

Error Analysis of English Language Speakers in the Use of Articles in Pakistan

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to investigate the errors of students in the use of English articles (a, an, the, and zero articles). The sample of the study comprised of 60 graduate students selected through simple random sampling method. The instrument used as data collection tool was the essays written by students of BS in the subject of Communication Skills. The essays written by the participants were collected and the errors committed by the students in the articles were identified and analyzed in frequencies. The main finding of the study was; learners' whose mother tongue is Urdu (Urdu does not have any article system) commit more errors as compared to those whose L1 has articles system. Students faced more difficulties in learning indefinite articles and omit it in their writings. Based on these finding some pedagogical implications were proposed, which might assist ESL/EFL teachers with some practicable suggestions and teaching strategies.

Keywords: Error, Articles, Learning difficulties.

Introduction

It is obvious that learning English Articles is difficult for non-native learners especially for those who do not have articles in their first language (Batanech, 2005). L2 learners, who grew up in a country whose language has no equivalent to English articles, may find it hard to understand an article system that is characterized by novel and abstract use. According to Celce-Mercia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) the article system is mostly troublesome to teachers of English. As a result, some English Teachers do not want to devote classroom time to teaching article usage. English teachers prefer to spend more time tacking other aspects of grammar and areas perceived to be more communicatively important (Chuang, 2005).

Master (as cited in Bataneb: 2005, p-2) notes that there are three reasons for L2 learners have difficulty comprehending the small particles a, an, and the system; (a) since articles are most frequently used in the language, it is usually difficult for the learners to maintain the rules especially when dealing with an extended text. (b) These

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words are usually not stressed which makes it somehow difficult for the non-native speaker to acquire them. (c) Learner especially the beginners look for one to one correspondence between words and their functions but in case of articles one word performs multiple functions.

Research Objectives

1. To find out types of errors of articles made by graduate level students.
2. To know the frequency of errors of articles made by the graduate level students while learning the English language.

Research Questions

1. What is the frequency of errors of articles made by the graduate level students while learning English language?
2. What types of errors of articles are made by graduate level students?

Literature Review

The article system in the English language is very complex and it is especially difficult for non-native the English speakers to master. That is why most of the students even after learning the English language make errors of articles. Before proceeding towards details about errors, we must distinguish between errors and mistakes. According to Brown (2000), a “mistake” refers to a performance error where a learner knows the system but fails to make use of it correctly. On the other hand an error is a divergence from the standard form used by native speakers and it reflects the lack of competence of the learner. After this error recognition procedure takes place the process of describing it.

Types of Errors

The errors can be divided as under:

Errors of Area

As the name suggests, it means errors belonging to the specific area in the use of language. Errors of the area are further categorized into phonological errors, lexical errors, grammatical errors, and semantic errors. Phonological errors are the errors of pronunciation. For example, if a learner’s pronounces the “r” sound in the word “girl”, it’s a phonological error. According to Chandler in 2003 Lexical errors are the errors made in the use of words. For instance, if a learner says “air-conditioned room” in place of “air-condition room” this is a lexical error. It’s a use of wrong lexical items. Semantic errors are the errors made by the learner due to vagueness of meaning. For instance, if a learner says “She is like ice-cream.” Here meaning is not clear.

Errors of Form

These errors are further divided into the errors of addition, errors of omission, errors of selection, and errors of order. The error of addition is the one made by making

the addition of unnecessary items. For instance if a learner says, “I am living in Pakistan from a one year.” The error of omission is the opposite of the errors of addition. They are made due to the omission of an item. For instance if a learner says, “this is my sister home.”(Apostrophe is missing). Errors of selection of the ones made due to an erroneous selection from the existing options. For instance, if a learner says, “yesterday I go for shopping” (Improper selection of tense). The error of order as the name suggests is made due to the inaccurate arrangement of words. For example, if a learner says, “How I will go to office?”(Incorrect order).

Error Analysis

Error analysis has been defined (Brown, 1980) as a process of observing analyzing and classifying the deviation from the rules of L2 and then revealing the systems with which learners operate. The qualitative research and the process and methodology of error analysis are similar in nature. The analysis of data in this process is actually the analysis of raw data, which in our case are the papers of the students. At the first stage the words phrases and concepts which reveal mother tongue influence are highlighted and marked. This process is called “open Coding”. In other words these words are phrases are broken into their smaller or discrete parts and they are observed minutely to make a comparison for the sake of finding similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The words, letters or acronyms used to refer to the concepts are discovered, e.g. MTI (mother tongue interference) and can be called as code words (Merriam et al., 2002). This study is going to discuss Article errors only as it is one of the most occurring error in ESL.

Article Usage

There are three English articles; a, an, and the (Keene & Adams, 2002). Catford et al. (1974) identify one more article, that is, 0 article (zero articles). Although there are only three of them, articles account for almost ten percent in terms of word frequency in the most text (Yule, 1998).

Different Studies on the Learning of English Article

English article system is real problems for many learners of English as a foreign language regardless of their proficiency level. Gleason’s (2002) examines then on generic uses of the English articles that are: the cultural situational, structural and textual. Barret and Chen (2010) study Taiwanese graduate students to study their handling of English articles in writing using corpus based data. Aldeni (2008) approaches his study differently. He focuses on the psychological aspect of learning the second language. He studies the role of avoidance strategy and its impact on the use of English articles and the learners’ awareness of the use of articles.

Problems with the Article Usage

It is obvious that learning English Articles is difficult for non-native learners especially for those who do not have articles in their first language (Bataineh, 2005). L2 learners, who grew up in a country whose language has no equivalent to English articles, may find it hard to understand an article system that is characterized by novelty and abstractness. According to Celce-Mercia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) the article system is mostly troublesome to teachers of English there for the English teachers give more of the class time to the other more areas of grammar which are commonly thought to be of more communicatively important than the article usage (Chuang, 2005).

Master (as cited in Bataineh, 2005, p-2) notes that there are three reasons for L2 learners have difficulty comprehending the small particles a, an, and the system; (a) since articles are most frequently used in the language, it is usually difficult for the learners to maintain the rules especially when dealing with an extended text. (b) These words are usually not stressed which makes it somehow difficult for the non-native speaker to acquire them. (c) Learner especially the beginner's wants one to one correspondence between words and their functions but in case of articles one word performs multiple functions.

In addition to the complex rules and exceptions of usage, Norris (1992) stated that Japanese students of English are burdened with the fact that there is no grammatical equivalent to an article in their own native language. In a study of structural errors found in 632 English compositions written by Japanese students in American high schools and junior colleges, Kimizuka (as cited in Norris, 1992) found more mistakes in article usage than in any other structural categories and explained this phenomenon as follows:

There exists no part of speech in the Japanese language that corresponds to the article system in the English language. As a result, Japanese learners of English face problems mastering articles and make frequent mistakes. They not only have to learn the rules in order to acquire the use of articles but have to practice them by the drill.

Mizuno (as cited in Huong, 2005) identified five types of these errors in article usage in the speech of Japanese EFL learners. They are "1 juxtaposition of articles and other determiners, 2 inversions of the order of articles and succeeding adjectives, 3 omissions of articles under the extension, 4 use of articles instead of zero, and 5 substitutions i.e. the indefinite article is used instead of the definite article and vice versa" (p,93)

Next, Avery and Radisc (2007) and Bataineh (2005) indicated that if an L2 learners native language has sonic type of determiner system, they probably face a problem of "mismatch" between the two systems on definitions, and on functions of determiners such as definiteness specificity, or concepts of countable and uncountable

nouns. The speakers understanding about parts of speech may also cause article errors. Trenkic (2008) discovered that some L2 learners make errors in article usage because they misinterpret articles as adjectives instead of determiners. As such, they do not use an article seeing that the definiteness of the noun in question is contextually clear. Thus, Trenkic's study notes that rule-oriented students may not be successful; and that students should absorb the understanding about the articles naturally, not by role.

Huong (2005) points out the since English articles have high frequency use in written works, their presence in a given discourse must be something meaningful. Huong states, "One function that the articles contribute to discourse is to create cohesion for stretches or language" (p, 5). This function is usually found in the definite article "the." Huong goes on explaining how articles "stretch" a particular discourse, using the sentence below.

Ninke lost a valuable watch yesterday and Bill is wearing the valuable watch this morning. In this sentence, time noun phrase "the valuable watch" refers back to the noun phrase "a valuable watch" via the article "the". In this context, the definite article "the" refers to something that has been previously mentioned. Therefore, the reader can assume that bill is probably the one who took the watch or who found it but did not return it to its owner.

Another study was by Bataineh (2005), who enumerated errors in writing samples by some students in a university in Jordan. He discovered such problems as deletion of an indefinite article, use of an indefinite article which marked and unmarked plurals (hypercorrection), use of an indefinite article with uncountable nouns, probably due to structural similarities, and use of an indefinite article with adjectives (overgeneralization).

Methodology

The method used in this research was mixed method of quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative method is used in order to know the frequency and percentage of the errors made by the students and qualitative method is used so that the factors involved in the errors may be investigated. Mixed method research gives more freedom to the research as description and narration along with numerical facts and figures due to which the research becomes more communicative.

Population and Sample

The population of this study is all the BS level students of semester fall 2014 in the Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan. The Department of Management Sciences was chosen for the selection of a sample of 60 students' simple random sampling.

Instrumentation

Written Essays and students' comments were selected for data collection. The selected sample was asked to write a well-organized essay on any topic of their choice. Students were asked to write approximately 250 to 300 words in one hour. The essays taken from the students were checked by the researcher and the errors were highlighted and corrected. Later, the participants were asked to look at their errors and their correction provided by the researcher and then comment on them. They were also asked different questions about the causes of these errors. The student's comments constituted the second source of the data collected. Fifteen different (semi structured) interview questions were set by the researcher to explore the reason behind the students' wrong use of English articles. These questions were based on Norrish (as cited in Hasyim, 2002) and Richards (as cited in Sanal, 2008) regarding the causes of errors. The purpose of these questions was to determine the background knowledge of English article usage.

Finding and Interpretation

The analysis of written essays was derived for 19 article error categories which were adapted from Richards (1971) and Chakorn (2005). These categories were used by the researcher to investigate errors in the participants' compositions. The 19 article error categories consisted of two kinds of errors; omissions and substitution of articles. The data collected will achieve the objectives of the research; one to know the types of errors the English language learners make, two to find out the frequency of the errors. The written essays and student's comments were selected as tool for gathering the required data to attain the above mentioned objectives. The data was collected in form of descriptive errors that the students have made in their essays and also their frequency and percentage were find out. Which points out to the fact that students mostly make different types of mistakes but three of them mention in table 02 are the most frequently make errors by the English language learners.

Table 1

Categories of Article Errors Found in the Essays of the Students

S.NO	Categories	Frequency of errors	Percentage
1	The omission of "the" before unique noun	18	4.8%
2	The omission of "the" before nouns defined by adjectives of nationality.	6	1.6%
3	The omission of "the" before nouns made particular in context.	115	30.6%
4	The omission of "the" before a noun modified by participle.	1	0.3%
5	The omission of "the" before superlative	0	0%
6	The omission of "the" before a noun modified by an of phrase.	32	8.5%
7	The omission of "a" before nouns	23	6.1%
8	The omission of "a" before singular nouns defined by adjectives	45	12%
9	"the" used instead of 0 article before proper names	5	1.3%
10	"the" used instead of 0 article before abstract nouns	22	5.8%
11	"the" used instead of 0 article before nouns behaving like abstract nouns	4	1.1%
12	"the" used instead of 0 article before plural nouns	42	11.2%
13	"the" instead of "a"	20	5.3%
14	"a" used instead of "the" before unique nouns	2	0.5%
15	"a" instead of 0 article before a plural noun	7	1.9%
16	"a" instead of 0 article before uncountable nouns	3	0.8%
17	"a" instead of 0 article before adjective	6	1.6%
18	"a" instead of "the"	10	2.6%
19	Possessive determiners instead of "the"	15	4%

Table 1 shows two kinds of errors; omissions of articles (categories 1-8) and substitutions of articles (categories 9-19). The findings indicate that the omission of articles were the most frequent errors. The students omitted "the" before nouns made particular in context most frequently. 115 errors were identified, comprising 30.6% of

all errors. and omission of “a” before singular nouns defined by adjectives was in the second place in terms of frequency with 12%.

The error of Omission of “the” before superlative was made by none of the students followed by Omission of “the” before a noun error which was made only by 1 participant having 01 frequency. In the error substitute section of the data the most common error found was “the” being used instead of 0 article before plural nouns with the frequency of 42 followed by “the” used instead of 0 article before an abstract noun with 22 frequency (5.8%). Substitution of article error is the least committed error by the participants with error of “a” used instead of “the” before unique nouns having a frequency of 2 only (0.5%) and “a” instead of 0 article before uncountable nouns with frequency of 3 (0.8%) only.

Table 2

Top three Most Frequent Article Errors

S.NO	Categories	Frequency of errors	Percentage
1	The omission of “the” before nouns made particular in context	115	30.6%
2	The omission of “a” before singular noun defined by adjectives	45	12%
3	“the” used instead of 0 article before plural nouns	42	11.2%

Table 2 shows that the most frequent article errors with the highest percentage in the participants’ essays were omissions of “the” before nouns made particular in context (30.6%), omissions of “a” before nouns defined by adjectives (12%) and use of “the” instead of 0 before plural nouns (11.2%).

Discussions and Conclusion

Articles in English mostly are made up of one to three letters and are so small that they are commonly considered as the atom of grammar. In order to give meaning to an article it has to be a part of a phrase, used before or after another word. According to the research of Sttayatham and Honssa (2007), Chalongsong et al. (2004), Banlomchon (2005) and Boonyavanch (2002) articles error is one of the most common problem in language learning. Articles carry no lexical definition by themselves, though because of their unique function in grammar they actually give the meaning to the sentence by specifying the reference of the noun, that is why they are so importance and occur so frequently in grammar. That is the reason one should be careful while using them. Baranieh (2005) says that it’s very difficult to master the use of article in English especially for those learners’ who have not article in their first language. The detailed analysis of the data proves that Pakistanis’ ESL speakers do not understand English

articles completely so they make frequent errors in the usage. Articles are considered to be the hardest part of grammar to be learnt by students in Pakistan.

It was revealed from the findings of the study that students experienced mother tongue interference while using articles. The most often ranked error was the omission of “the” before nouns made particular in context. This kind of error is caused by L1 interference; Richards and Schmidt (2002) classified errors of omission of “the” before nouns as inter-lingual errors. The top three most frequent article errors found in the compositions of the students were omissions of the articles. Furthermore, the data supports the facts proposed by Pongpairaj (2007) who says that omission of an article before a noun is the biggest problem of Pakistani students because their native language does not have articles.

Factors Responsible for these Errors

The following are the reasons responsible for the inaccurate use of English article:

- A. knowledge of English article usage
- B. mother tongue interference
- C. carelessness of the students
- D. the difficulties regarding English articles
- E. teacher-induction of such error

How Can the Situation be Improved

Errors are a natural result of the learning process, which eventually has a direct impact on the improvement of language teaching material and methods, in remedial teaching as well as in ordinary teaching (Corder, 1981). A deep analysis of errors can lead to students understanding and remedies to the situation. Some causes and remedies are given below:

Focus on Mother Tongue Interference

This is one of the causes of error that is hard to overcome. The teacher should focus primarily on mother tongue interference. Since the Urdu language does not have articles, its difficult for students to understand their function. Teachers should dedicate more time and energy to the use of articles.

Consultation of Grammar Books

Using the article “the” was problematic for all students in the study. Most of the students used the article “the” intuitively without consulting any grammar text book. These students are not provided with proper guideline about the use of articles if they are given guidance about what errors most of them make in their essays and are provide handouts on the usage of “the” which contain clear explanation, their errors can be reduced. Krashen (as cited in Zainuddin et al., 2002) claims that students learn second

language when they are given proper input of the language and when their filters allow them to have the input.

Importance of Teachers

In light of the feedback from the students, teachers can design teaching materials and techniques in order to improve students' understanding of the rules of articles and apply it both inside and outside the classroom (Spratt et al., 2005)

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