that many do not use the target language after school hours, students lack opportunity to expand their knowledge and practice using good English. Adding to that, some students are not made aware of applying grammar rules accurately. It is a case of either they forgot the rules which have been introduced or insufficient mastery learning taken place. Consequently, they do not possess a strong foundation in the learning of grammar that would enable them to use the language accurately in appropriate contexts.

The teaching and learning of grammar may be confusing to many. For example, there are four kinds of nouns, namely common nouns, proper nouns, abstract nouns and collective nouns. Grammarians like Thomson and Martinet (1986) claim that a noun can function as the subject of a verb, the complement of the verbs 'be', 'become' and 'seem', the object of a verb, the object of a preposition, and can also be in the possessive case.

Another part of speech that is confusing is verb. Nandy (2001) acknowledges that

verbs are the most difficult part of speech to master and acquire because they have many different forms, functions and variations of use. Verbs contribute to most mistakes in English. According to Nandy (2001) again, a verb is not always one word. It can be made up of more than one word (eg. Is playing). The words “am, is are, was, were” say something and are called helping verbs, also known as auxiliary verbs. Nandy elaborates that verbs are the most difficult part of speech to master because they have so many different forms and variations of use. Most mistakes in English occur because verbs are not used correctly.

Explaining the rules that govern the use of parts of speech may have already given a complex idea about the subject matter. It may be even more confusing for second language learners when it comes to applying accurate grammar rules in their daily lesson and practice. Therefore, it is wise to equip students with a strong foundation and to act and intervene early to prevent continuous errors from being committed. It is clear that interventions ought to be initiated to address this issue and I SPY 5 Stars, I SPY 5 Stars Version 2.0 and I SPY 5 Starflowers were introduced as a teaching aid.

I SPY 5 Starflowers was created by Hyginus Lester Junior Lee and it has been registered copyright CRLY00011510 with the Intellectual Property Corporation of Malaysia. It is an improved version of the earlier created I SPY 5 Stars and I SPY 5 Stars Version 2.0 with an addition of three flower-like designs for plural nouns, each with five petals with a ‘ring’ binding all five petals written ‘countable common noun’ in it.

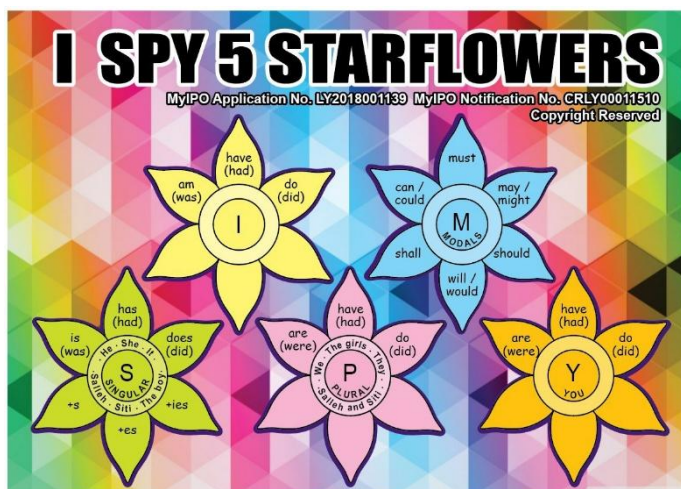
For subject-verb agreement (SVA), five starflowers are used. The first starflower (I) is for the pronoun “I”. The second starflower (S) is for singular subject while the third starflower is for plural subject. The fourth starflower is for the pronoun ‘you’ and fifth for modal verbs.

Each starflower has the verb to-be (am, is, are), verb to-d (do, does) and verb to-have (has, have). They are placed at the top of the stars while the bottom of the stars are reserved for main verbs. Some verbs need +s, +es or +ies (walks, catches, carryes) after a singular subject.

For the teaching of plural nouns, flower petals are also used. The first flower attempts to explain that one has to add ‘s’, ‘es’ or ‘ies’ to a common countable noun to change it into the plural form. Each petal is written ‘thing’, ‘animal’, ‘vehicle’, ‘place’, ‘place’ and ‘person’. These are clues for common countable nouns.

The second flower attempts to explain that one has to use the plural form when there are quantitative adjectives given such as ‘several’, ‘some’, ‘a lot’, ‘many’, and ‘few’. These words are written in each petal, to indicate that the noun used should be in the plural form.

The third flower suggests users to add 'es' to nouns ending with 'o', 'x', 's', 'ch' and 'sh' as indicated in each of the petal.



Formation of plural nouns
+s/+es/+ies to the singular ending with:

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i
+s	+s	+s	+s	+s	+s/+ves	+s	+es	+s
areas	barbs	antibiotics	lizards	certificates	chefs/ thieves	jugs	brushes	safaris
j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r
+es	+s	+s	+s	+s	+s/+es	+s	+s	+s
hadjes	hook	animals	hyponyms	lemons	typos potatoes	groups	talaqs	cars
s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	
+es	+s	+s	+s	+s	+es	+s/+es	+es	
classes	dentists	emus	maglevs	window	complexes	boys/ lorries	quizzes	

*may not be applicable to irregular plural nouns (eg. mice, children, oxen, sheep, men, geese, teeth, etc.)

Plural Rules

When we refer to more than one countable common noun (person/thing/animal/place), we use the plural form of that noun.

We add "s", "es" or "ies" to a countable common noun to change it into the plural form.

The word in each petal indicates that the noun used should be in the plural form.

Add "s" to most nouns but "es" to nouns ending in o, x, s, ch and sh.

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I SPY 5 Starflowers

Grammar may be one of the greatest challenging aspects of English language acquisition. Bhatia (1974) indicates that subject-verb agreement presents a problem for ESL learners. This includes the inconsistency of the use of nouns and verbs. Hence, it is wise that alternatives are sought to better help teachers teach and learners learn meaningfully and effectively.

This study was carried out to gauge students' understanding and application of subject-verb agreement (SVA) and plural rules in their grammar lesson. The teaching and learning of grammar is a challenging task as there are numerous grammar rules to be interpreted and applied. Teachers need creativity and good strategies to deliver the rules while students have to pay attention to the details so that the idea is conveyed effectively.

Problems in communication may occur when learners do not master the rules well.

Surina and Kamarulzaman (2009) who conducted studies in the English language concur that a majority of Malaysian students still have problems with subject-verb agreement. Another study by Nor Hashimah, Norsimah and Kesumawati (2009) showed SVA had the highest errors among the four grammatical categories (copula, SVA, article, relative clause) studied.

Siti Hamin and Mohd Mustafa (2010) claim that even English Language Studies postgraduate course major teacher trainees at a teaching college made significant errors in SVA. In addition, Ghabool, Mariann and Seyyed (2012) also support that Malaysian ESL students have problems in their writing tasks, especially in grammar and punctuation. Such an occurrence among users of English would definitely be a challenge for them to communicate effectively with precise and correct use of grammar.

Scarcella (2003: 28) said, *“Those who have a relatively low proficiency in everyday English grammar and vocabulary may be able to convey the gist of their messages in everyday situations, but their communication is often limited. They are handicapped when they try to acquire the English needed for academic situations. This is because academic English requires the development of advanced grammar and vocabulary”*. Reflecting on these wise words, it is wise that early intervention and assistance is offered to school students so that they would have a better understanding of grammar before pursuing higher levels of academic requirements in education and professional demands in their career choices.

This study involved 264 secondary school students from nine classes in a selected school in the Federal Territory of Labuan.

The instrument used in this study was a fill-in-the-blanks exercises for SVA (phase 1) and an open-ended fill-in-the-blanks exercises that required students to identify plural rules and give examples for each of the rules (phase 2). Scores are collected based on the pre-test and post-test conducted by three teachers who administered the tests. The data obtained from the pre-test and post-test conducted.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Phase 1: Subject-verb agreement (SVA)

GROUP 1 (N=42)	Score	Mean	Percentage
Pre-test	1303	31	55.40%
Post-test	1887	44	80.23%

Increment	584	13	24.83%
GROUP 2 (N=15)			
	Score	Mean	Percentage
Pre-test	499	33	59.40%
Post-test	721	48	85.83%
Increment	222	15	26.43%
GROUP 3 (N=28)			
	Score	Mean	Percentage
Pre-test	517	18	32.97%
Post-test	1367	48	87.18%
Increment	850	30	54.21%
Average			
	552	18	35.15%

Phase 2: Plural nouns

The findings of this study are as shown in the table below.

N=179			
Question	Type	Pre-test	Post-test
1		2	149
2	A	65	173
	Eg	66	172
	B	54	166
	Eg	52	170
	C	51	171
	Eg	50	165
3	A	8	169
	B	3	170
	C	3	170
	D	3	170
	E	1	169
4	A	5	175
	B	6	175
	C	5	175
	D	6	175
	E	4	175
5	A	67	172
	Eg	67	172
	B	57	173
	Eg	57	173
	C	55	173

	Eg	55	173
	D	41	175
	Eg	41	173
	E	39	174
	Eg	39	174
Total		882	4619
Scores increment		3737	
Percentage		18.25%	95.57%
Percentage increment		77.32%	

A comparison between the pre-test and post-test revealed that there was an increase of an overall 3737 marks which translates into a 77.32% increment.

This study found that in phase 1 which focused on subject-verb agreement, students were able to make improvement in subject-verb agreement (SVA). They made an average of 552 marks progress or 35.15%.

In phase 2, for plural nouns, students did not fair very well in the pre-test with just 882 marks (18.25%) in total but developed better understanding and application of plural rules after the intervention with a score of 4619 (95.57%), an impressive increase of 3737 marks or 77.32%.

Inferring from the results above, this study found that I SPY 5 Starflowers has helped students to understand and apply the concept of SVA and plural rules in their grammar lesson. It is essential that students start small by knowing the concept of SVA and plural nouns and how to apply them in appropriate contexts. It would be very helpful in their oral and written communication so that less mistakes are committed.

In the local context, students may undeniably need to learn English to pass their examinations in schools, to fulfill the requirement of university entrance and to meet the demands and expectations of future employers. Choy and Troudi (2006) point out that the methods of delivery need significant revamp as their study found that students learn the language due to necessity of survival, not for the love and interest towards English.

In order to help arrest the further decline of the English language, it is wise to propose that the teaching and learning of the English language be revised to meet the different learning styles and intelligences in this modern world of information and communication technology. Teachers today need to be more creative, innovative and effective in the language classroom. Teachers also need to meet the unique abilities, learning experiences, cultures and social backgrounds of students.

CONCLUSION

The use of I SPY 5 Starflowers may be an alternative teaching tool for teachers to teach SVA and plural nouns in schools and for students to understand the concept in a simpler manner. It is hoped that this innovation could help students to ‘visualise’ the application of grammar rules in their language learning process.

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