

AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD OF TEACHING SUBJECT- VERB AGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to introduce an unconventional method of teaching subject-verb agreement in the context of the present tense, using hands. If asked how to teach subject-verb agreement, most language teachers will most likely tell you that subject must agree with the verb in person and number. They do not elaborate. This paper demonstrates a method that is unconventional although a little childish for teaching subject-verb agreement based on four sets of paradigms, which are deliberately organized in such a way that if the students understand the first set, they will understand the rest. Both the conventional method of deliberating on the grammar rules and the unconventional method of using hands had been tried out Universiti Malaysia Sabah. Feedback from students suggests that they preferred the latter than the former method. The paper also presents a strategy of teaching subject by using the substitution method.

Keywords: subject, subject-verb agreement, conventional method, unconventional method, grammar rules

Introduction

Subject-verb agreement is a problem area for many students and teachers in schools and tertiary institutions. Many language teachers including the experienced ones find it difficult to teach this aspect of grammar effectively. Subject-verb agreement is the backbone of sentence structure in English, and this can be seen in common sentence patterns such as S-V, S-V-O, S-V-O-O, S-V-A, and S-V-C where every sentence contains a verb. It deserves our attention and especially so in the context of the present tense. Why focus on present tense? Statistically speaking, some research findings reveal that verb forms used in the present tense occur more frequently than those used in other tenses, hence this higher frequency of occurrence of the former justifies the need to focus more on the present tense.

Review of Related Studies

Most grammar books state the rules on this topic and give examples of sentences to show the relationship between subject and verb, but they do not elaborate on the pedagogical aspects of teaching the topic. Below are some views from some writers on the teaching of this topic.

Adrian Holden and Jagjeet Singh (2001) have identified this topic as a common problem area among students. Examples of problem are pointed out and explanations are given for each sentence. For example, *Susila, together with her younger sister, often (visit, visits) the book stores*. The explanation: a singular subject with an attached phrase is still a singular subject.

Wren and Martin (2001) says that the verb, like the personal pronouns, has three persons – the first, the second and the third, and they then continue with a very lengthy explanation on what is meant by first, second and third person. This method of learning the rules about the first, second, third person before deciding on the verb form is tedious and confusing.

Davidson (2003) states that sometimes it is not the immediate subject, or what seems to be the subject, of the verb that determines whether the verb must be singular or plural, but some other word or phrase in the sentence. For example: *The boy who was playing outside is my son*. ('The boy' is the antecedent of the relative pronoun 'who'). He also points out some differences between formal and informal English. In informal English, *there's* and *here's* may be followed by a plural noun or phrase. For example: *Here's three reasons why you shouldn't smoke* (Informal); *Here are the answers to your questions* (Formal).

Azar and Hagen (2006) deal with this topic by stating the rule in each case of subject-verb agreement, starting with the *be* verbs (*am, is, are*), then *have, has* and *do, does* in other chapters. These grammar words are taught at the basic level. There is no mention of subject-verb agreement in depth.

Alter (1996) provides many examples of subject-verb agreement, but the substitution method of teaching is missing. It is probably assumed that students know how to substitute the nouns with pronouns themselves. In reality, they do not know how.

The mentioned grammar books lack the pedagogical aspects of teaching the topic in depth. As such, students may understand the rules at surface level. They can use *I go* and *he goes* correctly. But once the subject is changed to *Ali's uncle*, they

get stuck with the problem of subject-verb agreement. The approach recommended in this paper is comprehensive. The method of teaching is unconventional, and the technique of finding the subject is the substitution method. The rules are consistent and hence the methods appeal to students. Moreover, students can always look at their hands for reference.

The Comprehensive Approach

The suggested method of teaching subject-verb agreement in class is explained as follows.

1. Basically there are four clusters of subject-verb agreement to deal with in English. They are classified as cluster 1, cluster 2, cluster 3 and cluster 4. Present the four clusters of subject-verb agreement on the board as illustrated below.

1		2		3		4	
Subject	- Verb	Subject	-Verb	Subject	-Verb	Subject	-Verb
I	am	I	do	I	have	I	} stem
You	are	You	do	You	have	You	
We	are	We	do	We	have	We	
They	are	They	do	They	have	They	} stem
He	is	He	does	He	has	He	} stem + s
She	is	She	does	She	has	She	
It	is	It	does	It	has	It	

2. Explain to the students some basic sentence patterns such as S-V and S-V-O so that they can see the subject-verb relationship in the context of sentences.

Examples:

I am a student. I do well in Maths.

I have a computer. I walk fast.

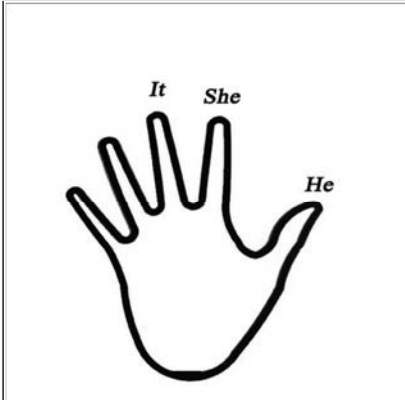
May is a student. She does well in Art.

She has a car.

She sings well.

3. Involve the students by using hand gestures. Get them to mentally place the personal pronouns *I, You, We, They* on the right hand, and *He, She, It* on the left. Be consistent in this arrangement, in that way they will always remember the personal pronouns at their fingertips.

4. Get them to raise their hands and say *I, You, We, They* as they raise their right hands, and *He, She, It* as they raise their left hands. Next, say the verb as they raise their right hands, and say the verb as they raise their left hands.



LEFT



RIGHT

5. Practise the rules of subject-verb agreement by drilling them. Get them to repeat the S-V correctly, do it as a group first before individually. Explain that *is* is used for a singular subject, *are* is used for a plural subject. Do not forget, there is a child in every one of us. Make it fun, lively and interesting!

Steps to follow (Focus on the item you want them to practice):

Step 1 (Do *am, is, are*)

First, direct their attention to the 1st cluster on the board. Say *I*, get students to say *I am*. Now say *she*, students will say *she is*. Next say *Mary*, students will say *Mary is* (tell them that they have to mentally substitute *Mary* with *she*).

Next, say *The manager of Pizzahut*, students will say *The manager of Pizzahut is...*, and so on. (They will mentally substitute *The manager of Pizzahut* with *He*, so *He is...*). Walk around to practise with everyone in the class. Practise it until all of them get this right. When they go wrong, correct them on the spot.

Step 2 (Do *do/does*)

Then, direct their attention to the 2nd cluster on the board. Say *I*, get students to say *I do*. Now say *she*, students will say *she does*. Next say *Mary*, students will say *Mary does...* (mentally substituting *Mary* with *she*). Then say *The manager of Pizzahut*, students will say *The manager of Pizzahut does...* and so on (mentally substituting *The manager of Pizzahut* with *He*, and so *He does...*). *Walk around to practise with everyone in the class. Practise it until all of them get this right.* When they go wrong, correct them on the spot. The bottom line is: *I, You, We* and *They* go with *do*, and *He, she* and *it* go with *does*.

Step 3 (Do *have/has*)

Next, direct their attention to the 3rd cluster on the board. Say *I*, get students to say *I have...* Now say *she*, students will say *she has...* Next say *Mary*, students will say *Mary has...* Then say *The manager of Pizzahut*, students will say *The manager of Pizzahut has ...* and so on (mentally substituting *The manager of Pizzahut* with *He*, and so *He has...*). Walk around to practise with everyone in the class. Practise it until all of them get this right. When they go wrong, correct them on the spot. The bottom line is *I, You, We* and *They* go with *have*, *He, She*, and *It* go with *has*.

Step 4 (Do *stem/stem+s*)

Finally, direct their attention to the 4th cluster on the board. Say *I*, get students to say *I run...* (write the word *run* on the board). Now say *she*, students will say *she runs...* Next say *Mary*, students will say *Mary runs...* Then say *The manager of Pizzahut*, students will say *The manager of Pizzahut runs ...* and so on. (mentally substitute *The manager of the KFC* with *He*, and so *He runs...*). Walk around to practise with everyone in the class. Practise it until all of them get this right. When they go wrong, correct them on the spot. The bottom line is: *I, You, We* and *They* go with *stem*, *He, She* and *It* go with *stem+s*.

Note: Drilling is found to be an effective way to ensure students remember the correct pattern structures. Bear in mind that many students nowadays do not have exposure to English at home, so they need drilling.

How do students learn from this method of teaching?

- They mentally place *I, You, We, They* on their right hand, and *He, She, It* on their left hand. In this way, they can always refer to their hands when deciding on the verb that follows.
- They learn through practice repeatedly.

- They learn what subject is through consistent rules.
- They learn to overcome their shyness in language learning.

Subject and Subject-Verb Agreement

The second part of this paper covers two concepts: subject and subject-verb agreement.

Subject refers to anything that we talk about in a sentence. This ‘anything’ could be a person or persons, an object or objects, a place or places, an idea or ideas etc. The subject could be a common noun, a proper noun, an abstract noun, a collective noun or a personal noun. So this ‘anything’ can be substituted by any of these personal pronouns: I, You, We, They, He, She, or It.

In English the subject usually comes before the verb. For example, *He runs* (S-V) or *He runs fast* (S-V-C). It is easy to recognize the subject when it is a personal pronoun (*I, You, We, They, He, She* or *It*). However, sometimes the subject can be a word or a group of words other than personal pronouns. When this happens, we substitute the word or words in two ways :

1. Substitution of a word with a personal pronoun: When a subject consists of a word, we substitute the word with a personal pronoun. For example:
Ali- substitute *Ali* with *he*.
Liza- substitute *Liza* with *she*.
air- substitute *air* with *it*.
cats – substitute *cats* with *they*.
2. Substitution of a group of words with a personal pronoun: When a subject is a group of words, we pick one word only from this group of words to represent the subject. Then we decide whether this word is singular or plural. If it is singular, we substitute the word with *he, she* or *it*. If plural, we substitute the word with *they*. For example: *The children of this class*. We pick one word *children*, which is plural. Then we substitute *children* with *they*.

Subject-Verb Agreement: The basic rule of S-V agreement is that the verb must agree with its subject in *number* and *person*. Agreement is the relationship between one word in a sentence, and some other word/s, whereby the form of one word is dictated by the other word. The word whose form is determined by the other is said to ‘agree’ with it. Agreement can occur over short or long distances in a sentence. Examples:

S—V S----V
*I **am** happy but you **are** not.*

S-----V
*The girl who **is sitting** in the front row **is** my sister.*

S-----V S-----V
*The examples in this page **show** which words **agree** with which words.*

Below are examples of subject we can identify in a sentence, and explanation on subject-verb agreement with reference to the 4th cluster (*stem/stem+s*). It is easy to identify the subjects if they are personal pronouns: *I, You, We, They, He, She, It*. See cluster 4.

A subject can be a person or persons. Examples :

Ali looks happy.

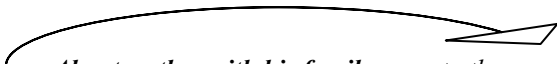
Jack and Jill look happy.

Explanation: Decide whether the subject is singular or plural. Substitute *Ali* with *He* which is singular, so the verb is *stem+s*. If the subject consists of more than one person, for example, Jack and Jill . Substitute *Jack and Jill* with *They*, so the verb is *stem*.

A subject can be an ‘empty’ word *It*. Example:

It usually rains in the evening.

A subject can consist of a name followed by a phrase. Examples :



Abu, together with his family, goes to the mosque on Fridays.

Aman, as well as Amin, exercises regularly.

Neil Armstrong, the first astronaut to the moon, lives in California.

Explanation: *Abu, together with his family* is the subject, singular. Substitute *Abu* with *He*, so the verb is *stem+s*. In *Aman, as well as Amin*, Aman is the subject, singular. Substitute *Aman* with *He*, so the verb is *stem+s*. *Neil Armstrong, the first astronaut to the moon* is the subject, singular. Substitute *Neil Armstrong* with *He*, so the verb is *stem+s*.

A subject can also consist of a name/names preceded by a phrase. Examples :

The most popular dish, fishhead curry, smells good.

Lily's children, Tom and Jerry, love durians.

Explanation: *The most popular dish, fishhead curry* is the subject, singular. Substitute it with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*. *Lily's children, Tom and Jerry* is the subject, plural. Substitute it with *They*, so the verb is *stem*.

A subject can also be a person who does two jobs. Example:

The manager and owner of the coffee shop runs the business.

Explanation: *The manager and owner of the coffee shop* is the same person, singular. Substitute it with *He* or *She*, so the verb is *stem+s*.

A subject can be words such as *this, that, these, those, someone, anyone, everyone, nobody, everything, anything, and nothing*. Examples :

There are many roads here. This leads to Tanjung Aru.

There are a few types of glasses. These break easily.

Everybody loves roses.

Nothing lasts forever.

Explanation: *This* is the subject, singular. Substitute *This* with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*. *These* is the subject, plural. Substitute *These* with *They*, so the verb is *stem*. *Everybody* is the subject, singular. Substitute *Everybody* with *He* or *he*, use *stem+s*. *Nothing* is the subject, singular, so use *stem+s*.

A subject can begin with *wh-* words, such as *who, whoever, which, whichever, what, and whatever*. Examples :

Whoever comes late will not get a seat.

Who says I am broke? Who say I am broke?

Explanation: *Whoever* is the subject, singular. Substitute *Whoever* with *He* or *She*, so use *stem+s*. *Who* is the subject, singular. Substitute *Who* with *He* or *She*, so use *stem+s*. *Who* can also be plural, then we use *stem*.

A subject can be a phrase beginning with *either... or..., neither... nor..., not only...but also, both... and...* Examples:

Either Ali or Amin rings the bell before the class dismisses.

Neither Lisa nor the boys know the way to my house.

Explanation: *Either Ali or Amin* is the subject, singular. Substitute it with *He*, so the verb is *stem+s*. *Neither Lisa nor the boys* is the subject. Pick *boys* (the word closer to the verb) to be the subject, plural. Substitute *boys* with *They*, so the verb is *stem*.

A subject can be a group of people with common interest. Examples:

The poor and needy apply for financial aid.

The public listen attentively to the politician's speech.

Explanation: *The poor and needy* is the subject, plural. Substitute it with *They*, so the verb is *stem*. *The publi'* is the subject, plural. Substitute it with *They*, so the verb is *stem*.

A subject can be an animal or animals, a plant or plants, a living thing or all livings things. Examples :

Puppies look cute.

The Rafflesia smells horrible.

Plants need water and sunlight to grow.

Explanation: *Puppies* is plural, so substitute *Puppies* with *They* so the verb is *stem*. *Rafflesia* is singular, substitute *Rafflesia* with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*. *Plants* is plural, substitute *Plants* with *They*, so the verb is *stem*.

A subject can be an object or objects, a substance or substances, food or foods, a brand or brands. Examples :

Fish and chips sells well in Freemantle.

Calcium increases our bone density.

Roses smell sweet.

Explanation: Decide whether the subject is singular or plural. *Fish and chips* is the subject. Substitute *Fish and chip* with *It* because it is taken collectively as a dish, singular, so use *stem+s*. *Calcium* is the subject, singular. Substitute *Calcium* with *It*, so use *stem+s*. *Roses* is the subject, plural. Substitute *Roses* with *They*, so use *stem*.

A subject can be the name of a building or buildings, a place or places, an institution or institutions, a country or countries. Examples:

The Twin Towers stand out as a famous landmark in Kuala Lumpur.

Nilai University College occupies 105 acres of land.

Explanation: Decide whether the subject is singular or plural. *The Twin Towers* is the subject, plural, so the verb is *stem*. *Nilai University College* is the subject, singular. Substitute it with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*.

A subject can be a fraction of a number of people, a fraction of time, money or distance. Examples of quantifier pronouns to describe a fraction are *none of*, *most of*, *a lot of*, *some of*, *the majority of*, *half of*, *all of*, *a third of*, *the rest of*, *10% of*, *a lack of*, *millions of*, *a couple of*, *not all of*, and *much of*. Examples :

50% of the electorate come early to vote.

None of them gets the right answer.

Half the time goes to the preparation of the notes.

Ten percent of my salary goes to the church.

Much of the money goes to the charity.

Explanation: *50% of the electorate* is the subject, plural. Substitute it with *They*, so the verb is *stem*. *None of them* is the subject, singular. Substitute it with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*. *Most of my friends* is the subject, plural. Substitute it with *They*, so the verb is *stem*. *Ten percent of my salary* is the subject, singular. Substitute it with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*. *Much of the money* is the subject, singular. Substitute *much* with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*.

A subject can be a collective noun. When the collective noun refers to a group of people as a unit, it is singular but when taken as a group of individuals, it is plural. Examples :

A loaf of bread costs five dollars nowadays.

The family lives two blocks away.

The Tan family usually travels together.

The jury decides on the verdict.

Explanation: *A loaf of bread* is the subject. It is singular because it is taken as a unit. Substitute it with *It*, so use *stem+s*. *The family* is the subject, singular because it is taken as a unit. Substitute it with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*. *The Tan family* is the subject, plural because it is taken as consisting of individual members. Substitute it with *They*, so the verb is *stem*. *The jury* is the subject, plural, consisting of a number of individuals. Substitute *jury* with *They*, so the verb is *stem*.

A subject can be a noun phrase (a group of words without a verb). Examples:

These Fuji apples taste good.

One of the boys tells lies.

Explanation: Pick one word from the phrase to represent the subject. *These Fuji apples* is the subject, plural. Pick *apples* to be the keyword, substitute *apples* with *They*, so the verb is *stem*. From the phrase *One of the boys*, pick *One* to represent the subject. Since *One* is singular, substitute *One* with *He*, so the verb is *stem+s*.

A subject can be the title of a book, a song, a painting etc. Example:

'The Audacity of Hope' portrays President Barrack Obama's aspirations in life.

Explanation: *The audacity of hope* is the title of a book and the subject. It is singular. Substitute it with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*.

A subject can consist of a subordinate clause (a group of words with a verb). Examples :

The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world

Explanation: *The hand* is the subject, singular. Substitute *hand* with *It*, so use *stem+s (rules)*; *that rocks the cradle* is a subordinate clause, and *that* refers to *the hand*. Since *hand* is singular, substitute *hand* with *It*, so use *stem+s (rocks)*.

A subject can be a noun clause. Examples :

What form of exercise you choose affects the kind of results you get.

Explanation: *What form of exercise you choose* is the subject because it contains an idea. Since it is an idea, it is singular. Substitute the idea with *It*, the verb is *stem+s*.

A subject can be a gerund /gerund phrase. Examples :

Staying in shape requires constant exercise and a balanced diet.

Manufacturing of goods drives the economy of China.

Explanation: *Staying in shape* is a gerund phrase, singular. Substitute it with *It*, so use *stem+s*. *Manufacturing of goods* is the subject. Pick one word to represent the subject. Pick *Manufacturing* to be the subject. *Manufacturing* is singular. Substitute *manufacturing* with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*.

A subject can begin with *Being + adjective*. Example :

Being tall certainly makes *Yau Meng* an asset in the basketball team.

Explanation: *Being tall* is the subject, singular. Substitute this phrase with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*.

A subject can be an abstract noun. It can be a quality, a trait or an emotion.

Examples:

Truth hurts.

Both sadness and joy cause him to cry.

Explanation: *Truth* is the subject, singular. Substitute *Truth* with *It*, the verb is *stem+s*. *Both sadness and joy* is plural. Substitute it with *They*, so the verb is *stem*.

A subject can also be a figure of speech. Examples :

An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

All work and no play makes *Jack* a dull boy.

Explanation: *An apple a day* is the subject, singular. Substitute *An apple a day* with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*. *All work and no play* contains an idea. Substitute the idea with *It*, so the verb is *stem+s*.

Based on the paradigm above (look at the 4th cluster), it is easy to establish the rules that *I*, *You*, *We* and *They* go with *Stem*, whereas *He*, *She* and *It* go with *Stem+s*. But very often confusion arises when students come across verbs ending

Based on the paradigm above (look at the 4th cluster), it is easy to establish the rules that *I, You, We* and *They* go with *Stem*, whereas *He, She* and *It* go with *Stem+s*. But very often confusion arises when students come across verbs ending with ‘*es*’ and ‘*ies*’. For example: *you wash/she washes, we try/he tries. What about I say/he says* (here *y* is not changed to *i*). How to teach these irregularities when the rules are inconsistent? The strategy here is to divide action verbs into two categories known as *Stem* and *Stem+s*. (*Stem* is taken from Patricia McEldowney’s article *Language Function and the English Verb System* published in *RELC Journal* in June 1976 to mean the base form of an action verb). Below are some examples:

Stem: go, come, sit, stand, pay

Stem + s: goes, comes, sits, stands, pays

The Concept of Stem

The Oxford Dictionary defines ‘stem’ as the main central part of a plant or tree coming up from the roots, from which the leaves or flowers grow. Like the stem being the main part of a growing plant which supports the growth of the others - buds, branches, leaves, flowers, fruits, roots etc., the base form of an action verb can be developed into a range of verb forms depending on what the speaker wants to say or when the speaker is referring to.

For example, the word ‘**cook**’ can give rise to so many possible verb forms such as the following: cooks, cooked, am cooking, is cooking, is being cooked, is cooked, was cooked, were cooked, was cooking, was being cooked, are cooking, are being cooked, were cooking, were being cooked, has cooked, have cooked, has been cooked, have been cooking, had cooked, had been cooking, had been cooked, will cook, will be cooking, will be cooked, would cook, would be cooking, would be cooked, shall cook, shall be cooking, shall be cooked, can cook, can be cooked, may cook, may be cooking, may be cooked, might cook, might be cooking, might be cooked should cook, should be cooking, should be cooked, must cook, must be cooking, must be cooked, must have been cooked, may have cooked, may have been cooked, might have cooked, might have been cooked, could have cooked, could have been cooked, would have cooked, would have been cooked, should have cooked, should have been cooked, will have been cooked etc

Feedback for the Lesson on Subject-verb Agreement

Below are excerpts of feedback from my PPG Cohort 2/2012 students (primary school teachers) on my lesson on subject-verb agreement:



Gan Ping ▶ PPG C2 G7:

Hi everyone, have you learnt something from my first lesson ? I hope you had enjoyed it.

Mon Mar 12, 2012 at 2:51 am [Comment](#) • [Like](#)

3 people like this

[View all 10 comments](#)



HARIYATI HARITH Ur class was my first class in this PPG course. I had enjoyed it very much. Much fun. No stress at all. Thank you madam, for being made us clearly understand..

Thu Mar 15, 2012 at 5:06 pm • [Like](#)



ct11210354 Jabrin Bin Oyuh The first class also i has enjoyed to learn english grammar. however i has obserb around and tried to join learning with my english skill is very limited. I hope some advice from lacturer and support our friends.

Sat Mar 17, 2012 at 5:05 am • [Like](#)



Gan Ping Say I have, not I has.

Today at 2:05 am • [Like](#)



IREYATI IBRAHIM ▶ PPG C2 G7:

Good morning madam! Yesterday is my fist time, i really enjoy in english Class. Thank You for that.

Sun Mar 11, 2012 at 2:12 am [Comment](#) • [Like](#)

1 person likes this



ANNAH PAHALUDDIN ▶ PPG C2 G7:

Good morning mdm .. thank you for teaching yesterday, happy to be Lecturer like u, really enjoyable lesson..

Sun Mar 11, 2012 at 1:51 am [Comment](#) • [Like](#)

The comments from these students suggest a few implications. First, these adult learners responded well to the lesson because it was fun learning grammar, which otherwise could be a boring subject. Second, what constituted the fun part was the way subject-verb agreement was taught using hands, which they least expected and they showed the surprise on their faces. Although some of them responded in their broken English, the truth was that they had enjoyed the lesson, and that was some form of evidence that learning had taken place.

Conclusion

To find out whether this unconventional method of teaching subject-verb agreement is effective or not, a simple test on this topic was carried out on 40 year-one university students with MUET band score of 1 and 2 only. A pre-teaching test with 100 items on subject-verb agreement was carried out. After the test, the students were given an hour-long lesson on subject-verb agreement using hands according to the steps described in this on the same day. A post-teaching test with the same questions was carried out later in the day for the same students. The pre-test marks were compared to the post-test marks. The result shows that 32 out of 40 students had improved by 2 to 20% in the post-tests, 6 of them had a decrease of marks by 1 to 9%, while the performance of 2 students remained the same. The increase of marks by majority of the students is an indication that the unconventional method of teaching grammar rules described in this paper can be effective as the method had produced better results.

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