The English Article Errors Encountered by Arabic EFL Undergraduate Students in the Writing Skill

Kesavan Vadakalur Elumalai.

College of Arts, King Saud University

Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

E-mail: ekesavan@ksu.edu.sa

Abstract

The research aims at English articles errors encountered by Arabic students in the English language classroom in writing. The study was analyzed in use of English articles (definite & indefinite) in the participant's writing skill. It also describes the types and sources of definite and indefinite article errors while writing. The Data were collected from 40 EFL students from College of Arts, King Saud University, and Riyadh. Who learn English language at least a minimum of 8 years .They were assigned to write different title of a short composition passage of approximately 100 words in one-and-a-half hours per week. Errors were identified during analysis of 'Omission of Articles', 'Omission of indefinite Articles' , 'Wrong insertion of Articles', and 'Confusion of Articles' .And the observation revealed frequency of removing both the indefinite articles and the definite article was higher than the occurrence of inserting and substituting one article with the other. This study also proofs that errors of using 'a' much common than errors of using 'an' and 'the' in writing the story.

Keywords: Arabic EFL learners, Omission of articles, Error analysis, Insertion, Substitute

1. Introduction

One of the most difficult writing elements in second language learners is accuracy of writing the English article (definite & indefinite). The articles, *a (n), zero*, and *the,* are quite hard to learn and the one of most complex problems faced by a nonnative speaker is when to use *a* (or *an*), *the*, or *0 (zero* or *no)* article at the beginning of a noun phrase. In English language the article writing rules is a marker of definiteness. Lyons (1999), states that definiteness is not a semantic notion but a grammaticalization of the semantic /pragmatic notion of

identifiability: a marker of definiteness, such as a definite article, "directs the listener to the referent of the noun phrase by indicating that he is in a location to identify it" (pp. 5-6).

Many researchers have agreed that article usage is an area of grammar that shows "considerable prominence in any error analysis" (Oller & Redding, 1971, p.85). Articles are believed to be a source of difficulty for learners and teachers of English as a second/foreign language, especially for those whose native languages do not have articles or do have articles or article-like morphemes which are used in ways that differ from English articles (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Errors in articles use does not interfere with the meaning of an utterance and the indefinite and definite article are sometimes interchangeable.

These errors are often dismissed as 'little words' and receive relatively 'little' attention. In the written productions, an incorrect or improper use of it may affect communication negatively (e.g. little, a little). If the learner wants to give a professional touch to his writing, a little attention should be given to the use of articles as it establishes cohesion in an essay. The definite article 'the' generally does that function. Therefore it is expected from the ESL learners to have ability in practice of the English articles. The misuse or nonuse of English articles is considering one of the most frequent errors in the students' writing. Bataineh observes that English articles are difficult to learn (2005, p.56) and are hard to hear. This difficulty can be attributed to four kinds of principle facts are found about the article system: (a) it is the system of the most frequently functioning words in English language; (b) it makes continuous rule application which is difficult over an extended stretch of discourse; (c) the functional words are unstressed (d) the article system piles multiple functions onto a single morpheme (Master 2002).

2. Literature Review

In reviewing of the literature, we identify that there is a shortage of studies that focused on the study of article errors encountered by Arabic-speaking EFL students. Searching the studies on this basis articles provoke the researcher to examine Arab students' misplace of the usage of articles in writing compositions.

Alhaysony (2012) examined the types of errors encountered by 100 Saudi Female first-year EFL students on writing compositions. The results reveled that ellipsis of 'the' article surfaced more often errors than substitution of the errors in use. Al- Mohanna (2014) studied that EFL students in Saudi university's compositions were established the types of the article errors on writing.

Tawalbeh (2013) tested a gap-fill test and a translation test to investigate the influence of informal Jordanian Arabic on the use of negation and definite articles in English. The total numbers of 200 Jordanian (100 male and 100 female) participants were randomly selected from public schools in the Karak region -Jordan.

Researchers contributes the errors in the use of articles to learners' insufficient learning methods, such as overgeneralization and simplification (Bataineh, 2005, p.17) and learners' inadequate practice and inability to grasp the article system which leads to false analogy and over application (Kamala, 1992, p.148). "The correct use of the articles (*a, an* and *the*) is one

of the most difficult points in English grammar" (Swan 1995, p. 54). Swan observes that most of the Languages of Western European origin have article systems like English and if a L2 learner already speaks one of these languages, perfectly or very well, (French, German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Romanian…); the learners would understand the English article system. On the other hand, if the learner does not already have a very good knowledge of one of these languages, he or she may have more difficulty with the correct use of articles (p. 55). Master observes while examining the complexity of the article system and the challenges involved in leaning that "… researchers consider the article system to be un-learnable and therefore un-teachable, because it can only be acquired through natural exposure to the language" (1994, p.229).

Oller & Redding identified that English article errors reduces as proficiency rises, even for participants whose First Language does not possess formal equivalents of the articles. The current study finds that the learners continue to meet errors in the use of English articles despite their exposure to reading and instruction. The absence of article in L1 corresponding to English articles struggles these Arabic speaking learners' to recognize the underlying rules and conventions. Berry (1991), after investigating the present approaches in some grammar-cum-practice sources, catches that they "are not yet well in the matter of teaching articles" and identifies such books with the incorrect or misleading formulation; undeserved emphasis on certain usage of forms and lack of variety in formats may also cause difficult for the learners to master article system in English (cited in Thu, 2005, p.138).

Researchers like Berry proposed seven principles in designing materials for teaching the articles, which can be condensed into three main points: (1) use a principled descriptive account; (2) make exercises / activities varied in terms of production, comprehension and perception, and (3) apply some principles of presentation methodology (e.g. simplicity, appropriateness) . Master (1990) introduces a binary system for teaching articles in which article use is reduced to a meaning contrast between "identification" (marked by *the*) and "classification" (marked by *a(an)/zero)*. The binary system is an effort to manipulate various descriptions by simplifying them with attention to the principle of *one form* for *one function* (Bolinger, 1977). Master attest significant improvement in learners' use of articles and wonders the improvement may be due to "the focusing of students' attention on the need for articles in English rather than from any explicit method for choosing the articles in English rather form any explicit method for choosing their article correctly" (1990, p.465). Master contends that ignoring the article is irresponsible and L2 teachers should provide their learners with better means of using the articles appropriately, especially when it comes to academic writing that is to be graded in part for grammatical accuracy (2002, p. 335).

3. Methods

This study focused on English articles errors encountered by Saudi EFL students studying English at the undergraduate level. The following methods were processed to analyze the data:

➢ Identifying the 'ellipses, 'Wrong insertion', 'Confusion' in the use of articles. This study was conducted by a comprehensive analysis of participants writing a short sentences as well as comprehension passeges.

➢ Categorizing and analyzing of the errors in the articles they use in the story writing.

➢ Counting the number of times they encountered the misuse of articles and the sources.

A total number of 40 male students were studying English at King Saud university, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia participated to this study. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 22 years, with a mean of 20 years. The researcher selected students randomly from three different levels according to their performance in the writing test. These participants might be studied English language for at least four years in the intermediate and higher secondary schools respectively before they took the Preparatory program. During the semester it leads fifteen-week course at each level, they get adequate chances to learn the language skills reading, writing, speaking, listening and also grammar skills from native and non-native English speaking teachers.

The researcher directed the participants to write a short composition passage of approximately 100 words of the followings topics:

➢ My favorite actor

➢ I love my country

➢ The most influenced person in my life.

➢ My summer holiday with family.

The composition writing was decided as it deemed appropriate because when writing, students must consider pragmatic, syntactic, and semantic constraints when determining the correct article to use.

3.1 Article Analysis

McEldowney (1977) records a great resemblance in article errors in the English of Arabs, Asians, Europeans and South Americans with vastly different language backgrounds and express that the same styles of error continue in the English among school children, college and university students, English teachers, scientists and other form of learners. .

These errors centralize around three main areas:

1. Omission of *a (n)/the/-s*

2. Wrong insertion of *a (n)/the/-s*

3. Confusion of *a (n)/the/-s*

This study has chosen to employ this category for investigating the errors in the use of articles, since such classification throws better insight into the specific environment where the L2 learners face problems (Thu, 2005, p. 93).

3.2 Ellipsis of Articles

Omission of articles errors refer to the absence of the articles (zero articles). Bataineh observes that the L2 learners inclined to commit omission or deletion of articles due to native language transfer and simplification (2005, p. 66). The L 2 learners' inadequate knowledge of the forms of the English language tends to apply the equivalent native language structure on English. The following examples emphasize the learners' incompleteness in the use of articles:

Figure 1. Ellipsis of articles

➢ Abdullah is ( ) nice man in ( ) village. (a nice , a village)

➢ Salah is in ( ) difficult situation to drive car because in ( ) lazy mood. (*a* difficult ,a lazy)

➢ Ahmad plays football in ( ) evening. (the evening)

➢ Mohammed eats orange in morning (an orange , the morning)

(a nice , a village ,a difficult a lazy, the evening , an orange, the morning.)

Learners' deviation from the rules of the target language can be attributed as one of the reasons for such omission of articles. Bataineh observes many learners delete the indefinite article *a (n)* the use of which is obligatory to some of the singular countable nouns such as campus, language, and accident (2005, p.11). The basic difference between structures of English and Arabic languages results in the production of ungrammatical sentence. Arabic language has a distinct marker for indefiniteness *the*. Some of the South Asian languages, such as Hindi, Punjabi and Gujarati do not have an equivalent of *the*.

3.3 Omission of Indefinite Articles

The ignorance in the use of indefinite articles has adversely influences the learners to delete or omit indefinite articles in the writings. Such writings confuse the reader in the process of decoding the message. Often these incorrect grammatical structures end in the wrongs meaning. The present corpus of errors indicates omission of indefinite article. A few examples can be noted for discussion

➢ It was ( ) different experience (a).

➢ He was ( ) lazy man (a).

➢ Australia lost the match for ( ) few runs (a).

Kamala (1992, p. 143) observes that the main reason for the omission of articles to 1) Inadequate understanding of the Article rules; 2) Insufficient practice; and 3) Direct influence of the mother tongue in which the article system does not exist. Students' insufficient understanding of article, over simplification of grammar books and lack of experience in using articles can be cited as other factors causing erroneous articles.

3.4 Wrong Insertion of Articles

Wrong insertion of articles errors refers to the use of 'unnecessary insertion' of article in the writings. A few instances from the learners' writings indicate the definite article being used unnecessarily.
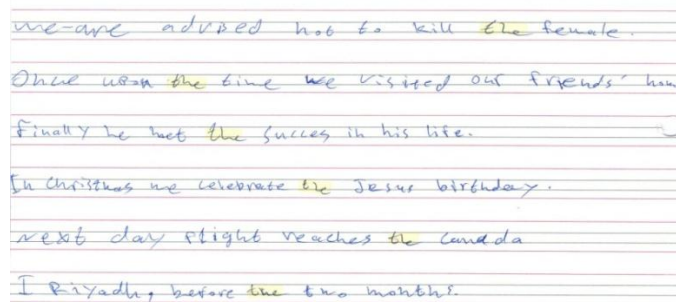

Figure 2. Wrong insertion of articles

➢ We are advised not to kill the female.

➢ Once upon the time we visited our friends' home.

➢ Finally he met the success in his life.

➢ In Christmas we celebrate the Jesus birthday.

➢ Next day flight reaches the Canada.

➢ In Riyadh, before the two months.

It is noticed from the present corpus that the learners commit errors in the use of indefinite article
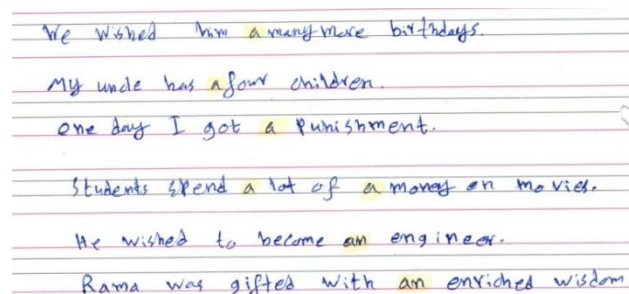

Figure 3. Errors in the use of indefinite article

➢ We wished him a many more birthdays.

➢ My uncle has a four children.

> ➢ One day I got a punishment.

> ➢ Students spend lot of a money on movies.

> ➢ He wished to become an Engineer.

> ➢ Raman was gifted with an enriched wisdom.

3.5 Confusion of Articles

Confusion type of errors refers to situation in which the learners are confused about the use of articles in certain context. Learners tempt to apply the rules of articles where they are not applicable. Such errors in the writings can be noticed when they use *a* in place of *the*, and *the* instead of *a/an*. It is found that the learners commit confusion of article error in the present corpus:
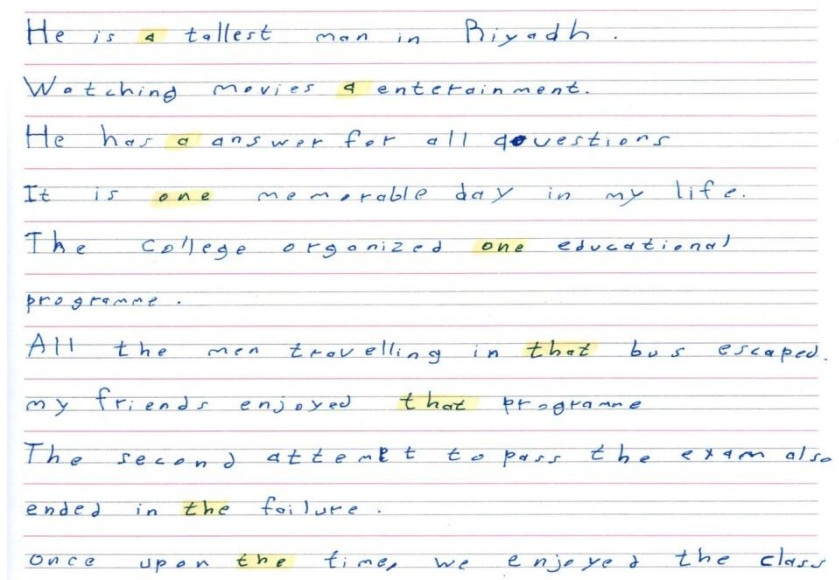

Figure 4. Confusion of articles

  i.   He is a tallest man in Riyadh (the).

 ii.   Watching movies a entertainment (an).

iii.   He has a answer for all questions (an)

 iv.   It is one memorable day in my life (a).

  v.   The college organized one educational programme (an).

 vi.   All the men travelling in that bus escaped (the).

vii.   My friends enjoyed that programme (the).

viii.   The second attempt to pass the exam also ended in the failure (a).

ix. Once upon the time, we enjoyed the class (a).

Table 1. Article errors occurred in writing compositions

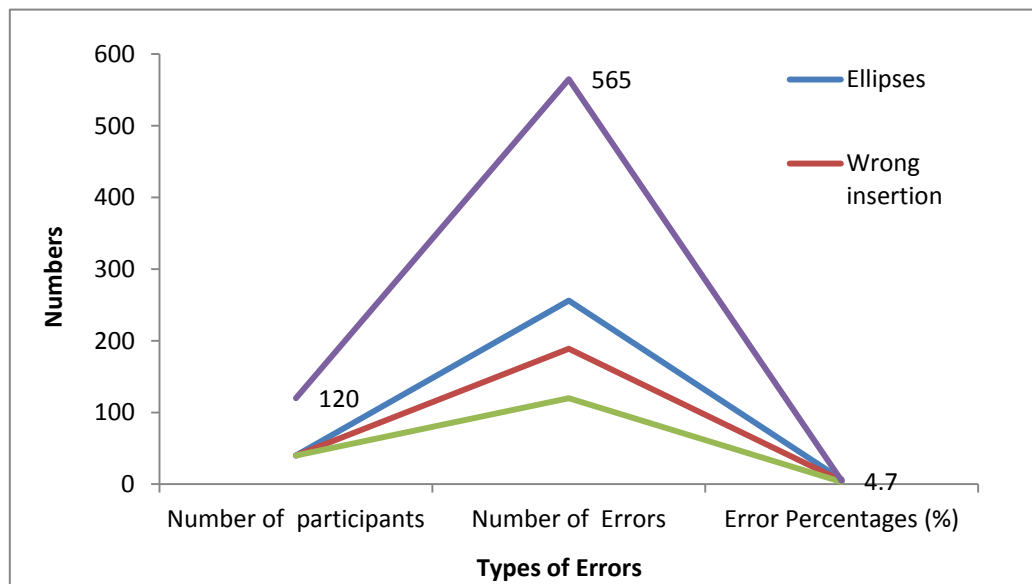| Sl. No.	Types of Errors	Number of participants	Number of Errors	Error Percentages (%)
1	Ellipses	40	256	6.4
2	Wrong insertion	40	189	4.7
3	Confusion	40	120	3.0
Total		120	565	4.7

Figure 5. Article errors occurred in writing compositions

The report findings on participant's performance in three tests taken in the classroom analyzed. The percentage of overall use of Ellipsis article in the blank test and in cloze test is 6.4%. The percentage of overall use of wrong insertion article in both fill in the blank test and in cloze test is 4.7%. And the percentage of overall use of Confusion article in both fill in the blank test and in cloze test is 3% .The overall occurs of errors in writing is 4.7%. This shows that errors in article minimize the students enough exposure in writing skills.

4. Conclusion

The correct use of the English articles (*a, an* and *the*) is one of the most difficult challenges for EFL learner in English writing. And the learners' insufficient practice and inability in use of the English article system leads to false analogy. The above study examines the impact of a particular learning pathway by providing students with opportunities to work on different

writing tasks with parallel themes besides the regular class hours, and providing feedback on the same. The study has administered forty undergraduate EFL students from College of Arts, King Saud University, Riyadh and they were tested on writing different short composition passage of approximately 100 words in one lecture hour per week. And this study has implications for undergraduate EFL students and a better understanding of their learning needs and addressing them early would result in better learning and educational outcomes of English article writing. This study is also primarily intended to help teachers of EFL students to understand the importance of English articles in writing skill. Using correct articles in writing skill encourages learning environment, and at the same time, gives visibility to the teaching that happens in the EFL classroom.

Acknowledgements

References

Alhaysony, M. (2012). An analysis of article errors among Saudi Female EFL students: A case study. *Asian Social Science, 8*(12), 55-66. https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v8n12p55

Al-Mohanna, A. D. (2014). Errors in the usage of the English definite/indefinite articles among Saudi university - level students. *International Journal of Arts and Sciences, 7*(3), 79-95.

Batanieh, R. F. (2005). Jordanian Undergraduate EFL Students' Errors in the use of the Indefinite and Articles. *Asian EFL Journal, 7*, 56-76

Berry, R. (1991). Re-articulating the articles. London: British Council. *ELT Journal, 45*(1), 252-259. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/45.3.252

Berry, R. (1993). *Collins COBUILD English Guides (3): Articles*. London: Harper Collins Publishers.

Bolinger, D. (1975). A postscript to Postal on the article. *Modern Language Journal, 59*(4), 181-5. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1975.tb06294.x

Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1999). *The Grammar Book: An ELS Teacher's Course.* Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Kalama, A. S. (1992). A Fresh Look at Errors in English. New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company. *Learning, 21*(1), 85-95.

Lyons, C. (1999). *Definiteness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511605789

Master, P. (1990). Teaching the English articles as a binary system. *TESOL Quarterly, 24*(3), 461-78. https://doi.org/10.2307/3587230

Master, P. (1994). The effect of systematic instruction on learning the English article system. In T. Odlin (Ed.), *Perspectives on Pedagogical Grammar* (pp. 229-252). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524605.011

Master, P. (2002). Information structure and English article pedagogy. *System, 30*, 331-348. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0346-251X(02)00018-0

McEldowney, P. L. (1977). A Teaching Grammar of the English Article System. *International Review of Applied Linguitics, 15*(2), 95-112. https://doi.org/10.1515/iral.1977.15.1-4.95

Oller, J. W. J., & Redding, E. Z. (1971). Article Usage and other Language Skills. *Language.*

Swan, M. (1995). *Practical English usage* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-1770.1971.tb00492.x

Tawalbeh, I. Z. (2013). The effect of colloquial Jordanian Arabic on learning the English definite article and negation. *English Language Teaching, 6*(8), 95. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v6n8p95

Thu, H. N. (2005) *Vietnamese Learners Mastering English Articles*. Retrieved 13th January 2014 from dissertations.ub.rug.nl

Copyrights