Iraqi Undergraduate EFL Students Errors in the Use of the Indefinite Article
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الخلاصة

إن هده الدراسة هي تحليل إنشاءات لطلبة جامعة عراقيين يدرسون اللغة الانكليزية في المراحل الأولى/ الثانية /الثالثة و الرابعة. تهدف هده الدراسة إلى تشخيص أنواع الأخطاء التي يقع بها الطلبة عند استخدام أداة التنكير .

تم تشخيص تسعة أنواع من الأخطاء هي :

١- حذف أداة التنكير

٢- كتابة (a) كجزء من الصفة أو الاسم اللاحق.

٣- التعويض بأداة التنكير بدلا من أداة التعريف.

٤- التعويض بأداة التعريف بدلا من أداة التنكير.

٥- التعويض ب (a) بدلا من (an) .

٦- استخدام أداة التنكير مع الجمع الغير المحدد.

٧- استخدام أداة التنكير مع الجمع المحدد.

٨- استخدام أداة التنكير مع الأسماء الغير معدودة.

٩- استخدام أداة التنكير مع الصفات

لقد وجد إن التأثر باللغة الأم ، علا عكس التحليلات السابقة، يلعب دورا ضئيلا ز يؤكد هدا التحليل بان كل الأخطاء عدا واحدة منها فقط هي غير معتمدة على لغة المتعلم الأم حيث أن النوع الوحيد من الخطأ الذي يعود إلى تأثير اللغة العربية كان حذف أداة التنكير.

لقد وجد، أيضا، بان العوامل التطويرية واستراتيجيات التعلم العامة مثل التعميم والتسهيل هي السبب في اغلب أخطاء المتعلمين. إن استخدام هده الاستراتيجيات كان ظاهرا في متعلمين المراحل الأربعة والدي وجد بأنهم واجهوا صعوبة في بعض الحالات وأجادوا في البعض الأخر.

Abstract

This study is an analysis of compositions written by Iraqi first- , second- , third-, fourth- year university EFL students. It aims at identifying the kinds of errors they make in the use of the indefinite article.

Nine types of error were identified, and their frequency computed and then compared across the four levels .These errors are: (1) deletion of the indefinite article, (2) writing **a** as part of the noun/adjective following it, (3)substitution of the indefinite for the definite article, (4) substitution of the definite for the indefinite article, (5) substitution of **a** for **an**, (6) use of the indefinite article with unmarked plurals, (7) use of the indefinite article with marked plurals, (8) use of the indefinite article with uncountable nouns, and (9) use of the indefinite article with adjectives.

Unlike earlier error analyses , native language transfer was found to play a role which is at best minimal .The analysis revealed that all errors , except one, are independent of the learners native language . The only type of error which could be traced back to the influence of Arabic, among other sources, was the deletion of the indefinite article.

Developmental factors and common learning strategies like simplification and over generalization were found to account for the majority of learners errors. The use of these strategies was evident among the learners of the four levels who were found to do well on certain items and to have difficulty with others.

1. Introduction and background

The English article system is one of the most difficult structural elements for ESL/EFL learners, especially for those whose native languages do not employ articles or article-like morphemes. Master (2002:166) attributes this difficulty to three facts about the article system: (a) Articles are among the most frequent function words in English ,making constant rule application difficult over an extended stretch of discourse; (b) function words are normally unstressed and consequently are very difficult for non- native speakers to discern , which affects the availability of input in the spoken mode ; and (c) the article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme , which constitutes a considerable burden for the learner who usually looks for a one –to – one correspondence between form and function, especially in the early stages of language learning.

Despite the fact that articles are important functional structures , they are hardly crucial communication devices , which is supported by the fact that they are dropped in telegraphic exchanges .Thus, unlike content words, function words are generally overlooked by learners when processing language primarily for meaning .According to Pienemann (1998:50), the difficulty of the meaning expressed by an article is determined by the novelty and abstractness of the concept, not to mention learners changing hypotheses about article usage at different stages in interlanguage development and the potential influence of the native language which may further complicate the task.

Articles do not impede understanding, for in oral communication, they are generally unstressed and almost inaudible . Nevertheless, given the fact that they are among the most frequent words in English, it is of the utmost significance that university students have some control of their usage.

The English articles **a(n)**, **zero**, and **the** are quite difficult to acquire not only for ESL/EFL learners but also for children learning English as a first language . 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 article –like morphemes which are used in ways that differ from English articles. (Celce- Murica and Larsen Freeman,1999:105). In a morpheme study by Brown (1973:98), the articles **a** and **the** came at numbers nine and ten in the acquisition of fourteen morphemes. They were found to be less difficult than the prepositions **in** and **on** , regular plural and possessive inflection -s but more difficult than the present progressive inflection –**ing**, regular and irregular third person singular (e.g. **cleans** and **has**), regular and irregular past tense (**cleaned** and **went**) and contracted and un contracted copula and auxiliary **be**.

The Arabic article system is similar to that of English in meaning; however, form is highly varied. While the Arabic system manifests a binary distinction between the defined and the undefined, the English system exhibits a tripartite distinction. The Arabic defined (marked by the definite article / **al** /) and the undefined (marked by the absence of /**al** /) correspond to the English defined (marked by the definite article **the**) and the undefined (marked by the indefinite articles a (**n**) and **zero**).   In other words, even though the concept is present in the two languages, indefiniteness in English is marked by lexical items such as **the** and **a** while it is marked in Arabic by affixes such as the prefix /al / and the suffix –n, both to mark definiteness and indefiniteness respectively. (Lyons, 1999: 34). For example, the Arabic and English sentences below are translation equivalents:

1. Dahara rajulun fil baldeh
2. Man appeared in town
3. A man appeared in town

The study examines the acquisition of the English indefinite article by a cross –section of Iraqi university students. It has three main objectives: (1) to identify the errors the learners make in terms of their types and potential sources, (2) to compute and compare the relative frequency of these

errors to detect any developmental tendencies among the learners of the different levels of proficiency, and (3) to determine any potential differences among the subjects which can be attributed to class level or average length of compositions.

To achieve these objectives , the present researcher seeks answers to the following questions:

.1. What are the types and potential sources of the errors Iraqi.
EFL students make in the use of the indefinite article?

2. Are there any developmental implications in the relative frequency of the occurrence of these errors?

3. Are there any differences in the students errors which can be attributed to class level?

4. Is there a relationship between the average length of compositions and the number of errors made in indefinite article use?

This study derives its significance from the significance of the topic it addresses and the fact that it attempts to explore a new area in performance analysis, namely, the relation ship between the average length of compositions and the number of errors in them, which is hoped to add another perspective to the current literature on the English article system.

Only indefinite article errors are examined in the present study. The fact that different students are targeted at each class level may add another limitation posed by these students' potentially different personalities, motivation, and writing abilities .Such limitation would.

2. Review of Previous literature

The literature has a good number of the studies which yielded important findings. Hakuta (1976:37- 52) , Huebner(1979: 21- 28), and Tarone (1985:21-4) were specifically conducted to examine grammatical morphemes rather than article acquisition .Only Master (1987: 165- 186, 1997: 215- 232), Parrish (1987: 361- 383), Tarone and Parrish (1988:21-43) and Thomas (1989: 335- 355) specifically studied the acquisition of articles.

To the best of the researcher knowledge , Master (1987: 165- 186) was the first to point out that articles seem to be acquired differently , depending on whether or not they occur in the learners native language . Overall, the acquisition of the definite article the precedes the acquisition of the indefinite article **a** . Huebner(1983: 141 -163), Parrish(1987: 261- 283), Thomas(1989: 335- 355), and Chaudron and Parker (1990: 43- 64) found an overuse of the definite article, but higher proficiency learners improved in accuracy with indefinite **a** . Although both Master (1997: 215- 232) and Huebner (1983: 25 -32) referred to the phenomenon of **the** – flooding in which **the** is over generalized with a dramatic rise in usage, Thomas (1989:335- 355) found the zero article over generalized across proficiency levels.

For learners whose native languages lack articles, researchers Master (Ibid), Parrish (Ibid), and Ekiert (2004: 1-23) reported that **zero** dominates in all environments for articles in the early stages of language learning. Parrish (Ibid) suggested an order of acquisition in which the **zero** article, the definite article, and the indefinite article are acquired consecutively.

Master (Ibid) concluded that these learners seem to acquire the **zero** article first although he warns that one cannot tell the difference between the **zero** article and omission of the article. Masters data showed that **zero** accuracy is close to 100 % for the low – ability level participants, which then drops, and rises to nearly 100% again for the high – ability level participants. He further reported that the overuse of **zero** article decreases with the increase in the proficiency level , although the overuse of zero article persists more than the overuse of the other articles. Liu and Gleason (2002:5) reexamined Masters data and offered a new interpretation of the overuse of the zero article and underuse of **a** and **the**;

This overuse of the zero article and the underuse
of the advanced stage would suggest that the two
articles are acquired rather late.

Liu and Gleason s hypothesis was supported by Youngs (1996:135 – 175) data on the use of articles by Czeh and Slovak learners of English, for while definiteness was not encoded by **the** at the early stages of acquisition, it persisted even at the more advanced stages. However, participants encoded indefiniteness by means of the indefinite article **a** at all levels of proficiency with rising frequency as acquisition progressed.

Celce – Murica and Larsen –Freeman (1999:105) claim that the problematicity of the use of the article system is due in part to whether or not the lexical classification in to countable versus uncountable nouns corresponds in the native and target languages. For example, while **furniture** and **equipment** are uncountable in both Arabic and English, **chalk** and **information** are countable in Arabic and uncountable in English. This mismatch may very well add to the complexity of the learners task, for he /she needs to learn both the article system and other noun distinctions.

Articles need to be taught because not only do they carry meaning but using them erroneously often causes misreading and confusion. (Rinnert and Hansen,1986: 13) . This is made more plausible by Rinnert and Hansens (Ibid) report of significant improvement in article use by more than one thousand learners from different native language backgrounds following a systematic instructional approach using self – developed material. It has been reported that very few EFL/ESL textbooks present a systematic approach or a adequate practice to positively affect learners performance in article usage.

3. Method and Procedure

The subjects for this study were all students of English at Kerbela University (Kerbela, Iraq) in the second term of the academic year 2009 – 2010. The four groups of subjects started their degree in 2007- 2008-2009-2010 respectively. A total of 200 male and female students ,all of whom were between 18 and 23 years of age, were selected for the study .Like all Iraqi students , the ones who participated in this study started learning English as a foreign language in the fifth grade . They were homogeneous in terms of their linguistic and socioeconomic background, educational system, and field of study. The subjects lived in an exclusively Arabic – speaking community and had learned English as a foreign language prior to taking it up as their major field of study at the university. Class level and average length of compositions are the only two variables .The subjects were asked to write paragraph /essay about one of the following topics : Why do we study English?, violence in movies , car accidents author / story / poet. Table (1) shows the distribution of the sample in terms of gender and class level.

Table (1): Distribution of the Sample

Class Level	Male	Female	Total
First	12	37	49
Second	12	40	52
Third	14	42	56
Fourth	7	36	43
			200

The compositions were all written in 50- minute class sessions. For every composition, a word count was made and errors in the use of the indefinite article were counted, classified and later analyzed. The types and frequency of these errors were compared to observe similarities and /or differences in the type and number of errors made across the four levels. The length of the compositions was different across individual respondents as well as across class levels. A word count was performed excluding the instructions and questions which some of the subjects copied onto the answer sheet .An average word count for each class level was used to calculate the

percentage of errors in indefinite article usage . The average length of the compositions for each of the four class levels is shown in table (2).

Table (2): Average Length of Compositions across Class Level

Class Level	Average Length of Compositions
First	227
Second	301
Third	541
Fourth	606

The aim of the linguistic analysis of the compositions was to observe errors in the use of the indefinite article which could be interlingual errors caused by the influence of the learners native language; intralingual errors caused by the influence of the target language itself; *transfer of training errors* caused by faulty material presentation by teachers or textbooks; *second language learning strategies* which are the processes by which learners form, test, or modify hypotheses about the nature of the target language; and *second language communication strategies* by which learners attempt to handle the heavy communication demands facing them.

Data from each reading were organized using the following error categories: (1) deletion of the indefinite article, (2) writing a as part of the noun / adjective following it, (3) substitution of the indefinite for the definite article, (4) substitution of the definite for the indefinite article, (5) substitution of a for an, (6) use of the indefinite article with unmarked plurals, (7) use of the indefinite article with marked plurals, (8) use of the indefinite article with uncountable nouns (9) use of the indefinite article with adjectives.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, the researcher presents and discuses the findings of the study in the light of its objectives. First , the errors made by the four groups of subjects are identified in terms o their types and potential sources; second, the frequency of these errors is computed and compared to detect any developmental tendencies among the four levels; and third, potential differences among the subjects which can be attributed to class level or average length of compositions are detected.

5. Types of Errors

Discussed below are the nine types of error the subjects made in the use of the article.

5.1- Deletion of the indefinite article

Table (3), below, shows that a large number of errors were made under this category (67, 51, 20 and 9 errors by first, second, third, fourth students, respectively). These errors can be attributed to more than one source, the most obvious of which may be native language transfer, for the learners may be giving the equivalent native language structure as the result of their inadequate knowledge of that of the target language, as shown in the examples below:

4. English is international language {an international language}.
5. My neighbor was killed in car accidents. {a car accident} near Al-Temar hospital.
6. It is interesting story. {an interesting story}.

Where a considerable number of the subjects made the error of deleting the indefinite article **a (n)** whose use is obligatory with the singular countable nouns **language**, **accident**, and **story**. While

English requires the use of the indefinite article, Arabic shows indefiniteness by not using an article at all.

Due to the aforementioned differences between the two languages, ungrammatical structures are produced. The fact that Arabic does not have a distinct marker for indefiniteness the way English does is probably the cause of the learners deviation from the target language rule. This assumption is further supported by previous work by researchers like Duskova (1969 :11-36), Richards (1971:204-219) and Bataineh (2002:5-26) among others, where the same error was made by learners from this and other language backgrounds that either do not have corresponding article systems or articles altogether.

Another potential source of this error is the strategy of simplification. Learners could be attempting to reduce the learning burden where by the target language structure (the indefinite article) is simplified into a form which is compatible with the learners still developing interlanguage system. They may be using the zero articles with both singular and plural unidentified countable nouns, which would certainly reduce the system into a more manageable one.

5.2- Writing the indefinite article as part of the following element

Although this is by far the most frequent error among the learners of the four levels, it seems to be the easiest to explain. Since it could not be traced to either the native or the target language, transfer of training seems to be the ideal explanation, for very early in the acquisition process , these learners are presented with the indefinite article **a** as an inseparable companion to the noun (and later the adjective) it modifies. It is always **a book**, **a pen** or **a pencil** but never **book**, **pen** or **pencil**. By such presentation, learners are led to believe that a book is single item rather than a two – item noun phrase made of an indefinite article and a noun. This is further worsened by the fact that early material presentation is mostly oral, which may mean that by the time the learner is exposed to the written form, the misconceived structure has already been imprinted in his /her interlanguage system. This misconception causes them to write the article as part of the following element almost whenever they happen to observe the English rule of using one with singular unidentified countable nouns as seen in the examples below:

7. Shakespeare wrote so much he became **afamous** {a famous} playwright.
8. Speed is the most common case for **alot** {a lot} of accidents.

It is worth noting that this error is subsequent to that of article deletion, because once the learner realizes that an indefinite article is required, he /she often fails to treat it as a separate entity from the noun or adjective it modifies and, thus, continues to produce deviant structures.

5.3- Substitution errors

The substitution of the indefinite article **a (n)** for the definite article **the**, of the definite article the for the Indefinite article **a (n)**, and of the indefinite article **a** for the indefinite **an** were observed among the students of the four levels, as shown in the following examples:
9. English may be **an only language** {the only language} of business.
10. The international language {an international language} is used by people all over the world**.**
11. The person {a person} needs English for communication**.**
12. She broke her arm in **a accident {an** accident}.
13. He hasn't **a enough time** {?} to leave the car.

Table (3) shows numbers as well as the frequency of occurrence of the subjects errors. The way substitution errors are distributed in table (3) may appear odd .Compared to first, second, third stage students, fourth stage students made the least number of substitution errors, while fourth

stage students erroneously substituted the indefinite for the definite article, the definite for the indefinite article, and **a** for **an**.

Third stage students aside, second stage students and fourth ones exhibit a pattern which is best described as puzzling. First .second, and third stage students seem to do a little worse than fourth stage students in the erroneous substitution of the indefinite for the definite article (compare 31. 4%., 22. 1%, and 25.6% to 20 9%, respectively). This phenomenon, however, may make better sense if one keeps in mind that the subjects of the former levels made more errors in article deletion than fourth stage students (compare 45. 6%, 34. 7%, and 13. 6% to 6. 1%). In other words, while first, second , and third stage students deleted more indefinite articles , most fourth stage students recognized the fact that English requires the use of one with singular unidentified countable nouns which may have led them to over generalize the rule to instances where it is not applicable.

The fact that the third substitution error (i.e. that of **a** for **an**) occurred only in one third stage students composition and in a totally inappropriate context makes it appear like a nonce mistake or a slip of the pen . In addition to the faulty substitution, **he has not a enough time to leave the car** does not even call for the use of an article. furthermore, the use of the sentence, he does not have enough time is quite frequent in ESL / EFL textbooks and classroom situations, which lends itself to further support this analysis.

5.4- The use of the indefinite article with marked and unmarked plurals
Like the erroneous substitution of the indefinite for the definite article, fourth stage students surprisingly made the largest number of errors in the use of the indefinite article with unmarked plurals, as shown in the examples:

14. English is spoken by a people {people} from every nation.
15. A student {students} who know English have a better chance in life.

Nevertheless, they made no errors in the use of the indefinite article with marked plurals. Analogy or overgeneralization of other target language structures could be offered to explain this error. The learners were probably applying the rules of indefiniteness where it is not applicable.

Furthermore, hypercorrection, or the learners tendency to erroneously use the article in places where it is not required for fear of making errors, could be offered to explain this type of error. Because they are so often corrected when they drop the article, learners occasionally overuse the article to avoid making the error, especially after they have begun to recognize the need for an indefinite article in certain contexts in English.

5.5- The use of the indefinite article with uncountable nouns
This error occurred with larger frequency in the compositions of the first stage students and gradually decreased in the compositions of the other three groups (i. e 8, 2, 1 and 1 for first, second, third, and fourth stage students, respectively). Like the previous error, either overgeneralization or hypercorrection is probably the source of this error.

16. Young people use **an information** {information} to imitate the crimes in movies .

The learners could be erroneously extending the use of the indefinite article with singular unidentified countable nouns to uncountable ones on the grounds of structural similarity, or they could be overusing the indefinite article to avoid errors of deletion.

5.6- Use of the indefinite article with adjectives

This error is possibly the result of overgeneralization, for once the learner realizes the presence of an English structure where the adjective serves as the head of the noun phrase, he /she may erroneously extend this structure and, thus, use the indefinite article where it is not required on the false assumption that since the adjective is the head of the noun phrase, it is treated the same way the noun is with regard to the use of the indefinite article. Sentences like **I will nurse your sick and feed your hungry** and **I ventured into the unknown** are perfectly grammatical in English and , in fact , not structurally different from a sentence like **English is an extensive** and **the movies are all a classical**.

This error could also be explained as a nonce mistake, or one which is caused by learners carelessness, exhaustion or lack of attention. It has been found that learners usually correct this type of error themselves once their attention is drawn to it. The writer could have easily neglected or even not been able to come up with an appropriate singular noun to complete the sentence. Surprisingly, the researcher finds it hard to come up with appropriate noun for the sentence. Actually, the best she can do here is use the noun substitute **one** and **ones**, respectively.

6. The Effect of Class Level

The subjects made a total of 561 errors in the use of articles , which are divided into 283 errors by first stage students , 160 errors by second stage students , 54 errors by the third stage students ,and 64 errors by the fourth ones. The analysis of the different types of errors revealed that the learners performance varied from one item to another, for as students did well on certain items ,they had some difficulty with others .Table (3) shows that learners performance differs significantly from one item to another among the four proficiency levels. Most surprisingly , third stage students seem to consistently do better than their counterparts ,except, in the errors of substituting the indefinite for the definite article and using the indefinite article with adjectives , scoring a total error percentage of 9. 6 compared to 50.4% by first stage students , 28. 5% by the second , 9.6% by the third , and 11. 4% by the fourth ones. This researcher intends to investigate this phenomenon further in future research.

As third level students did better than first level students ,they outdid second level students in all areas but one (i.e. substitution of the indefinite for the definite article) (compare 22.1% to 25.6%). They also outdid fourth level students in all but the avoidance of three errors (i. e , the deletion of the indefinite article ,substitution of the indefinite for the definite article , and using the indefinite article with adjectives (compare their 13.6 %, 25.6%, 9.1% to the fourth level students 6. 1%, 20.9%, and 0%, respectively). This phenomenon would not seem so odd if one kept in mind that fourth level students made the least number of errors in article deletion .The fact that they used more articles explains their making more errors in writing (a) as part of the following element , substitution of the indefinite for the definite article , and the use of the indefinite article with unmarked plurals.

7. The Relationship between Composition Length and Number of Errors

Composition length was not found to have a consistent relationship with the number of errors made. While first level students, who wrote compositions of an average count of 227 words, made a total of 283 errors, second level students, who wrote compositions of an average count of 301 words, made a total of 160 errors, third level students, who wrote compositions of an average count of 541 words, made a total of 54 errors , and the fourth, who wrote compositions of an average count of 656 words, made a total of 64 errors.

This result is not consistent with traditional teacher warnings that the more one writes, the more errors he /she is bound to make. In fact, these figures may readily support the researchers claim that the errors made by the subjects are more developmental than thought in previous research .Although third level students and fourth ones wrote compositions with almost double the length of those written by their first and second counterparts, their errors were dramatically cut to less than 20 % and 23% of those made by first level students and 34% and 40%of those made by second level students, respectively.

8. Conclusion

The results obtained above suggest that the majority of errors made by the four groups are the result of common learning processes, such as overgeneralization and simplification of the English article system. The impact of the subjects native language was found minimal. The only type of error that could possibly be ascribed to native language transfer, among other sources, is the deletion of the indefinite article. Although the results achieved in this study are sound and significant, more research is needed .A longitudinal study using the same subjects over the period of their study might prove invaluable for these purposes, not to mention incorporating oral as well as written data in the analysis.

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