



USING CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING TASKS TO HELP BASIC SCHOOL PUPILS TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR LEARNING OF SUBJECT-VERB-AGREEMENT (SVA)

Ruby Jecty¹ⁱ,

Sylvester Donkoh²,

Emmanuel Kofi Adusie³

¹Tutor, Department of English,
Foso College of Education, Assin Foso,
Ghana

²Principal Tutor, Science Department,
Foso College of Education, Assin Foso,
Ghana

³Teacher,
Adawukwao Roman Catholic Basic School,
Adawukwoa, Awutu Senya West District,
Ghana

Abstract:

This research work was aimed at investigating the effect of consciousness-raising (CR) tasks on basic school pupils' understanding and use of SVA. The study was conducted at a Basic School in the Assin North Municipality in the Central Region of Ghana to find out whether CR which has been used in a science lesson will produce positive impact in English Language lessons. All the 30 Junior High School pupils were purposively sampled to participate in the study. Since the problem was a classroom issue that required immediate attention, action research design was used. Data collection occurred at three stages; pre-intervention stage, intervention stage and post-intervention stage. A pre-intervention test was designed to test the pupils' understanding of SVA. Intervention activities were carried out after the pre-intervention test using the consciousness-raising tasks. A post-test was conducted after the intervention to find out the impact of the intervention on pupils' performance in SVA. The findings of the study showed that varied SVA rules and types, rules not well explained and teachers' unsuitable teaching methods and confusion towards SVA teaching are some of the causes of pupils' difficulty in mastering SVA concept among the basic school pupils used for the study. The data collected showed that CR tasks are effective in promoting learner's accurate use of Subject-Verb-Agreement (SVA) in a relaxed condition.

ⁱ Correspondence: email slydonkoh@hotmail.com

Keywords: consciousness-raising, subject-verb-agreement, SVA, basic

1. Introduction

Subject-Verb-Agreement (SVA) has been a persistent challenge to Ghanaian basic school pupils (Anderson & Donkoh, 2016). Even though pupils are exposed to the application of grammar rules from kindergarten, many students graduate from the basic school, having difficulties in applying grammar rules and in effect writing sentence with correct SVA (Klu, 2014). As indicated by Wee (2009), Ting, Mahadhir and Chang (2010) and Wee, Sim and Jusoff (2010), SVA is the most difficulty aspect of grammar for pupils. SVA, according to Surina and Ramuruzaman (2009) is the most important elements in producing correct and complete sentences. SVA needs to be emphasized in language learning since it is essential in communicating ideas and thoughts in a meaningful way (long et al, 1980, Sauvignon 1991). To teach SVA in a way that pupils will understand requires the use an innovative active learning approach applicable to basic school pupils. One of such approaches is consciousness-raising (CR).

Ellis (2003) described CR as *“a pedagogic activity where the learners are provided with data in some form and expected to perform some operation on or with it, the purpose of which is to arrive at an explicit understanding of some linguistic property”* (p. 160). The purpose of CR is to make the learners aware of a target from that may simply exist at the level of understanding without the necessity of production (Thornburg, 2009). As Ellis (2002) put it *“the aim of consciousness-raising is not to enable the learners to perform a structure but simply to help him/her to know about it”*. Similarly, Fotos (1993) state that the aim of CR is not to develop immediate ability to use the target forms but rather to call learners attention to the target forms and raise their awareness of the particular linguistic features.

The use of CR is only meant to create awareness. Ellis (2003) defined CR as a pedagogic activity in which learners are given data to perfume operations on with the aim of arriving at an ‘explicit understanding of some linguistic property’ (p. 160). The use of CR is simply to make learners aware of and understand a target form without producing the target form (Thornburg, 2009). The aim of CR according to Ellis 2002 is only to help learners know about a form but not to write based on a structure. What CR does is only raising awareness of a linguistic feature. It is not meant to develop in learners the immediate ability to use the target form (Fotos, 1993). Ellis (1993) put the use of CR in teaching linguistics as getting learners understand a particular grammatical feature, how it works, what it consists of, and so on, but not require the learners actually produce sentences manifesting that particular structure. The goal of CR is therefore to raise awareness of the target grammatical feature and develop explicit understanding of the target form without the necessity for mastery of production and these are facilitated by the noticing process (Schmidt, 1990).

The essence of applying CR in teaching is to assist learners in developing accurate and appropriate explicit knowledge. As emphasized by Ellis (1990), effective grammar teaching cannot occur without CR. According to Idek, Fong and Sidhu (2013), even if the

grammar practice is directed at implicit knowledge; (knowledge about how to do something and is usually unconscious) with no formal instruction, learners will always try to construct their own explicit representation of the target form. Learners therefore need to be assisted in developing explicit knowledge (knowledge without something factual and conscious) without having to engage in repeated production practice (Ellis, 1990). Otherwise, learners might resort to forming wrong hypothesis on how the target form works if they do not receive adaptive and accurate knowledge through effective and accurate knowledge through effective was of learning. CR therefore crucial and significant in helping learners to acquire a linguistic feature by facilitating their development of explicit understanding of the structure.

Having identified that the pupils of the school, had challenges constructing sentences free of SVA errors, this study sort to achieve to the following objectives. The first was to find out the possible causes of the pupils weak understanding of SVA. The second was to use CR tasks and find out whether or not CR tasks are effective in helping pupils learn as it had in science lessons and apply SVA.

2. Methods and Material

The research design used for this study was action research. It focused mainly on the pupils being made to interact and experiment more and collaborating learning to assist individual learners to find a solution to their inability to comprehend fully the concept of SVA. The study was conducted in a basic School located in a town located in the Assin North Municipal in the Central Region of Ghana.

The sample consisted of 30 Junior High School two pupils. The data collection occurred at three stages; pre intervention stage, intervention stage and post intervention stage. The research adopted illustrations and sketches that bring a touch of practicality into teaching to aid understanding to all 30 pupils who were purposively selected for the study because almost all of them had weak understanding of the concept of SVA. The design employed both qualitative and quantitative methods of collecting data. The quantitative data was collected using interview and test while the qualitative data was collected using observation. The interview and test were used at the pre-intervention and the post intervention stages.

2.1 Pre-intervention Stage

At the pre-intervention stage, the interview had an advantage of providing the depth of details from the pupils on their views on subject verb agreement, revealing otherwise hidden interrelatedness between emotions, people, objects in the sense that, through the interview the pupils were able to come out with the methodology, teaching-learning materials and certain actions taken by tutors that killed their interest in the study of SVA. The pre-intervention test was conducted to empirically determine pupil's entry behavior in terms of their ability in understanding the concept subject verb agreement. The pre-intervention test which was in the form of an exercise was to assess how much the child

knew and to establish the extent of pupils' challenge or level of mastery in the study of subject- verb agreement. The information gathered from the pre-intervention stage served as a basis for the researchers to employ the CR tasks to help the pupils to understand the SVA concepts.

2.2 Intervention Stage

At the intervention stage, CR tasks, which is an approach to language teaching and means to make someone aware of something, were designed to help learner's language awareness. The immediate aim of CR is to help learners notice something about the language that they might not notice on their own. They are typically asked to reflect on it, usually by talking to peers. An example of the CR is the "discovery activity" for which learners are asked to formulate a grammar rule based on some language examples.

Lessons were taught on SVA using the CR tasks. During the intervention stage, the pupils were observed as they discussed problems involving SVA. The observation was done to record pupils' pre-conceptions SVA. During the observation, the peer and group discussions were encouraged. Participatory feedback and building on what others say were professionally blended with the CR tasks. The researchers began the activity by posting the SVA rules on the wall.

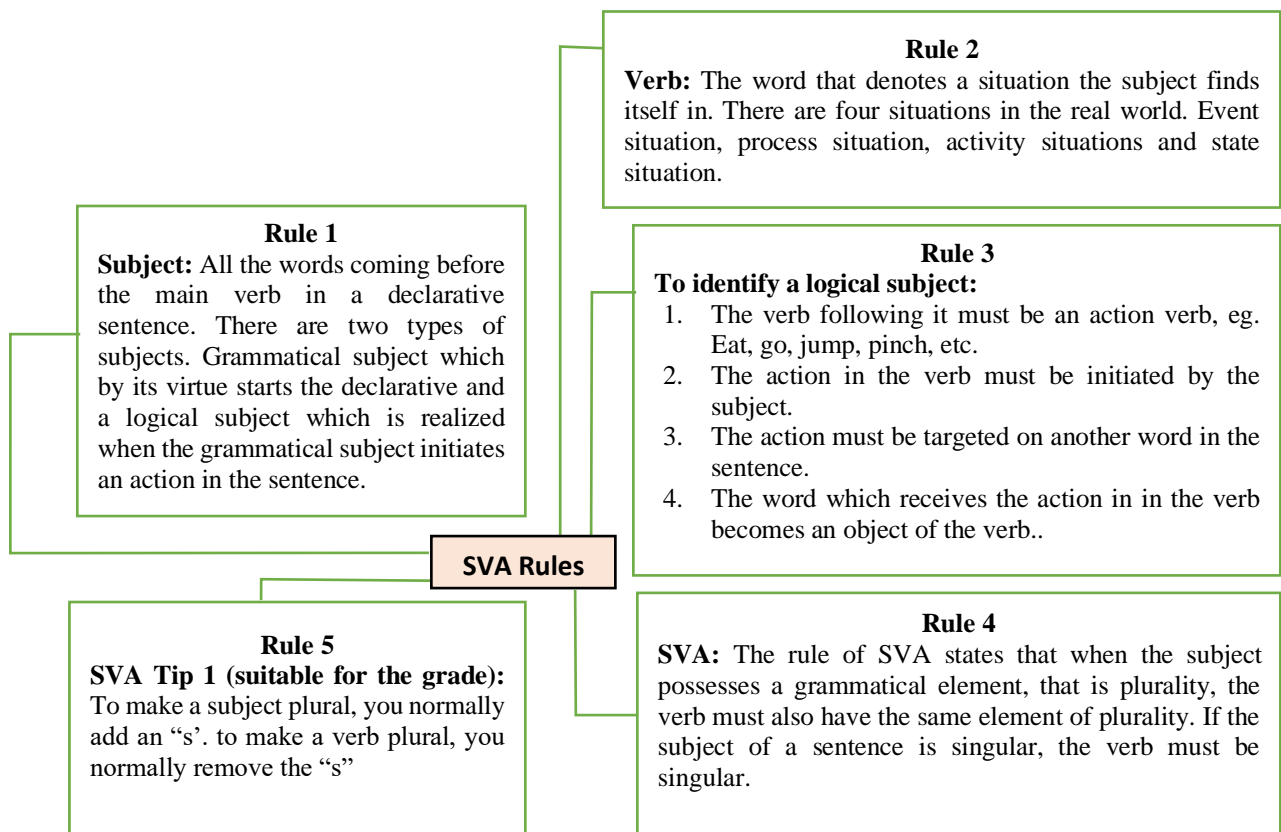


Figure 1: SVA Rules

The research adopted consciousness-raising tasks. The tasks were adopted to bring a touch of practicality into teaching to aid understanding to all 30 pupils who were purposively selected for the study. Almost all of them had weak understanding of the concept of SVA. The sample consisted of 18 males and 12 females. The data collections occurred at three stages; pre intervention stage, intervention stage and post intervention stage. The design employed both qualitative and quantitative methods of collecting data. The quantitative data was collected using interview and test while the qualitative data was collected using observation. The interview and test were used at the pre-intervention and the post intervention stages. At the pre-intervention stage, the interview had an advantage of giving us details from the pupils on their views on subject-verb agreement, revealing pupils' resentments on the methodology, teaching-learning materials and certain actions taken by their teachers that negatively influenced their interest in the study of SVA. The pre-intervention test was conducted to empirically determine pupil's entry behavior in terms of their understanding of the concept subject verb agreement. The pre- intervention test which was in the form of an exercise was to assess how much the pupils knew and to establish the extent of pupils' challenge or level of mastery in the study of subject-verb agreement.

At the intervention stage, the pupils were made to take control of and dictate the pace of their learning. Pupils' pre-requisite skill on SVA sentence construction was implicitly nurtured to consciously make them aware of some patterns they might have taken for granted. Strategies were tactfully designed to help learners reflect on, talk to peers, and share with a whole class on something about the language that they might not notice on their own. This discovery activity for which learners are asked to formulate a grammar rule based on some language examples gave the researchers a good observation task to record pupils' pre-conceptions of SVA as they discussed problems involving SVA. During the observation, peer and group discussions were encouraged. Participatory feedback and building on what others say were professionally blended with the inductive technique.

The researchers began the activity by asking pupils write simple sentences on the board. The class was made to identify the two parts of each sentence. The pupils had already been taught in earlier lessons that a simple sentence is made up of a subject which is doer and a predicate which talks about the doer. This made the pupils identify only a single noun as subjects. Some sample sentences pupils were guided to provide through demonstration included

- 1) The girl ate the food.
- 2) Their house burnt into ashes.
- 3) My mother hit me so hard.
- 4) The kenkey is in the plate.

The pupils were paired and given work to do. Each pair was to identify verbs in the declarative sentences given to them. Then they should underline all the words in front of the verb and label them **grammatical subjects** and underline the identified verbs and all words following them and label them predicates. Again, they were asked to read the

subjects again and identify those which are doers of actions and label them **logical subjects**.

The pairs joined other pairs and identified

- A. Verbs that could be performed.
- B. Verbs that showed that something moved from one condition to another.
- C. Verbs that happened instantly.
- D. Verbs which required no movement.

The second activity was working out rules for themselves. The questions that guided the pupils were:

- 1) How do you identify subjects in sentences? Establish your own rule for identifying subjects?
- 2) What is a predicate of a sentence? How will you help your sibling to identify predicates?

The pupils were then put into groups of five (5) and each group tasked to discuss the rules on strips A to C. Using the PMI strategy, pupils were made to add, (P), remove or make revisions (M) or express interest (I) in what other groups had presented.

A substitution table was provided for the learners to try out the rules of identifying subjects (grammatical and logical) and predicates in sentences. Because any item on the substitution table substitutes for any other, pupils had no problems, identifying subjects and predicates.

A whole class discussion followed on how predicates agree with their subjects.

1. Pairs of sentences were provided for learners to observe.
2. In each pair, one sentence exhibited correct subject verb patterns and the other would exhibit wrong subject verb patterns.
3. The pupils discussed in groups and then selected the grammatically correct sentence and convinced the class why their choice was correct (Example, The players are already at the game.)
4. If any group had other views, they prompted the researcher for their add-ons.

From the discussion, it was realized that learners had a misconception that SVA is about tenses. To clear this misconception pupils were taken through the following activities.

- 1) The researcher took the pupils through the grammatically correct sentences.
- 2) No explanation was given, pupils were made to observe and come out with their own findings.
- 3) The pupils observed that when the subjects contain 's, the verbs do not, and when the subjects have no 's', the verbs have.
- 4) Pupils were assisted to come out with a rule that would work for these examples.

Though pupils' answers were accepted in the local language, the researcher wrote the first rule in English and explained to them.

In guiding the pupils through practicing the application of the subject verb agreement rule, a set of sentences were shown to pupils. In these sentences, plural

subjects were followed by singular verbs/plural verbs for the pupils to choose one which might agree to it.

- 1) Learners were taken through a first process of identifying which of the nouns after of could be counted and which could not.
- 2) Learners were asked to explain why the second group of words could not be counted.
- 3) After the guided practice, the pupils were made to attempt this task independently. The researcher made students explain why their choice was correct based on the subject verb agreement rule and other members added to what others had said.

Following the implementation of the intervention, a post-intervention test was conducted. The purpose of conducting the post-intervention test was to find out the extent to which the intervention was successful in helping the pupils understand the concepts of SVA. In order to have a good basis for comparison, the same test given to the pupils at the pre-intervention stage was given to the pupils at the post-intervention stage.

3. Results

This section consists of two parts. The first part is the result of the interview conducted to find out the causes of pupils' inability to use correctly use SVA. The second part is the presentation of the pre-intervention test and post-intervention test results.

3.1 The Causes of Pupils' Inability to Use SVA Correctly?

In a relaxed interview, the pupils were made to discuss the factors that they felt were impeding their ability to understand SVAs. Table 1 represents the responses in frequencies and percentages given by pupils on their inability to understand SVA concepts.

Table 1: Causes of Pupils' Inability to Understand SVA Concepts

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Teachers' unsuitable teaching methods and confusion towards SVA teaching	6	20
Varied SVA Rules and types	10	33
Compulsion in rule application	5	17
Rules not well explained	7	23
No motivation	2	7
Total	30	100

Out of the 30 responses 6 respondents representing 20% were of the view that teachers' attitude towards SVA teaching caused their inability to understand and identify SVA elements in sentences. They observed that teachers were not consistent about the structures that identified a given expression as a SVA type let alone to know which type it is. None of the respondents felt that inadequate textbook caused the problem, whilst 10 respondents representing 33% suggested that varied SVA rules and types killed their

interest in studying SVAs. It is taught so abstractly and the needed clues to assist them identify SVA elements easily are not provided. Instead of the teacher taking them through a lot of different activities to make learning fun and relaxed and to move at their own pace, lessons on SVA concepts are often rushed and not captivating.

Also, 5 respondents representing 17% saw compulsion in rule application as the major cause of their problem. Since SVA, to them, is a technical sub-strand and involves a lot of inferences and making meaning out of them, flexible and adaptable rules which should help to make the writers thoughts concrete for them to make some meaning out of what is read is totally missing from the grammar class, rather compulsory rules must be applied. What makes the matter worse is that SVA concept, by itself causes a lot of problems because it is expressed in several ways and involves a lot of reasoning to make meaning out of those them so if learner friendly rules are not part of the grammar lessons, then it is also impossible for them to reason through the expressions to identify any special expressions and to know which SVA type has been used. Again, 7 respondents representing 23% boldly declared that they were not interested in the study of SVA concepts because they do not see the head and tail of what the teacher talks about in the grammar class.

When their inability to apply one rule to all SVA types had already scared them and the totality of the piece remained confusing, the teachers' inability to explain the various rules to their understanding never made them enjoy and understand any of the types treated and the teachers frequent caution that SVAs are difficult to understand so be serious with it' kills any initiative they have to dedicate time to studying it. The last group of 2 respondents representing 7% agreed with those who expressed no interest in the study of SVAs that their teacher did not provide any form of motivation to urge them to develop interest in how they could identify and use SVA types correctly.

3.2 Pre-Intervention Test Scores

Before the implementation of the intervention strategies, pupils' knowledge of SVA concept was very low.

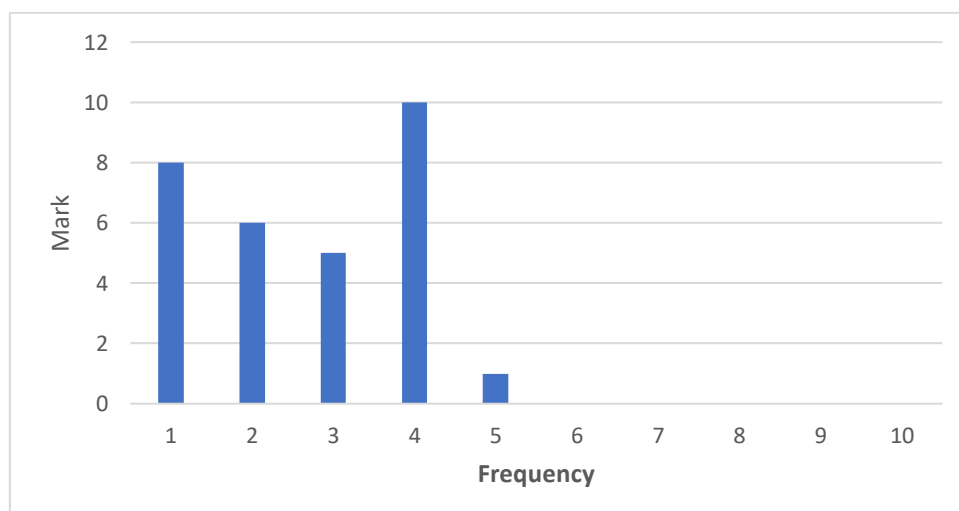


Figure 2: Pre-intervention Test Scores

$$\text{Mean 1} = \frac{\sum fx}{\sum f} = \frac{80}{30} = 2.6$$

Pupils performed poorly in the pre-intervention test. Figure 2 shows that the average score of 5 attracted only 3% of the pupils. Score 4 attracted 33%, score 3 17% score 2 20 % and score 27%. The result shows 97% of the pupils scored below the average mark. With the modal mark of 4 and a mean of 2.6, it can be deduced out rightly that the pupils' performance during the pre-intervention test was low.

3.3 Post-Intervention Test Result

Carefully designing and implementing these strategies to address the pupils' difficulty in understanding SVA concept went a long way to remedy the problem. Because the intervention was strategically implemented to allow pupils dictate the pace of their own learning by raising their awareness to demonstrate application of knowledge and understanding of SVA concept in subject analysis, pupils made informed decisions on working within the boundaries of the rules discussed.

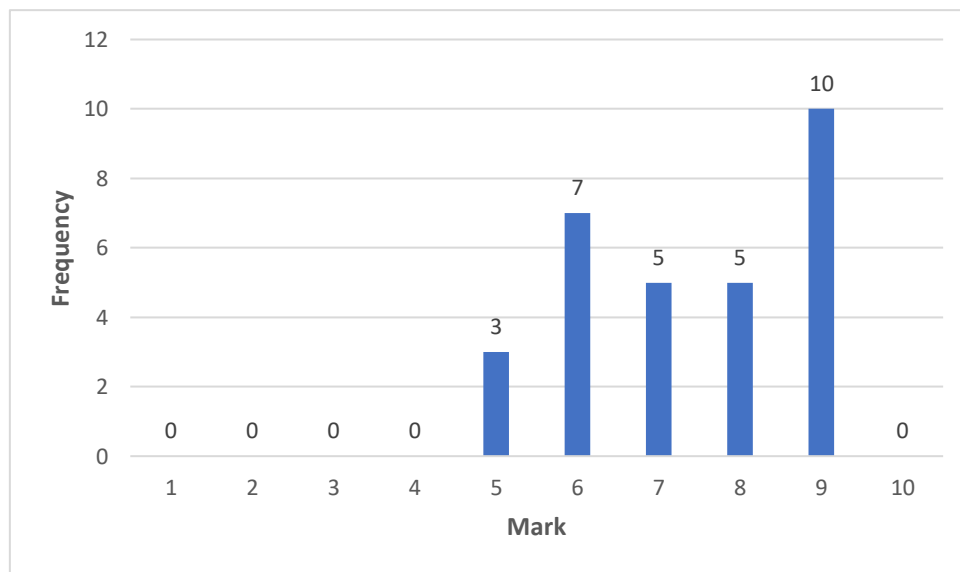


Figure 2: Post-intervention Test Scores

$$\text{Mean 2} = \frac{\sum fx}{\sum f} = \frac{222}{30} = 7.4$$

The percentage analysis on the table indicates a credibly upward performance. Score 5 attracted three pupils representing 10% while scores 6,7, and 8, indicating above average marks saw the following performance: 7 pupils representing 23% scored 6 marks, 5 pupils representing 17% scored 7 marks and 5 other pupils representing 17% scored 8 marks. Below average percentage at the pre-intervention stage fell from 97% to 0% at the post-intervention stage. A 97% upward improvement testifies to the effectiveness of the intervention strategies. The average score rose from 3% to 10% recording a 7% upward adjustment. Though not so remarkable, a difference of 2 pupils making a head way after

the intervention process is worth noting pedagogically. Excellent performance was catalogued with score 9 which became the modal score inviting 10 pupils representing 33% for the post intervention results. A rise of 33% from the pre-intervention results backed by a mean of 7.4, marking a 4.8 difference has all the proof to conclude that the implementation of the 3 weeks intervention was commendable.

4. Discussion

Employing consciousness-raising tasks leads to improved understanding of SVA. Analysis of the mean of the pre intervention-test (2.6) and the post-intervention test (7.4) confirmed that the mean for the post-test was higher than the mean of the pre-test. There was a difference of 4.8. The difference shows an obvious improvement in the pupils' performance after the intervention. The various activities used in the intervention led to the impressive improvement. This means that when visual teaching aids and observation methods are employed in teaching pupils understand well and performance improves.

Consciousness raising task is a technique that creates an active classroom encounter. By applying CR in lessons, pupils talk time and hands on activities are enhanced and the teacher only becomes a facilitator. The teacher allows the pupils to dictate the pace of their own learning by creating forums for debates, discussions, interactive learning and individual shower thoughts about a proposition. By using questions and activities to investigate misconceptions and consolidate learning, the pupils tend to learn better as they replace their wrong pre-conceptions with the right knowledge (Ford, 2012). This is seen in the result of the pre-intervention test and post-intervention test. It could be seen that in the pre- intervention test the pupils scored low marks, but the data in the post-intervention test portrays a different picture. This is as a result of making learning relaxed and fun through the use of CR tasks blended with group work and different aspects of talk for learning strategies which fortify pupil-pupil interaction and teacher-pupil communication through presentations and participatory feedback techniques. In the process, the students were allowed to discuss the issues presented to them, share with the entire class their thought on the issue before the teacher comes in to establish learning. The CR task offered the pupils the opportunity to think about the same concept at two different levels. First when the question or statement is given, the pupils share their view in their groups and then later the groups share their views to the whole class. In each of these levels, the pupils get the opportunity of comparing their wrong pre-conceptions to preconceptions of their peers and then when the activity is conducted, they get another opportunity to review their pre-conception and discard wrong pre-conception. This is what accounted for the performance observed in the post-test.

5. Conclusion

The findings showed that teachers' ineffective teaching methods and confusion towards SVA teaching, varied SVA rules and types, compulsion in rule application, rules not well explained and no motivation are the causes of pupils' difficulty in mastering SVA concept among the basic school pupils used for the study. The feedback collected from the pupils led to the conclusion that using consciousness-raising tasks will help to reduce or overcome the difficulty pupils have in understanding SVA concepts.

References

- Anderson, H. K., & Donkoh, K. E. (2016). Problems of Teaching and Learning in Basic Schools-The Case of Ewusa Demonstration Basic School, Ghana. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 3(4).
- Ellis, N. C. (2002). Frequency effects in language processing: A review with implications for theories of implicit and explicit language acquisition. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 24(2), 143-188.
- Ellis, R. (1993). Talking shop: Second language acquisition research: how does it help teachers?. *ELT journal*, 47(1), 3-11.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1990). *Instructed second language acquisition*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Fotos, S. (1993). Consciousness raising and noticing through focus on form: Grammar task performance versus formal instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 14, 385-407.
- Idek, S., Fong, L. L., & Sidhu, G. K. (2013). The Use of Consciousness-Raising Tasks in Learning and Teaching of Subject-Verb Agreement. *English Language Teaching*, 6(6), 113-122.
- Klu, E. K. (2014). An Analysis of Grammatical Concord in Selected Examination Scripts of Students of the Ghana Technology University College. *International Journal of Educational Sciences*, 7(3), 727-731.
- Long, M. H., Allen, W., Cyr, A., Lemelin, C., Ricard, E., Spada, N., & Vogel, P. (1980). *Reading English for academic study*. New York: Newbury House.
- Schmidt, R. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 11, 129-158.
- Svalberg, A. M. L. (2012). Language awareness in language learning and teaching: A research agenda. *Language Teaching*, 45(3), 376-388.
- Thornbury, S. (2009). *How to teach grammar?* Malaysia: Longman.
- Ting, S. H., Mahadhir, M., & Chang, S. L. (2010). Grammatical errors in spoken English of university students in oral communication course. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, 10(1).

- Ting, S. H., Mahadhir, M., & Chang, S. L. (2010). Grammatical errors in spoken English of university students in oral communication course. *Journal of Language Studies*, 10(1), 53-69.
- Wee, R. (2009). Source of errors: an interplay of interlingual influence and intralingual factors. *European Journal of Social Science*, 11(2), 349-359.
- Wee, R. Sim, J., & Jusoff, K. (2010). Verb-form errors in EAP writing. *Educational Research and Review*, 5(1), 16-23.

Creative Commons licensing terms

Author(s) will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions and conclusions of the author(s). Open Access Publishing Group and European Journal of Education Studies shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflicts of interest, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated into the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).