

Article

# Concord Errors in Academic Writing: A Study of First-Year Students at Offinso College of Education and Strategies for Improvement

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**Abstract:** This study examines concord errors in academic writing among first-year students at Offinso College of Education in Ghana, aiming to identify common errors and propose remedial strategies for improvement. The population sample consists of first-year students at the college, reflecting a gender-sensitive distribution. The study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses to explore the effects of concord errors on academic writing. Sampling techniques include purposive, quota sampling, and simple random sampling methods. Research instruments include questionnaires, interviews, and writing assessments to evaluate students' language skills. Data analysis involves identifying concord errors in students' writing and assessing the impact on their academic performance. The study concludes by recommending strategies to mitigate concord errors, such as targeted language practice, timely feedback, and awareness of grammatical conventions, to enhance students' writing proficiency and academic success.

**Keywords:** Concord errors, Academic writing, Remedial strategies, Language proficiency

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## 1. Introduction

English has become one of the most important languages in the world. It is the language of science, aviation, computers, diplomacy, and tourism. Knowing English increases one's chances of getting a good job in a multinational company within one's home country or finding work in Anglophone countries. It is also the language of international communication, the media and the internet. Learning English is important for socialization and entertainment, as well as work. English is the dominant business language. It has become almost necessary for people to speak English to enter the global workforce. Research from all over the world shows that cross-border business communication is most often conducted in English and many international companies expect employees to be fluent in English. On the internet, the majority of websites are written and created in English. Even sites in other languages often give one the option to translate what is posted on the site. It is the primary language of the press, more newspapers and books are written in English than in any other language, and no matter where in the world one may be one will find some of these books and newspapers available. Realizing the importance of English, many people have taken it as a second language.

In Ghana, more languages and dialects are spoken. In view of the linguistically associated problems, cultural differences and as a result of the country's colonial past, English has become Ghana's official language. It is used for all government affairs, large scale business transactions, and educational instructions and in national radio and television broadcast. In Ghanaian formal education, English language is the medium of

instruction from the basic level four to the University level and it has been accepted as a compulsory subject at the pre-tertiary levels. This means that before one can move from one level to the other, proficiency in English is required. English is, therefore, a major subject of study in all Ghanaian schools. The selection for placement from the basic level into the senior high level is based mainly on one's proficiencies and good scores in the English language. Since students at the colleges of education level began learning the basic language skills and rules of English language from basic level, it is assumed that they are equipped with the basics which must be improved upon to give them all the confidence that they need to communicate. All subjects are taught and written in English language with the exception of Ghanaian languages and French. It is therefore very essential for all students to master the English language and its rules because an excellent command and performance in the language opens a lot of avenues for people to communicate and interact with the world around them.

A lot of people have shown concern about the falling standard of education nowadays. The problem has been attributed to the poor teaching and learning of the English language in our schools since all subjects, except French and Ghanaian languages are taught in English. This has raised a lot of concern among language experts and other stakeholders in Education [1]. One major area which has contributed to the poor performance of students in English language is grammar in general and concord in particular. English grammar is how meanings are encoded into wordings in the English language. This includes the structure of words, phrases, clauses and sentences, right up to the structure of whole texts [2]. "Grammar is the structural foundation of our ability to express ourselves" [3]. According to him, the more we are aware of how it works, the more we can monitor the meaning and effectiveness of the way we and others use it. It can help foster precision, detect ambiguity and exploit the richness of expression available in English. It can help everyone, not only English teachers but teachers of all subjects, for the ultimate aim of teaching is a matter of getting to grips with meaning.

The ultimate aim of students trying to learn hard in school is to be able to acquire knowledge, write examinations, pass well and be able to go higher or get a good job to do in future. Because of these objectives at the back of their minds, they try as much as possible to learn hard to pass well, but no matter how hard they try some weaknesses continue to reoccur in their writing. The examination report for the July 2018 End of Second Semester Examination of the Colleges of Education compiled by the chief examiner for English Language exposed some of the candidates' weaknesses in the area of grammar. Candidates showed lack of understanding in the area of grammar topics such as direct and indirect speech, clauses and their functions and concord. The report also revealed that the concord errors of students were identified in both their essay or composition and grammar. Given the abysmal performance by a substantial number of the candidates in the grammar section, the chief examiner recommended that tutors of the English language should endeavour to take students through the various grammar topics in the syllabus and pay particular attention to their concord errors. The chief examiner further suggested that the habit of reading should be inculcated in the students in order to help them improve on their vocabulary acquisition and spelling. This is a very laudable suggestion because reading improves writing. It helps one to be able to communicate effectively. One can also acquire a lot of vocabulary to be able to write and speak well with the appropriate registers at all time.

The report again suggested that the teaching and learning of grammar should be intensified. Dictation and drills should be done regularly for students to be conversant with the language under study. The suggestion is also relevant since the problem of concord has been a phenomenon of learners of language at all levels, especially, the first-year students at Offinso College of Education. Teachers should use more interesting methods and strategies like drills, games, etc. that can generate students' interest in the learning process [4]. For students of Offinso College of Education to be able to overcome

their concord errors they should be exposed to the nature of concord, the rules, the errors students constantly make and the various strategies that can be used to help them overcome such problems. This will go a long way to build their confidence level in both their writing and speaking.

It has been observed by tutors at Offinso College of Education that, concord of all types has remained a very big problem with the first-year students. This problem was identified by the researcher as a result of an interaction with the students concerning both their written and oral communication. Concord errors have contributed largely to students' low performance in the English language [5]. This is because in Ghana, English language is learnt as a second language. Since students acquire this after the mother tongue, there are bound to be peculiarities in their level of usage. This is a consequence of two languages in contact [5].

The two languages, first Ghanaian and the second English exhibit a lot of structural differences. Consequently, most Ghanaian learners and users of English face a lot of challenges in the structural and functional aspects of the language. In the course of learning a second language, learners commit errors because learning a second language, and indeed a foreign one, is very daunting.

Again, although students make a lot of concord errors tutors of grammar always concentrate on only one aspect of concord which is a subject-verb agreement [5]. Other types like the notional concord, pronouns antecedent concord, subject-complement concord and concord by proximity have been neglected. In view of the above problems faced by the first-year students of Offinso College of Education, investigation would be made to identify the probable causes of concord errors among these students and also to adopt strategies which will help overcome the problem. The purpose of this study is to find out the causes of concord errors made by first-year students of Offinso College of Education and the nature, and type of errors that students make to help find solutions to these problems. The study will also guide tutors to select the appropriate strategies that can be used to help students overcome their concord problems. Finally, the study will create awareness of the seriousness of concord errors made by students. The study sought to answer these research questions. (1) What types of concord errors do students make? (2) What are the probable causes of concord errors of first-year students of Offinso College of Education? (3) How can the problem of concord errors of the first-year students of Offinso College of Education be overcome?

### ***1.1. The concept of concord***

According to Merriam-Webster, concord is a state in which the different parts of a sentence or phrase agree with each other. MacMillan English Dictionary defines concord as, "how words are used together correctly according to the rules of grammar" [6]. Another writer also defines grammar as "the body of rules that describe the structure of expression in the English language, this includes the structure of words, phrases, clauses and sentences. The rules of grammar are guidelines which attempt to help us write in such a way that we come close to a uniform way of communication. A verb may agree with the person, gender and number of some of its arguments, such as subject and object. Subject-verb agreement is, therefore, choosing the correct form of a verb to go with a given subject [3]. These examples show the concord of person between subject and verb:

*I am doing the work. (1<sup>st</sup> person singular concord)*

S V

*You are late to school. (2<sup>nd</sup> person concord)*

S V

*She dances Adowa. (3<sup>rd</sup> person)*

S V

*They are talking. (3<sup>rd</sup> person plural)*

S V

*I am talking*

S V

*You are eating.*

S V

*She is driving.*

S V

*They are here.*

S V

These sentences are correct because they follow certain grammatical rules. The notion **is** that a verb must agree in number with the subject [8]. Other writers add this to buttress the point that the present tense of the singular form of the verb usually ends in 's' or 'es'. This usually occurs with only the third-person singular [9]. For example,

*Mantebea washes her clothes every day (Singular)*

S V

*She dances adowa gracefully (Singular)*

S V

*They dance adowa gracefully (Plural)*

S V

Choosing the right verb to agree with the given subject (whether singular or plural) contributes to achieving meaningful construction of sentences and subsequently discourse. Concord termed as agreement and defined as the relationship between two grammatical units such that one of them displays a particular feature, for example, plurality [10]. A subject and its verb are the basic parts of a sentence. The subject and its verb must agree in number [7]. A singular noun in the third person takes the form of the verb that is singular." She goes on to explain that in the present tense, the singular form of the verb usually ends (in) 's' or 'es'. For example,

*The mountain rises sharply to the sky. (Singular)*

S V

*Naturalist teaches us about nature. (Singular)*

S V

*The mountains rise sharply to the sky. (Plural)*

S V

*Naturalists teach us about nature. (Plural)*

S V

Lester goes on to explain further that the irregular verbs 'be', 'do' and 'have' can be main verbs or helping verbs. They must agree with the subject, regardless of whether they are main verbs or helping verbs. For example,

- I am well. (main verb)
- I am cutting the tree. (helping verb)
- They are in the room. (main verb)
- They are questioning the stranger. (helping verb or auxiliary verb)
- He has a car. (main verb)
- He has bought a car. (Auxilliary verb)

Lester (1999) argues that in English grammar, concord goes beyond subject-verb agreement between words, gender, number, case or person. For example:

- Gender: The beauty Queen lost her crown.
- Number: The workers are too many.
- Person: I am a good Christian.

A writer agrees with the above authors on concord that the predicate or the verb must agree with the subject in number and person [11]. By number, he means the subject can be first, second or third person. A person can be seen as the relationship between the speaker and what he is speaking about. When he speaks about himself, it is the first person that is (I, me), that is the subject is 'I' and the object pronoun is (me). The person he speaks to is the second person which is the general meaning of (you), the things or person he is speaking about is the third person (she, he, it, they and them). A similar study agrees with the others by saying that Standard English requires that the verb agrees with the subject in number and person [12]. This means that a singular verb form and subject that are represented by words such as he, she, it and singular nouns agree with the verbs that add 'is' or 'es' in the simple present tense. The singular subject in the third person take(s) is, has, does, etc. The plural subjects plus first person singular (1) and second person singular (you) take (are, have, do, etc.) For example:

'is'

- She is a student.
- He is a man.
- It is late.

'are'

- You are students. (Plural)

- They are students. (Plural)
- You are a student. (Singular)

'has'

- He has a room here.
- She has a nice dress.

'have'

- I have a room here. (singular)
- You have a room here. (**singular/plural**)
- They have a room here.

'does'

- She does well in school.
- He does his work well.

'do'

- I do well.
- You do well.
- We do well
- They do well.

Thakur (2009) also sees concord from the point of view of numbers that the noun phrase operating as a subject complement agrees with the noun phrase operating as the subject of the clause. For example,

*Mansa was a hairdresser*

S        V        C

*Mansa employed some hairdressers*

S            V        O

Thakur explains that the importance of these syntactic features can be fully understood if we apply them to noun phrases operating as objects. For example:

*Mansa employed a hairdresser*

S        V        O

*Mansa employed some dressmakers*

S        V        O

It is evident from these examples that the number of a direct object is selected independently of the number of the subject noun phrases. In other words, whether the object noun phrase is singular or plural has nothing to do with whether the subject noun phrase of that clause is singular or plural. From the above discussion on what concord is, it is obvious that before one can construct a grammatical sentence, one needs to make

third-person singular subjects agree with verbs with 's' or 'es' and plural singular subjects pronouns agree with the verbs without 's' or 'es'. Students find subject-verb agreement none problematic when the subject is close to the verb. It is when the subject is far away from the verb that they sometimes commit a ghastly grammatical mistake. This is evident from sentences constructed by the students. Below are some of the wrong sentences from the students.

1. \*The man who came here with his friend **have** collapsed.
2. \*The manager and lover **were** here last week.

These errors were made by the students because they have memory limitation concord problems. This was due to the words that came between the subjects and the verbs. So instead of choosing singular verbs 'has' and 'was' to agree with the subjects, plural verbs 'have' and 'were' were chosen by the students.

### 1.1.2. Types of Concord and Principles Governing Their Usage

This section discusses the five main types of concord which often pose problem to both students and teachers as far as teaching and learning of English as a second language is concerned.

The five categories of concord in English are: Grammatical (subject-verb) concord; Notional concord; Proximity concord; Pronoun-Antecedent concord; and Sequence of tenses (verb - verb) concord.

#### *Grammatical Concord*

Quirk et al. (1990) state that, the most important type of concord is the English concord of 3<sup>rd</sup> person number between the subject and verb. For example:

1. The book is on the table. (Singular)
2. The books are on the table. (Plural)
3. My daughter watches television after supper. (singular)
4. My daughters watch television after supper. (Plural)

The number of noun phrases depends on the number of heads. For example:

1. The change in male attitudes is most obvious in industry.
2. The changes in male attitudes are obvious in industry.

The following are treated as singular concord.

1. A clause in the position of the subject counts as singular for concord.

*How you got there doesn't concern me. (Singular Concord)*

S   V   O

2. Nominal relative clauses, on the other hand, resemble noun phrases in this respect and may have plural as well as singular concord. For example,

*What was once a palace is now a pile of rubble. (Singular Concord)*

S   V

*What ideas he has are his wife's.*

S   V

An apparent exception to the concord rules arises with singular nouns ending with apparent plural 's' (measles, billiards, mathematics, etc.) or conversely plural nouns lacking the plural inflection like cattle, people, clergy, etc. For example,

*Measles is sometimes serious*

S V

*Our people are complaining.*

S V

1. Plural phrases (including coordinate phrases) count as singular if they are used as names, titles, quotations, etc. For example,

*'Lord of the Flies' is a good novel to read.*

*'In Your Presence' was written by a very good poet.*

2. Titles of some works that are collections of stories, etc. may be counted as either singular or plural. Example: Canterbury Tales exists in many manuscripts.

### **Notional concord**

Notional concord is the agreement of a verb with a subject according to the idea of a notion or number [7]. Collective nouns: A collective noun is a noun denoting a group or collection of similar individuals considered as one complete whole. It is, therefore, notionally regarded as being singular and as such takes a singular verb. For example,

- The committee is having a meeting.
- The committee consists of seven members.
- The audience is enjoying the show.
- The public is to be served.

Lester continues to say that when the parts or members that composed of the thing denoted by the collective nouns are thought of individually, a plural verb may be used. Example,

- The committee are finding it difficult to reach a decision.
- Her family are coming to dinner.
- The public are requested not to litter the street.

Grammatically, singular collective nouns are treated as notionally plural if the group is considered a collection of individuals [10]. For example,

- The government are doing their best to develop the rural areas.
- Everybody cast their vote on the Election Day.
- The audience were enjoying every minute of it.
- England have won the cup.

When the group is considered as a single undivided body, grammatically, singular collective nouns are generally treated as singular especially when they refer to government and sports teams.

Plural pronouns are often used to refer to singular collective nouns even when the verb is singular. For example: *The committee on the Asawase armed robbery issue has not yet decided on how to react to the findings.* Thakur agrees with the above assertion stating that when using collective nouns, the writer may either think of the group as a unit or

individual members of the group. The verb agrees with whichever of the two the speaker has in mind. Another rule of concord, it dictates that although nouns with plural forms but singular in meaning end in 's' they refer to a single thing or unit, therefore they should be treated as singular subjects to take the right form of the verb to agree with it. For example,

1. Economics is a very interesting subject to do.
2. Ten cedis is not enough for the meal.

Other nouns such as clothes, congratulations, pliers and scissors end in 's' and take the plural form of the verbs but they refer to one thing. For example, *the pair of scissors are floating in the atmosphere of the space capsule*. When you have a prepositional phrase following a singular subject, you should let the verb agree with the subject, not with nouns or pronouns in the phrase [12]. Example:

- One of the windows are open.

S V

- One of the wheels do not turn freely.

S V

### *Proximity concord*

The principle of proximity is an agreement of the verb with the noun closest to the verb [7]. For example,

- More than one person has refused.

S V

- No one except his supporters agree with him.

S V

- One in ten take drugs.

S V

This principle of proximity states that when there is a list of nouns or pronouns at the level of the subject, it is the nearest noun or pronoun to the position of the verb that will determine the choice of the verb [7]. For example: *If James fails his examination, his teacher, his parents, his friends or John (is/are) to be blamed*. The correct option to fill that blank is 'is' not 'are' because, at the subject level, we have his teachers, his friends, his parent and John (four different people). To choose the correct verb, we will need to choose the nearest subject to fill the gap as the subject, which is John.

Measures and partial numbers (fractions, percentages, decimals, etc.)

- Three milligrams of calcium nitrate was administered.
- Twenty-five percent of the crops was lost.
- Half of the sugar was wet.

The proximity principle may lead to plural concord even with indefinites such as each, every, everybody, and anybody [10]. For example:

- Nobody, not even the teachers were listening.



- Each of the customers had his deposit returned to him.

'his' and 'he' are pronouns in agreement with their antecedents (the subject)

- I invited **the students** and told **them** to play in the field.

'them' is a pronoun in the objective case. It agrees with its antecedent, 'the students', which is the object of the first clause

- Mensima quarreled with her husband

**Mensima** is a feminine subject in agreement with '**her**', a feminine pronoun.

### *Tense Concord Agreement*

English maintains the sequence of tenses: verb present – verb past within clauses in sentences [5]. For example:

- They often meet and discuss family matters. (Present)
- They often met and discussed family matters. (Past)

Independent clauses are not only in structure but in tense in complex sentences, it is expected that there is an agreement of tense that the tenses of a subordinate clause agree with that of the main clause [11]. The principle is also referred to as the principle of the sequence of tenses. For example:

- Mercy **confirmed** that she **was** sick
- Bea **said** she **needed** some time to think about the proposal.

### *Concord Errors*

There is no doubt that in the course of learning a second language, learners are bound to commit errors. This is a result of the fact that learning a second language and indeed a foreign one entails a lot of difficulties [14]. A writer stated that "Nobody learns a language without goofing, therefore, goofs should not be considered as linguistic sins to be condemned and punished." Nelson Brooks is quoted by a writer saying, "It is unrealistic to reckon on language learning without errors as a reckon on existence without sin" [5]. Another writer supports the above views that the most important reason is that error itself may be a necessary part of learning a language [3]. Errors are symptoms of deficiency in language use. Consequently, the user of that language may not have attained the level at which we could take his utterances to be close to the level of native speakers. A basic feature of such a user is his inability to make corrections to his errors even if he is given time to reexamine his utterance (Brown, 1999). Some errors are more serious than others. Both native speakers English can tolerate some but there are some errors like concord rule deviances which tend to elicit very unfavourable responses from both native and non-native speakers alike. Such errors reflect badly on the speaker's personality. They tell us something about their educational background. They portray their inter-language as a developing grammar which borders on illiteracy. The development of one's ability to express himself in a new language is one of the most interesting areas of human study. Teachers of language are therefore to be persuaded to treat learners' shortcomings more leniently and to help learners gain a sense of enjoyment and confidence in using the new language.

### *Sources of Concord Errors*

Errors that are persistent at all levels undoubtedly question the effectiveness of our English language teaching materials and strategies of the educational system. A writer indicates that, "Errors of agreement, tenses, and persons are made by both teachers and learners and this negatively affects the outcome of the student's linguistic competence."

It is, therefore, necessary for a teacher of the language, in the first place, to work on his language errors before trying to find out the errors that students usually make and then adopt strategies and methods that will guide him to help students overcome these errors [1]. To support this assertion, a writer postulates, "The teacher is the most useful teaching aid, an important agent and model in any language situation." It is, however, unfortunate that a teacher who has difficulty in speaking the language is not going to succeed in giving students a good command of the language [14]. From the above views, we can say that learners should be made aware of the errors that they make as far as concord is concerned to avoid the reoccurrence of the same errors. To be able to overcome the various types of concord errors, these errors have been identified and grouped as follows: omission of the 's' inflection, subject-verb concord errors, developmental errors, pronoun-antecedent concord errors, notional concord errors and proximity concord errors.

#### *Omission of the /-s / inflection.*

The omission of the inflection /-s / of the third person singular indicative is possible because all grammatical persons do not take an '-s' ending except the third person singular, the tendency is for the learner to drop this '-s' ending as a redundant feature. This error is committed by native English speakers as well as second-language learners [5].

#### *Subject-verb concord errors*

The basic rule of concord states that a singular subject in the third person must agree with a singular verb (with 's' inflection) and a plural subject should also agree with a plural verb (without the 's' inflection). A singular subject involves a single item or person, and a plural subject involves more than one item or person. Errors of subject-verb concord arise when the subject does not agree with the verb. These can be classified as learners' developmental errors.

#### *Developmental errors*

A writer argues that under developmental errors, errors are unavoidable and are typical of all second language learners. Even though most, if not all, of the learners know the guiding principles, they still commit errors. These rules for the formation of English subject-verb concord are taught in primary school throughout the various levels. So the only explanation one can give is that students who after all these years of formal education continue to commit such errors have not fully internalized the formation rules, which means the concord system has not registered in their memory with sufficient firmness [5]. Examples of the type of errors are:

- The student (attend/attends) a language class
- This course (have/has) taught me a lot.

The above errors are called developmental errors because they show that the student has not internalized the rules of subject-verb concord which state that a singular subject takes a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb. So the right sentence should be:

- The student attends a language class.
- This course has taught me a lot.

Since 'the student' and 'this course' are singular, the right verbs should be 'attends' and 'has'.

#### *Notional concord errors*

Another principle that comes into conflict with grammatical concord is the rule that states that singular subject takes singular verb in notional concord. For example,

- The committee is/are having a meeting
- The audience is/ are enjoying the show

Notional concord error occurs because the student conceives of committee and audience as collection of individuals and develops the notion of plurality rather than the grammatical singular subject, so instead of choosing the singular verb 'is', 'are' rather was chosen.

#### *Proximity concord errors*

The principle of proximity denotes agreement of the verb with a noun or pronoun that closely precedes it in preference to agreement with the head of the noun phrase [10]. Example:

- One in ten take/takes drugs
- More than one person have/has refused the offer.

The examples above are correct but the students were confused as to which of the two subjects in the sentences would determine that verb form. According to the principle of proximity the subjects that closely precede the verbs are 'ten' and 'person' and as such, that right verbs to choose are 'take' and 'has'.

#### *Pronoun antecedent concord errors*

Folini (2001) states that pronouns too must agree with the words they replace: their antecedent. Concord errors may occur when students refuse to select the right form of pronoun to agree with the subject noun head word preceding it. For example:

- She hurt herself.
- They did the work themselves.

### *1.2. Causes of Concord Errors*

Errors have come to be regarded as evidence of the learner's strategy and the route he follows when building up his competence in his mother tongue. There are bound to be peculiarities in all aspects of language learning. A writer identifies three major causes of concord errors. These include language transfer (intra-lingual errors and Interlingua errors) faulty teaching techniques and materials and the background of the learners [4].

#### *Inter Language Transfer Errors*

Language Transfer (inter-language) In this case, the learners' errors are traceable to the interference of the mother tongue in the second language. A similar study argues that it is committed by learners irrespective of their mother tongue [15]. The Inter-Language errors manifest themselves in the conversations and writings of the first-year students of Offinso College of Education. This is because the students are mostly Akan speakers of Twi. In the Twi dialect, there are no plural verbs; all the subject pronouns both singular and plural can go for any verb. For example:

<i>English</i>	<i>Twi</i>
• I eat	Medi
• You eat	Wodi
• He/ She eats	Ŋdi
• We eat	Yedi

Also, in Twi, when the subject precedes the verb directly, it is written together as one word unlike English language which separates the subject from the verb. English gives the chance for singular subjects to agree with singular verbs and plural subjects to agree with plural verbs, but Twi has no subject-verb agreement, all subjects can go with all the verbs. Again, in the simple present tense 's' and 'es' is added to the verbs in the third person singular. For example:

<i>English</i>	<i>Twi</i>
• Singular: She speaks English.	Ɔka Borɔfo
• Plural: They speak English	Wɔka Borɔfo

Errors are symptoms of deficiency in language use, consequently, the user of that language may not have attained the level at which we could take his utterances to be close to the level of native speakers. A basic feature of such a user is his inability to correct his errors even if he is given time to re-examine his utterance. It has been observed that most of the errors produced by the first-year students of Offinso College of Education can be regarded as evidence of their strategy as learners and the route they follow when building up their competence in the target language. Below are some of the errors found in students' sentences.

- a. Several things is being said about him.
- b. All the school's facilities was damaged.
- c. The manager have made a promise.
- d. I wishes to inform you of my intentions.
- e. Afia and Ama does not know what to do.

Examples a, b, and e above have plural subjects and they are supposed to take plural verbs but singular verbs were chosen for them. For example, 'c' has a third person singular and is supposed to take a singular verb, 'has', but 'have' was chosen. Example 'd' has first person singular, 'I', as the subject, therefore, there should not be inflection 'es' with the verb 'wish'. Most of the errors made by these students can be traced to the transfer of the features and interference of the mother tongue with the second language. The correct renditions of the above examples are:

- Several things are being said about him,
- All the school's facilities were damaged.
- The manager has made a promise
- I wish to inform you of my intentions
- Afia and Ama do not know what to do.

#### *Intra-Language errors*

A writer refers to the second group of errors as "intra-lingual errors". He says these errors do not necessarily show features of the mother tongue [4]. They result from the learning process itself. In this case, learners simply generalize the target language system based on the data they are exposed to. Since the data the learner is exposed to are limited, there is a tendency for them to over-generalize and produce utterances that are not correct [16].

#### *Teaching Techniques*

A teacher's role is related ultimately both to assumption about language and language learning at the level of approach. Some methods are dependent on the teacher as a catalyst, consultant, guide and model for learning [4]. Supporting the above assertion,

Richard postulates that the teacher is the most useful teaching aid, an important agent and a model in any language situation. It is however, unfortunate that a teacher who himself has difficulty in speaking the language is not going to succeed in giving students a good command of the language.

### *Home Background*

Richard again states that the home background of students could be another cause of grammatical errors [4]. Writers affirm that the decline in students' standard of speaking and writing the English language can be attributed to the background of the average learner. Also, the learner's immediate environment can contribute to their concord usage and errors. For example, learners who come from literate homes are likely to be exposed to a lot of teaching/learning materials, the internet, computers, home libraries, and television channels with lots of programmes that are beneficial to their learning [13]. Some errors like concord rule deviances tend to elicit very unfavourable response from both native and non-native speakers and hearers alike. Such errors reflect badly on the speaker's personality as they tell us something about his educational background [5]. They portray his interlanguage as a "developing grammar" that borders on illiteracy. This is because the noun-verb agreement concord for example is very basic in English sentences; it is therefore taught at a very early stage. So for this type of error to persist in the inter-language of the first-year students, then it should be of great concern to their English tutors. It is evident from the above discussions that different linguistic background of the learners hinders on their competence in grammar. But still, much blame has been on the teacher's choice of methodology and strategies that are not effective and which militate against students' competence and proficiency in the language. In a nutshell, it is very clear that the student's inability to perform well in grammar and concord is based on interference, the poor foundation of teachers and students, and home socio-economic background which includes the availability of books, internet, television, and other resources which aid learning. It is upon this that the study aims at finding the causes of concord errors of first year students of Offinso College of Education, and find ways and means of helping them to overcome this problem.

### *1.3. Strategies that can promote students' grammar skills and reduce concord errors*

According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, a strategy is a planned series of actions for achieving something [17]. Any discussion that borders on a methodology, that can help improve the skills of students means asking for what is the best way to teach grammar (concord) so that students can achieve a high level of proficiency in English language. When teachers attempt to improve the performance of learners in the language classroom, they focus more on what actually happens in the classroom — not just what happens to the plans they make. This means teachers need to focus on classroom activities and strategies that bring about effective language skill development. This can successfully be done by encouraging our students to use the language in all aspects of their communication. Before planning the organisation of our teaching, we need to be clear in our minds exactly what our subject matter is, what sorts of things are included under the heading 'grammar' and what is involved in knowing the structure. Ur continues by suggesting, "In any generalization about the 'best' way to teach grammar, what kinds of teaching procedure should be used, and in what order, we will have to take into account both the wide range of knowledge and skills that need to be taught, and the variety of different kinds of structures subsumed under the heading 'grammar' [18].

From the above points raised by the various authors, it is clear that language teachers should focus more on identifying diverse activities they can employ in the classroom, and help students develop their grammar skills rather than looking for a single method that

might make students confused or bored in solving their concord problems. Language experts are of the view that activities and strategies teachers adopt in their grammar classrooms to improve students' skills should be based on the level of the students and the purpose of the grammatical structure [5, 18]. A writer supports the idea of the above experts. He notes that in general terms, at the beginner level, we need to do quite a lot of structure and function teaching and practice and do less free communicative activity. The teaching of grammar at this stage is likely to be covert since the main aim is to get students to practice and use what they are taught as much as possible. As the students learn more, however, the balance would change and at the second cycle level, the students are expected to be involved in more communicative activities and would have less grammar teaching. At any level, it could also preview language that will later form the basis for grammar teaching [19]. Linguists focus on the mental system that allows human beings to form and interpret the words and sentences of their language [20]. This system is called grammar. A writer defines grammar as a systematic study of the scientific method which provides us information and guidance necessary to learn a language. The science of grammar teaches us how a language is spoken and written correctly and effectively, so it can be said that grammar is primarily concerned with the formation and classification of words and sentences and their practical significance in our daily life [21].

From the above definitions, it is clear that as far as English language is concerned, grammar has greater importance and significance in our practical life, but unless we have mastered it, we do not or we cannot speak or write English correctly. Besides, the English language is closely related and associated with grammar and so it is entirely based on grammar. Upon all the advantages and significance that grammar has acquired in English language, grammar does not easily lend itself to popularity among students and even teachers of English. This is mainly because, it is complex and difficult, and partly because it is not well taught. Traditionally, English grammar was viewed as a separate part of the educational experience, teachers helped students learn by requiring regular pattern practice skills and diagramming sentences. Memorization was a very key part of grammar instructions with frequent quizzes to test a student's mastery of grammar rule [22]. Today, grammar is viewed as an essential communicative tool. It is in this sense that pattern practice has now been replaced by a practical discussion of effective communication on how grammar is used in a particular piece of interaction. This calls for the Communicative Language Teaching approach to interact with other people, either singly, through pairs, and group work or in their writing. It is against the problems of learning grammar that a writer assesses that there is the need that grammar and, indeed, concord should be taught in innovative and interesting ways to get students involved to practice and internalize grammar and structure extensively [23]. This research work is a means of exploring what others have done on attempts to study activities and strategies that can be used in the language classroom to enhance learners' grammar (concord) skills.

## 2. Materials and methods

Descriptive Survey Research Design was employed in this study. The population for this study consists of all first-year students of Offinso College of Education in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Three hundred and fifty (350) first-year students were used for the study because the researcher teaches grammar in the first year and she identified the problem of concord errors during her interaction with some of them. The study adopted a quota sampling and a simple random sampling technique for the selection of the sample. A quota sample strives to represent significant characteristics of the wider population. For this study, fifty percent quota was given to the males and fifty percent to the females. A quota sampling seeks to give a proportional weighting to selected factors which reflect their weighting in which they can be found in the wider population.

The sample population of fifty students is made up 14.2% of the total population of the three hundred and fifty students. The fifty students were selected from the five first-

year classes. The classes have been labelled A, B, C, D, and E to correspond with the actual names of the classes as they exist in Offinso College of Education. Ten students were taken from each class. This is shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Students' Sample for the Study**

Students Sample	Men	Women	Total	Percentage
A	5	5	10	20
B	5	5	10	20
C	5	5	10	20
D	5	5	10	20
E	5	5	10	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100</b>

The main instrument for data collection was a test. This is because Henn, Weinstein and Foard (2006) contend that a test as a research instrument is the form of instrument that enables the researcher to interpret the numbers and give them a voice and also to make an explanation about the population in question. Tests also permit the researcher to make comparisons across studies and with different populations [24].

To find out students' grasp of concord, the researcher constructed a series of tests comprising the five types of concord and administered them to the sampled students. Permission to conduct the various tests was sought from the principal and the other tutors from the college. The tests were administered during break time over some time and under a conducive atmosphere and made the respondents feel comfortable and relaxed. The areas covered were the concord of subject-verb (grammatical concord), proximity concord, pronoun-antecedent concord, notional concord, and concord of tenses. The tests were marked and marks obtained were recorded. The average performance of students was very low as most of them scored low marks. A critical study of the answers given by students revealed that they did not understand the rules of concord. Because of that, they found it difficult to identify or differentiate one rule from the other. The areas they found to be problematic were:

- The ability to identify noun headwords - Students found it difficult to identify noun headwords in sentences of complex noun phrases. This was evident in the tests they took. They chose 'are' instead of 'is' in the following examples:
  - a. The owner of the books (is/are) Mr. Johnson.
  - b. The writer of the poems (is/are) David Diop.
- Students' problem over 's' inflection – Students were confused as they were taught that regular verbs form their plural by adding 's' or 'es' as do nouns. This was the result of generalization of the rule that makes nouns plural by adding 's' and 'es'. Most of them chose 'wants' and 'takes' in the following:
  - a. All students who (want/wants) to (take/takes) part in the exercise should register now.
- Proximity concord – It was realised that students were confused about choosing a verb to agree with a subject that is closer to it, instead of the head of the noun phrase. For example,
  - a. No one except his own relatives (agree/agrees) with him.
  - b. One in ten (drink/drinks) alcohol.
  - c. Neither the teacher nor the students (is/are) to be aware of the case.

- Nouns with 's' ending – Another problem that was identified was that students were confused and did not know that there were some exceptions to the rule with singular nouns ending with an apparent plural 's'. For example,
  - a. Measles (are/is) sometimes serious.
  - b. Mathematics (are/is) a very difficult subject for some people.

They mistook the 's' ending for plural.

- Inability to identify subjects followed by parenthetical expressions – Students were not able to identify subjects followed by parenthetical expressions, e.g. along with, as well as, as long as, together with, etc. A lot of the students chose plural verbs instead of singular verbs to agree with the subjects, e.g.

The head together with his staff (is/are) visiting the friend from Paris.

- Notional concord problem – Students had problems with notional concord. They did not know that notional concord is an agreement according to the idea of the number instead of a grammatical marker for the idea, e.g. the society at large (hold/holds) university students in high esteem. They thought society is made up of many people, so they chose the plural verb instead of the singular verb as the answer.
- Tense agreement concord problem – Some students had problem choosing the right tense of the verb in the subordinate to agree with the subject in the main clause, e.g. She came here this morning and (sit/sat) for about 30 minutes. The tests were marked and marks obtained were recorded.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the analysis of data collected and findings made from the analysis of data collected from the tests administered during the research process. The results have also been analysed in line with the research instrument as well as the research questions. The research questions served as a guide during the analysis. The data gathered through the test was analysed using tables, percentages and descriptions.

**Table 2. Gender of Students**

Gender	Number of students	Percentage%
Male	25	50
Female	25	50
Total	50	100

Table 2 shows the gender of the fifty students used for the research. According to the table, twenty-five students (25) representing fifty percent (50%) of the students are male and twenty-five (25) students representing fifty percent (50%) are also female. The reason why the researcher chose equal number of males to females is that the total population of students in the college consists of equal number of men and women.

#### 3.1. Types of Concord Errors Students Make

This section presents data analysis on the research question - *What types of concord errors do students make?* Table 3 represents the performance of students on the test items that were administered to them. The items were based on all the types of concord. The table indicates how students performed in each of the concords they answered items on.

**Table 3. Types of Concord Errors**

Types of Concord Errors	Scores	Percentage
Subject-Verb	14	28
Notional	35	70
Proximity	42	84
Parenthetical Expression	27	54
Pronoun Antecedent	12	24
Tense Agreement	19.5	39
Developmental	19	38
's' Inflexion	28.5	57

Table 3 above reveals that the minority of the students, that is 14 students representing 28% of the participants only, were not able to get the answer right, showing that they are not conversant with Subject-Verb Agreement. Despite the success of the majority of the participants (72%), there is still the problem of the other 28% who lack knowledge of how the Subject-Verb Agreement works.

For Notional Concord, 35 students representing 70% were not able to select the right verb to agree with the given subject. For example, they chose 'consist of' instead of 'consists of' to agree with the subject 'committee', 'are' to agree with the subject 'committee' instead of 'is', 'are' to agree with the subject 'audience' instead of 'is', and 'are' to agree with the subject 'public' instead of 'is'. Students are making these errors because of the notion of a plurality of committee, audience, and public. Notional concord is the agreement of a verb with a subject according to the idea of a notion or number [7]. Collective nouns are nouns denoting a group or collection of similar individuals considered as one complete whole. They are therefore notionally regarded as being singular and as such it takes singular verbs. It was realized that some students were confused about choosing a verb to agree with a subject that is closer to it, instead of the head of the noun phrase. This is about Proximity Concord which states that the verb should agree with the noun which is closer to the verb if there is more than one. According to the table, 42 students representing 84% got the answer wrong because they chose the wrong options. They chose 'have' instead of 'has' to agree with the subject 'One person'; 'agrees' instead of 'agree' to go with the subject 'his supporters'; and 'takes' instead of 'take' to agree with the subject 'One in ten.' So, they applied their knowledge on the concord rule that states that plural subject takes plural verb and singular subject takes singular verbs. They failed to apply the idea of proximity. Several factors could have resulted in most participants picking out the incorrect verbs. For example, they considered the nouns that were at the beginning of the sentences instead of those closer to the verbs in the sentences. This agrees with a writer that the principle of proximity is an agreement of the verb with the noun closest to the verb [7].

For the items on the identification of subjects followed by parenthetical expressions 27 students (54%) provided the wrong answers. They selected 'are' instead of 'is' to agree with the subject 'The headmaster as well as his vice'; 'have' to agree with the given subject 'The headmasters as well as their deputies'. This shows that 46% were able to identify subjects followed by parenthetical expressions. A lot of the students chose the plural verb and therefore got the wrong answers. Selecting the right form of pronoun to agree with the subject noun head word preceding it points to a good grasp of the concept of concord and its rules. The table shows students' performance on items based on the Pronoun Antecedent Concord. It can be seen that 12 students representing 24% of the participants did not know the correct pronouns and their antecedents form to complete the sentences while 76% were the ones that knew the answers for the items. Concord errors may occur when students refuse to select the right form of pronoun to agree with the subject noun

head word preceding it. A writer states that pronouns too must agree with the words they replace, thus their antecedents [25]. A pronoun is a word used in place of a noun [13]. The agreement between a pronoun and its antecedent is co-reference rather than grammatical concord. The reflexive pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number, person and gender. Some students displayed weakness in choosing the right tense of the verb in the subordinate clause to agree with the subject in the main clause. According to Table 3 above, an average of 19.5 students representing 39% of respondents got the answer wrong. The table indicates that the majority of the participants (61%) chose the correct answer to the items. A writer confirms that independent clauses are not only in structure but also in tense in complex sentences [11]. It is expected that there is an agreement of tense that the tenses of a subordinate clause agree with that of the main clause. The principle is also referred to as the principle of a sequence of tenses.

Table 3 also shows students' performance on Developmental Errors. According to the table, 19 students representing 38% provided the wrong answers to the items on Developmental Errors. It shows that they have not internalized the rules of subject-verb concord which state that a singular subject takes a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb. The subjects 'The student' and 'This course' in the given items are singular so students were expected to choose the right verbs 'attends' and 'has' to agree with the subjects in the third person singular. Here, a writer argues that developmental errors are unavoidable and are typical of all second language learners [5]. Even though most, if not all, of the learners know the guiding principles, they still commit errors. The rules for the formation of English subject-verb concord are taught from primary school throughout the various levels. So, the only explanation one can give is that students who after all these years of formal education continue to commit such errors have not fully internalized the formation rules, which means the concord system has not registered in their memory with sufficient firmness. About 28.5 of students (57%) had problems with inflection. They were confused as they thought that regular verbs form their plural by adding 's' or 'es' so do nouns. The remaining 43% showed an understanding by choosing the correct answer. The majority of the participants displayed ignorance in this area, their level of understanding revealed that they misunderstood the 's' inflection to be a plural marker thereby choosing the plural verb to agree with the given subject. All the expressions that indicate quantity or amount are to be considered as a unit and this requires a singular verb. Their confusion was also because some of the subjects in the items had 's' endings. The 's' which ends the subject 'economics' which is the 's' inflection could have misinformed the participants to be plural resulting in the wrong verb choice. Their ignorance could be linked to the perception that an amount is not always presented as a single note, this is because of fossilisation. The inclusion of 'ten thousand' in the sentence, which on its own implies many, could have been the bedrock of the wrong answer. The focus could have been on every single Cedi added together until they make 'ten thousand Cedis' which expresses a large sum of money which could never be seen as singular. The conclusion then could have been that the sentences expressed plural meaning to them.

### **3.2. Probable causes of students' concord errors**

This section also presents data analysis on the research question - *What are the probable causes of concord errors among first-year students of Offinso College of Education?* Students' responses to the items on Concord that were included in the test indicate that the challenges students face with Concord stem from their lack of knowledge about Concord. Also, most of the students perceived principles governing concord rules as many and difficult to understand. They sometimes became confused as to which rule to use or apply. This might be due to the absence of a reading habit among students. The more one reads the better he becomes in the knowledge and use of the rules of grammar. The absence of novels and other supplementary reading materials in the college's library did not

motivate students to read. Then also if tutors do not adopt the right pedagogical strategies to the teaching of grammar in general and concord in particular, students would continue to face difficulties in their English language studies and in their communication. Moreover, the study revealed that most students displayed a weak foundation base in Concord, maybe because teachers at the basic and senior high school levels either did not spend enough time on grammar or did not teach all the types of concord. They, therefore, had problems when they were introduced to the different types that they were not familiar with like verb-verb concord, pronoun antecedent concord, etc.

### ***3.3. How the Problem of Concord Errors of First-Year Students of Offinso College of Education be overcome***

**This section presents data analysis on the research question - How can the problem of concord errors of first-year students of Offinso College of Education be overcome?** It was revealed from the students' responses in the test and the literature that knowing the types of concord and concord errors students normally make, and being conversant with the various concord rules go a long way in minimising concord errors. Again, involving students in the teaching and learning of grammar (concord) and providing reading materials to students to study both in school and at home and using the appropriate and professional error correction methods can also help in improving students' concord errors. Then effective strategies like using language games, dialogue, discussion and other interesting methods can help students overcome their concord problems.

## **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

The study identifies concord errors as a significant challenge affecting the writing proficiency of first-year students at Offinso College of Education. Concord errors, which involve agreement between different parts of a sentence, were found to be prevalent in the students' academic writing. The study also indicates that Concord errors can hinder effective communication and impact written work quality. Common concord errors observed among the students include subject-verb agreement issues, pronoun-antecedent agreement errors, and agreement between articles and nouns. The study reveals the need for targeted interventions to address concord errors and enhance the writing skills of the first-year students. Understanding the types and causes of concord errors is essential for implementing effective remedial strategies. It is recommended to tutors to implement targeted language proficiency programs that specifically address concord errors. These programs can include workshops, tutorials, and practice exercises tailored to improve students' understanding of concord rules. It is also recommended that descriptive feedback should be given to learners on written assignments to help students identify and correct concord errors. Timely feedback is crucial in reinforcing learning and guiding students towards improvement. It also recommended that incorporating concord exercises and drills into the curriculum to reinforce proper agreement rules. Regular practice can help students internalise correct concord usage and reduce errors in their writing.

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