

The Role of Transfer in the Use of English Articles by Moroccan Learners

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Received: August 7, 2016 Accepted: August 13, 2016 Published: September 30, 2016

doi:10.5296/ijl.v8i5.9855 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v8i5.9855>

Abstract

This study investigates the acquisition of the English article system by Moroccan EFL learners. More specifically, the focus is on transfer and the extent to which it accounts for errors in the use of these articles by Moroccan university students. The study purports to investigate: 1- the effect of proficiency level on transfer errors by Moroccan learners in the use of articles, 2- the difference between transfer errors made in comprehension and in production in using articles and 3- the difference in transfer errors according to the three English articles. In order to answer the aforementioned questions, data was collected from university students (40 in first year and 40 in third year) through their performance on a grammaticality judgment test and an essay. The findings of the study show that: 1- proficiency level has an effect on transfer errors made in article usage. This effect is clear in comprehension but not in production, 2- subjects made more transfer errors in comprehension than in production, 3- the effect of transfer differs according to the three English articles. The findings of the study have some important implications for the methodology of teaching articles.

Keywords: Articles, Transfer, Second language acquisition, Error analysis, Error attribution

1. Introduction

This study purports to investigate the use of the English article system by Moroccan EFL learners. More specifically, the aspect which is examined is transfer and the extent to which it accounts for errors in the use of these articles by Moroccan learners.

Transfer is a factor in second language acquisition which has been studied for a long time. However, “despite the wide recognition of this phenomenon and the important role it has had in language learning and pedagogical research, its true nature has not been adequately established” (Gass, 1978: 327).

Throughout the literature on transfer, there has been a huge focus on the effect of cross-linguistic influence on the use of English articles (e.g. Pica, 1983; Kharma, 1981....). This focus can be explained by the fact that articles are a problem for ESL/EFL learners and a number of researchers (Master, 1997) have observed that the difficulty in using English articles becomes greater when there are differences between English and the learner’s L1 in the Article system.

Arabic and English display many differences in the article system and the choice of articles as the main focus of the present study stems from the fact that many researchers acknowledge that articles are a problem for Arab learners of English. In this perspective, Willcott (1978:67) points out that “anyone who has taught English to Arabic speakers knows that definiteness is a problem for them”.

Many researchers who have investigated errors made by Arab learners in the use of articles claim that the difference between Arabic and English in the article system is the main source of difficulty for Arab learners. This is clear in the following statement by Naser (1963: 94): “‘a’ and ‘an’ have no equivalent in Arabic which makes their use in English a serious problem for Arab students”. Hence, the aim of the present study is to investigate the extent to which this claim is true for Moroccan learners of English.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transfer

There has been a continuous change in defining the word ‘transfer’ according to the attitudes of researchers and applied linguists towards the role of L1 in using a target language. The definitions range from considering the role of L1 to be linear and mechanical to those viewing transfer as a complex process.

Richards, Platt and Platt (1992: 205) define transfer as “the effect of one language on the learning of another”. A broader view of transfer is given by Selinker (1992:208) who considers transfer as a “cover term for a whole class of behaviors, processes, and constraints, each of which has to do with crosslinguistic influence”. He goes on to argue that this influence includes in addition to native language knowledge, any other prior linguistic knowledge. This implies that language transfer can result from L1 influence as well as from the learner’s knowledge of other linguistic systems. This view of transfer is challenging because it is sometimes very difficult to determine whether transfer is from the learner’s L1

or from another language he/she knows, especially when there are areas of similarities in the rules governing the use of certain features.

Transfer, then, is a complex process which is determined by many other factors, a process which is not linear or mechanical and since its role in SLA is related to other factors, it seems logical that linguists and language teachers have not agreed on one definition of language transfer. “A fully adequate definition of transfer seems unattainable without adequate definitions of many other terms such as strategy, process and simplification” (Odlin 1989: 28).

It is worth noting at this stage that many researchers (e.g. Kellerman and Sharwood Smith 1986; Odlin 1989) have suggested the term ‘cross-linguistic influence’ instead of ‘transfer’ because the former is sufficiently broad to include all the phenomena taking place when there is a contact between two languages. Gass (1984) presents a list of these phenomena:

- Delayed rule restructuring.
- Transfer of typological organization.
- Different paths of acquisition.
- Avoidance.
- Overproduction of certain elements.

However, Gass (1984: 121) acknowledges that the aforementioned phenomena are difficult to detect within the framework of early transfer studies.

Within the same perspective, Kellerman (1979) argues that not all items of a language are transferrable when using another. Two major factors determine transferability:

- The learners’ perception of L1-L2 distance (psychotypology).
- The degree of markedness of an L1 structure (typological markedness).

Hence, there are language specific elements (unique to the learner’s L1) and neutral elements (the learner perceives to be common to the L1 and the target language). Kellerman gives examples of both categories. ‘He kicked the bucket’ is language specific and ‘he kicked the ball’ is language neutral. For an English learner of another language, ‘to kick the bucked’ is not transferrable because it is specific to English.

Therefore, transfer is not a mechanical activity that occurs whenever there is a contact between two languages. It is a cognitive process which involves decision making. This is a perspective which considers the role of the native language to be a ‘when and under what conditions does transfer take place?’ perspective, as Gass and Selinker (1983: 95) put it. They argue that learners of a language must see a similarity between the target language and their L1 before “they are able to recognize that the native language might be useful to them” (p: 90).

This perspective of transfer claims that learners are selective in what they transfer. Many researchers (e.g. Ringbom, 1986) have suggested that transfer is a strategy which learners resort to in order to fill a perceived gap in their L2 knowledge. When transfer was viewed mainly as a mechanical activity, only errors were considered the result of L1 influence.

With the view of transfer as a strategy, other forms of learners' language are considered, as Odline (1989: 36) points out: "although negative transfer tends to be equated with production errors, there are other ways in which an individual's second language performance may differ from the behavior of native speakers".

These behaviors are: underproduction (when learners produce very few or no examples of a target language), overproduction (which can be the result of underproduction), production errors and misinterpretation (as a result of L1 influence, learners infer something very different from what native speakers would infer). Furthermore, some researchers argue that L1 effects do not occur as direct linguistic influence only. In this perspective, Zobl (1980a; 1980b; 1982) points out that the effect of L1 can occur in:

- A prolongation or delay in the restructuring of an interlanguage rule.
- The number of rules traversed on the path from the acquisition of one form to another.

The first effect means that if a natural developmental stage corresponds to a pattern in the learner's native language, that pattern will occur longer in the learner's language than if it is not in his/her language. For the second effect, Zobl found that the acquisition of articles by a Chinese child differed from that of a Spanish child in terms of the rules occurring in their interlanguage in using articles. Zobl explains this difference in the path of acquisition by the fact that Chinese does not have a formal article system whereas Spanish does.

2.2 The Role of Transfer in the Acquisition of Articles

A great amount of research has been conducted on the acquisition of articles in English (e.g. Grannis 1972; Sharma 1981; Berry 1991; Master 1997) and the general conclusion is that, as Grannis (1972: 83) puts it, "the English article system is a source of extreme frustration for the foreign language learner of English". Similarly, in a study by Sharma (1981), the results of error analysis indicate that errors in the use of articles account for 60.37 % of the total of the errors made by the subjects. This difficulty in using articles becomes greater when the mother tongue has no equivalents for the English articles (Berry 1991; Master 1997).

Since articles present an obstacle for second or foreign language learners, a lot of researchers have investigated the acquisition of articles by speakers of different languages. In a study on "the English article system: acquisition, function and pedagogy", (Master (1997), the researcher started the study with the assumption that articles are acquired differently depending on their occurrence in the learners' first language. He concluded the study by observing that "because articles did not exist in {-Art} languages (languages not having articles), {-Art} speakers needed more time to acquire the article system than did {+Art} speakers (speakers of languages having articles)" (p: 299).

In this perspective, Odlin (1989:34) points out that it has been found in three studies (Oller and Redding, 1971; Kempt 1971; Ringbom 1976) that "speakers of languages having articles tend to use them more accurately than do speakers of languages not having articles". This implies that the presence of a similar article system in the learners' L1 can facilitate the acquisition of the English article system, whereas the absence of such a similarity can make the acquisition process more difficult.

Arabic is different from English in the use of articles and a number of researchers have focused on the role of this difference in the acquisition of the English article system. Kharma (1981), as a case in point, has drawn some conclusions concerning article use by Arab university students. The first one is that the use of the English definite/indefinite articles is a serious source of difficulty to Arabic-speaking students. The second conclusion is that most errors were caused by interference from Arabic. The last finding is that “the” has the biggest percentage of mistakes.

In another study on the misuse of determination in Arab students’ written production, Maalej (1999) argues that students generate the Arabic version of what they write first and then they translate it into English. This, in the author’s opinion, explains the occurrence of such examples as:

- Advertising is the best propaganda of the companies to circulate their goods.
- This cohesion and unity between the members is the source of the happiness.
- The lungs and liver cannot resist the effects of the liquor.

When translated into Arabic, these examples become well-formed. Another finding of this study is that the students tend to use zero article instead of a/an. This could be explained by the fact that Arabic uses the absence of determination to signal indefiniteness.

In another study on the “problems of definiteness in the written English of Arabic speakers (Willcott: 1978), the subjects produced examples as:

- led lately to the overproduction.
- The iron was being used more.

The author explains the occurrence of such examples as the result of the fact that Arabic uses “the” with mass nouns used either in a qualified or non-qualified sense. This opinion is shared by Nacer (1963) who states that “the” is commonly used in some places in Arabic where it is not used in English. As a result, Arab students speaking English tend to use “the” where it should not be used. The following examples illustrate this point:

- The dogs and the cats.
- The Iraq.
- This the month.
- The King George the Sixth.

Hence, the aforementioned studies prove that transfer can have an influential effect on learners’ use of articles, especially if there are differences between L1 and English as is the case with Arabic.

2.3 The Difference between English and Arabic in the Use of Articles

Because the main purpose of the present study is to investigate the role of transfer from Arabic in the use of English articles, it is important to focus on the main differences which exist between Arabic and English in the article system. These differences are useful since “any study of transfer must naturally provide a detailed consideration of cross-linguistic

differences in structure” (Odlin 1989: 129).

The first difference between the two languages is that English uses three articles: the, a/an and zero article whereas Arabic uses two: the definite article “al” and zero article. Another major difference between the two languages is the use of articles with abstract nouns. These words take the definite article in Standard Arabic whereas in English they do not. In English one says: “happiness is necessary in life”, but in Arabic one says: “the happiness is necessary in the life”.

English and Arabic differ also in signaling the generic meaning. The latter appears in English through singular noun with ‘a/an’, singular with ‘the’ and plural with zero article. Arabic, on the other hand, uses the definite article with nouns, singular or plural. Hence, in Arabic one says “the horses are useful animals”. In this respect, Willcott (1978:68) points out that “it is not possible in Arabic to contrast, for example, ‘the milk is nutritious’ and ‘milk is nutritious’. Only the first form can occur”. Concerning indefiniteness, English signals it by the use of “a/an”. Arabic, instead, uses the absence of the definite determiner “al”.

These are the major differences between the two languages in the use of articles which may explain some errors made by Arab speakers using English.

3. Subjects

The subjects of the study are first and third year university students. The subjects were chosen randomly from the faculty of letters in Rabat. There are 40 first year and 40 third year students. Their age ranges from 19 to 24 and there are both male and female students in each group. They were introduced to the rules of article usage in English as part of first year syllabus.

4. Instruments

The instruments used in the present study are a grammaticality judgment test and an essay. The rationale behind using these two instruments is that each one tests a different aspect of learners’ knowledge. The grammaticality judgment test focuses on understanding or comprehension. It calls for the subjects’ underlying knowledge of the rules governing article usage. However, some researchers (e.g Culiciver 1997) put into question the validity of these tests arguing that learners underlying competence cannot be directly accessed. Nevertheless, the variability of learners’ performance on different tests, including grammaticality judgment ones, is inevitable. Hence, in order to increase the validity of the grammaticality judgment test used in the present study, the essay is used as a productive task. The essay calls for the students’ use of articles without focusing on rules because in the essay the general meaning is more important than the rules, but this meaning is conveyed through the writer’s reliance on the previously acquired rules and language items. In this perspective, Kellerman (2001) argues that narratives provide researchers with the opportunity to investigate the interface between language and cognition. The comparison between the subjects’ performance in the two instruments is very useful for the study and will help answer the second research question.

The grammaticality judgment test items were taken from two grammar books: *Explaining English Grammar* (Yule 1998) and *Understanding and Using English Grammar* (Azar 1996). Both instructions and items were written in English. Both groups of subjects were given nineteen items and an example to show them what they were required to do.

For the essay, the subjects were asked to write a paragraph or an essay about a funny situation they had experienced or an interesting film they had watched. No further instructions were given because the focus was on their production of a discourse in which they use articles.

The technique used to analyze the data obtained from the two instruments is error analysis. The choice of this technique is justified by the fact that error analysis is an effective way of detecting transfer errors. In this respect, Sridhar (1980: 101) argues that “the best way to discover transfer is through error analysis”.

For the grammaticality judgment test, errors in judging the given sentences were classified under two headings; transfer errors and non-transfer errors. What was considered as a transfer error was any error in the use of articles which reflected a similar use in Arabic. These errors were considered both in the case of an incorrect use of an English article which was not corrected by the subjects, or a correct use which was ‘corrected’ according to a rule which exists in Arabic. Non-transfer errors included any erroneous judgment of the given sentences, but which does not reflect an Arabic rule of article usage.

The same classification of errors was used for both the essay and the grammaticality judgment test. It is worth mentioning here that the classification for both instruments was done for each category of articles; ‘a/an’, ‘zero’ and ‘the’. The elicited data was analyzed using SPSS package. A series of independent t-tests was used in order to compare the performance of the two groups in both instruments.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 The Effect of Proficiency Level on Transfer Errors Made in Using Articles

5.1.1 Transfer Errors in the GJT

The first research question aims at investigating the effect of proficiency level on transfer errors. In order to answer this question, a series of independent t-tests was run to compare the means of the groups in both instruments (levels 1 and 3). Table 1 presents the results of this comparison concerning the grammaticality judgment test:

Table 1. Transfer errors in the GJT

variable	Level	Mean	Std.dev.	t	sig
Transfer errors in GJT ‘Ø’	1	.97	.999	-2.62	.043
	3	1.45	.999		
Transfer errors in GJT ‘a’	1	.67	.711	1.106	.272
	3	.48	.731		

Transfer errors in GJT 'the'	1	.93	1.081	-9.849	.000
	3	4.43	1.670		

The results above indicate that there is an effect of proficiency level on transfer errors in article use since more proficient subjects make more errors than less proficient subjects in the use of zero article and 'the'. However, proficiency level does not seem to have an effect on the subjects' use of 'a/an'. This finding might sound surprising since the general consensus among researchers is that language transfer is more likely to occur at lower levels of proficiency (Odlin 1989; Ellis 1994; Poulisse and Bongearls 1994). However, other researchers have cautioned against the correlation between low proficiency and the occurrence of transfer. Jarvis (2000), for example, argues that L1 influence may increase with L2 proficiency since learners acquire more tools to express their L1 perspective. Furthermore, some errors traceable to L1 influence only occur at later stages of development. Kellerman (1983) illustrates this point by arguing that transfer errors in relative clauses can only occur when the learner is at an advanced stage of development to produce relative clauses. This implies as Klein (1986:27) puts it, that the possibilities of transfer increase as knowledge of the second language increases.

5.1.2 Transfer Errors in the Essay

Still attempting to answer the first research question, the results obtained from the t-test comparing transfer errors made by the two groups in the essay are displayed in table 2:

Table 2. Transfer errors made in the essay

variable	Level	Mean	Std.dev.	T	Sig
Transfer errors in the essay 'Ø'	1	.33	.802	1.572	.12
	3	.11	.387		
Transfer errors in the essay 'a'	1	.07	.254	.316	.753
	3	.05	.302		
Transfer errors in the essay 'the'	1	.73	.944	-1.289	.199
	3	1.11	1.402		

When comparing the means of the two groups, it is clear that there is no significant difference between the two levels in the use of articles in the essay. However, most errors were made in the use of 'the', especially for level 3. Therefore, it can be concluded that proficiency level has no effect on transfer errors made in the essay. This finding can be explained by the effect of the writing task. In the essay, subjects of both levels were not obliged to use articles in a 'sophisticated' way. Most of the time, they mention something in the beginning and they start referring to it using 'the+NP' and the meaning is preserved. This explanation is forward

grounded by the fact that the number of transfer errors in the essay is far smaller as compared to the grammaticality judgment test. In this perspective, Tarone and Parrish (1988:34) argue that:

“It seems most likely that the demands of the narrative task itself can explain..... any increased accuracy of article use. Effective story telling requires that the narrator keep track over time of the persons and objects important to the story line”

This means that the type of task might have an effect on the occurrence of transfer and this effect might be more than that of proficiency level.

5.2 Transfer Errors Made in Comprehension and in Production

In order to answer the second research question, a series of paired-samples t-tests was run to compare the performance of each group in both instruments.

Table 3. Comparing transfer errors in the GJT and the essay for level 3

Variables		Mean	Std.dev	t	Sig
Pair 1	Transfer errors GJT ‘Ø’	1,45	,999	8,610	,000
	Transfer errors essay ‘Ø’	,11	,387		
Pair 2	Transfer errors GJT ‘a/an’	,48	,731	3,500	,000
	Transfer errors essay ‘a/an’	,05	,302		
Pair 3	Transfer errors GJT ‘the’	4,34	1,670	9,740	,000
	Transfer errors essay ‘the’	1,11	1,401		

As indicated by the results of the comparison, the difference between the performance of the subjects of this level in the two instruments is very significant. The subjects made more transfer errors in the grammaticality judgment test than in the essay for all articles.

Table 4. Comparing transfer errors in GJT and in the essay for level 1

Variables		Mean	Std.dev	T	sig
Pair 1	Transfer errors GJT 'Ø'	,97	,999	2,433	,021
	Transfer errors essay 'Ø'	,33	,802		
Pair 2	Transfer errors GJT 'a/an'	,67	,711	4,267	,000
	Transfer errors essay 'a/an'	,07	,254		
Pair 3	Transfer errors GJT 'the'	,93	1,081	,711	,483
	Transfer errors essay 'the'	,73	,944		

As the table above shows, there is a significant difference between the subjects' means on the use of zero article. Concerning the use of 'a/an', the difference between the results of the two instruments is highly significant. However, there is no significant difference between the results of the subjects' performance in the use of 'the'. Accordingly, the subjects of level 1 made more errors in the grammaticality judgment test than in the essay.

This finding might seem surprising since in the grammaticality judgment test the focus is on form and one would expect that this will result in recalling the rules and applying them correctly. This finding can be explained by two main factors. The first one is the related to the rules of article usage which most EFL/ESL learners find difficult to apply especially that there are a lot of exceptions and irregularities in these rules. A second explanation is related, as has been mentioned above, to the nature of the writing task. In the essay, there is a general discourse which makes the use of articles easier than in isolated sentences. This point is mentioned by Tarone and Parish (1988:35): "the increased accuracy in the narrative task is due to the general influence of communicative pressure".

5.3 Comparing Transfer Errors Made in the Three Categories of Articles

In order to answer the third research question, transfer errors made in the three categories of articles were compared in both instruments.

Table 5. Transfer errors made in the three articles in the GJT:

Variables	Level	Mean	Std. dev.
Transfer errors in GJT 'Ø'	1	.97	.999
	3	1.45	.999
Transfer errors in	1	.67	.711

GJT 'a/an'	3	.48	.731
Transfer errors in GJT 'the'	1	.93	1.081
	3	4.43	1.670

It is clear that 'the' has the highest mean for level 3 in the GJT. For level 1, zero article has the highest mean. The following table displays the results of using the three articles in the essay:

Table 6. Transfer errors made in the three articles in the essay

Variables	Level	Mean	Std. dev.
Transfer errors in essay 'Ø'	1	.33	.802
	3	.11	.387
Transfer errors in essay 'a/an'	1	.07	.254
	3	.05	.302
Transfer errors in essay 'the'	1	.73	.944
	3	1.11	1.402

In the essay, in the same way as in the GJT, 'the' has the highest mean for both levels. Hence, it can be concluded that subjects make most transfer errors in the use of 'the' followed by zero article and then 'a/an'. The overuse of 'the' by the subjects could be explained by the fact that 'the' is used in Arabic in many cases where in English it is not. As a result, when they want to use an NP, they refer to their Arabic repertory where most NPs are used with 'the'. In this respect, Maalej (1999) points out that: "Arab learners find it difficult to keep separate the details of the two linguistic systems [English and Arabic]". This explains the following example occurring in the essay of a third year subject:

The last April I went as usual to the faculty.

Bearing in mind that transfer can occur either from Arabic or French, one can imagine the weight of this rule of using 'the' with most NPs since it exists in both Arabic and French.

After 'the', the subjects made many transfer errors in the use of zero article. The overuse of this article could be explained by the difference between Arabic and English in signaling absence of definiteness. The latter is signaled in English by 'a/an' whereas in Arabic it is signaled by the absence of the definite article. This results in students using the absence of English article i.e. using zero article, to indicate absence of definiteness. This could explain examples as "one day I went to bookshop so as to buy some books" produced by a first year subject. It is worth mentioning here that since subjects have problems using zero article, they consequently have problems using 'a' because most of the time they use zero article instead of using 'a/an' as in the example mentioned above. This is due to the fact that Arabic uses a binary system to signal definiteness/indefiniteness while English uses a tripartite system. This

might confuse the students and make it difficult for them to understand the difference between zero article and ‘a/an’ since both signal absence of definiteness as it exists in Arabic. In this respect, Willcott (1978: 70) points out that on the production level, since English has ‘a’ matching ‘Ø’ in Arabic, an Arab student will tend to omit the article in singular constructions.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The general findings of this study can be summarized as follows. First, proficiency level has an effect on students’ transfer errors in comprehension but not in production. Second, there is an effect of task type on transfer errors in that students make more transfer errors in the grammaticality judgment test than in the essay. The last finding of this study is that there is a difference in students’ performance according to the three categories of articles. Students make most errors in using ‘the’ and then zero article.

Since it has been noticed that it is easier for students to use articles in an essay, it follows that articles should be taught in a context. The focus now is on teaching articles through focusing on grammatical rules and de-contextualized sentences. A context provides an opportunity for introducing articles in naturally occurring sentences. When the sentences used to teach articles are authentic and occur within a communicative context, the learner can encounter many exceptions of the rules and consequently becomes aware of their existence. Within the same perspective, Pica (1983: 225) argues that learners should develop “an awareness of variations of article usage within communicative contexts”.

Since transfer from Arabic seems to result in serious problems in article usage for Moroccan learners, it seems reasonable to establish a comparison between Arabic and English rules of article use and make students aware of the differences between the two systems. Translation of sentences from one language to another can be a good way of attracting students’ attention to the differences between the two languages.

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