

University learners' performance in using the definite article in definite contexts versus the indefinite article in indefinite contexts.

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ABSTRACT

Interlanguage errors have long been a field of interest for a number of studies over the years. Errors in article usage, a kind of interlanguage errors are a persistent problem that teachers of English as a second/foreign language very often encounter. It is widely observed in the Sri Lankan context too that learners have difficulty with the article system of English as Sri Lankans consider error-free English as the hallmark of English proficiency. Many teachers agree that errors in article usage is basically a problem caused by the absolute complexity of English article system as learners experience difficulty in expressing definiteness or indefiniteness of the noun using appropriate articles. This study was an attempt to identify whether the first year undergraduates at the Wayamba University of Sri Lanka performed better in using the definite article in definite contexts than the indefinite article in indefinite contexts. The study was carried out by means of a pre-test, a post-test and a delayed post-test. Teaching was done after the pre-test and the post-test was deployed after teaching and a delayed post-test was conducted four weeks after the post-test. The tests consisted of a cloze test and a free writing task. The necessary data were obtained by analysing the students' errors in zero, single and multiple modifier noun configurations. The descriptive method was used and a statistical analysis was followed to identify the variance of errors. P values of two-way ANOVA tests on the percentages of correct attempts were considered to determine the effect of article type on the learners' performance. The analysis of the results indicated that the article type had some significant bearing on the performance of the subjects' using of articles, and they performed better in definite contexts than in indefinite contexts. This supports the view that learners have to be exposed to a considerable amount of language over a long period of time before they master certain grammar rules, especially articles, which consist of a number of rules as well as exceptions to those rules.

Keywords: *interlanguage, errors, grammar*

1. INTRODUCTION

The rationale behind this study is to identify in which type of article usage the students of English as a second language (ESL / L2) commit less errors. The comparison was twofold; a comparison of the performance between the definite article ('the') and the indefinite article ('a and an') and a comparison among three articles ('a', 'an' and 'the'). First comparison is to find out whether the students perform better in definite contexts than in indefinite contexts and the second comparison is to identify the article which the students control best.

Since the relevant literature indicates that many researchers have approached articles from different perspectives such as error analysis, acquisition of the second language, semantics and pragmatics (Agnihotri, Khanna, & Mukherjee, 1994; Robertson, 2000; Trenkic, 2007; Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008; Snape & Kupisch, 2010), the present study too is based on an error analysis, which seems to be the most extensively followed practice among the researchers who carried out studies on articles.

2. METHODOLOGY AND EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

The corpus of the language sample was studied for errors in article usage by identification, categorization and explanation, which was suggested by Corder (1973) and later modified by Brown (1994), Ellis (1997) and Gass and Selinker (2001). This was a widely-held and frequently utilized method in carrying out an error analysis. Data were collected by means of three tests (a pre-test, a post test and a delayed post-test). Each test comprised two tasks; a cloze task and a free writing task; the cloze task was based on reading and writing skills and was intended for the purpose of testing the key uses of articles while the free writing task was based on writing skills for the purpose of identifying whether types of errors committed in the cloze task could be observed in their written production too. Two different tasks were chosen as the relevant literature indicates that students' performance is affected by the task they are engaged in (Agnihotri et al., 1994; Robertson, 2000; Trenkic, 2007; Zdorenko and Paradis, 2008; Snape and Kupisch, 2010). Since students were not informed that article usage

would be tested in their free writing task, it is assumed that they produced articles involuntarily. However, in the cloze task (forced choice elicitation task) students had to produce articles consciously.

The present study used a description of an imaginary local person given in about 197 words. It was adapted and modified from a task given by Hewings (2002) in his *Advanced English Grammar* textbook. The advantage of this task was that it provided a high degree of control over the input. The same cloze task was used in all three tests (pre-test, post-test and delayed post-test). In this particular cloze task participants had to supply 27 missing articles (ten blanks for missing 'the', eight blanks for missing 'a' and another nine blanks for missing 'an').

The free writing task was for them to write a short description in about 200 words on the topics 'The most unforgettable day', 'The most unforgettable person' and 'The most unforgettable teacher'. Although the same cloze task was used in all three tests, the participants were given a different topic for the free writing task in each test.

Although the original study focused on a number of analyses, this particular analysis was done to determine whether the students perform better in definite contexts than in indefinite contexts. For the purpose of this particular analysis the performance in each type of article was considered separately. Therefore, for this analysis the subjects' performance in the usage of three main articles ('a', 'an' and 'the') in the cloze task and the free writing task was compared across the three tests conducted. Zero modifier, single modifier and multiple modifier noun configurations of three main articles (See Table 1 for the examples for these configurations) were considered in order to determine the variance among them in this particular analysis.

Then the errors were identified and classified based on the noun phrases in which the articles were used. Finally, the quantification and description were carried out to complete the error analysis process.

In the present study, after the pre-test a two-hour lesson on articles was given to the participants by a lecturer in ELT. Then after a week's time the post-test was administered and the delayed post test was conducted ten weeks after the pre-test. Subjects were given 40 minutes to complete the cloze task as well as the free writing task. The cloze task was printed on one side of an A4 paper and the instructions for the free writing task were printed on the other side (*Appendix i sets out the sample of the cloze test*). Although it was planned to administer the tests to 60 subjects, only 48 were present

for the pre-test, 44 for the lesson on articles, 38 for the post-test and 39 for the delayed post-test.

Table 1: Noun configurations used in the present study

Article Type	Configuration	Example
the	1. the + noun	<i>the manager</i>
	2. the + single modifier + noun	<i>the Colombo branch</i>
	3. the + multiple modifiers + noun	<i>the most skilful player</i>
a	1. a + noun	<i>a member</i>
	2. a + single modifier + noun	<i>a professional cricketer</i>
	3. a + multiple modifiers + noun	<i>a leading political party</i>
an	1. an + noun	<i>an umbrella</i>
	2. an + single modifier + noun	<i>an honest person</i>
	3. an + multiple modifiers + noun	<i>an ambitious branch manager</i>

2.1. Sample

The sample consisted of first year undergraduates of the Faculty of Applied Sciences of the Wayamba University of Sri Lanka. This particular faculty is one of the four faculties of the university and students who take combined mathematics for the General Certificate of Education - Advanced Level (G.C.E. A/L) are selected for its study programmes.

2.2. Collection of Data

The test was administered in the classroom where the participants usually had their English classes. No special seating arrangement was made and the printed test paper was distributed among them. They were given 40 minutes to complete both tasks. These 40 minutes were taken at the beginning of their usual two-hour class. Two tasks of the test were printed separately on each side and they were expected to fill in the blanks with 'a', 'an' or 'the' for the cloze task and write the given description in the space provided for the writing task.

2.3. Analysis of Data

The procedure followed by Agnihotri et al. (1994) in their study for data analysis was adopted in the present study too. They presented data based on percentages and the method they used to calculate the percentage of correct attempts was adopted in the present study since it was a simple, straightforward method which helped comprehend data easily. The procedure was to calculate the total number of attempts that could be made for each potential place in each noun configuration of the cloze task. The percentage of correct responses was

calculated against the total numbers of attempts. For example, there were six potential places in the cloze passage where the definite article was required to be inserted in 'the + noun' configuration. Since the total number of subjects being 48 at the pre-test, then the total number of attempts would be calculated as 288 (48 x 6 = 288). Out of these, 'the' was correctly inserted only in 113 attempts. Thus 39.24% (113/288 X 100) responses were correct.

In the free writing task, all possible noun configurations were marked separately and the total number of attempts representing one configuration was calculated by considering all the essays produced by the participants. When essays were analysed for the errors in article usage, individual scripts were considered and the total number of noun phrases requiring articles was identified. After that the number of correct inclusions of articles in these noun phrases was also identified. Both article omission errors as well as article misuse errors were taken into account during the analysis. Likewise, all the scripts were evaluated and the percentage of correct responses was calculated for each article configuration. For example, there were 167 potential places in all the 48 essays where the definite article is required to be used in 'the + noun' configuration in the pre-test. Therefore, the total number of attempts is 167. Out of them only in 78 attempts 'the' is correctly inserted. Thus 46.71% (78/167 X 100) responses were correct. Likewise, calculations for all the noun configurations were carried out. When analysing the errors of article usage in the free writing task, the length of the essays produced was not taken into consideration. The number of errors in each noun configuration was noted and percentages of the correct use were calculated. The same procedure was repeated in all three tests.

3. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

All possible configurations were considered for the analysis as the relevant literature indicates that an article can precede a noun with or without modifiers. The 'article + zero modifier + noun' configuration was considered when no modifier was used to modify the noun (e.g. *the manager*). The 'article + single modifier + noun' configuration was considered when only one modifier was used to modify the noun (e.g. *the Colombo branch*). The 'article + multiple modifiers + noun' configuration was considered when two or more modifiers were used to modify the noun (e.g. *the most skilful player, the best supporting actor award*). Therefore, articles used in the tasks (the cloze task and the free writing task) were coded according to the noun configurations as correct use of 'the', 'a', and 'an' in 'article + noun', 'article + single modifier + noun' and 'article + multiple modifiers + noun' configurations. Both tasks were marked on the basis of the correct or

incorrect article used in the noun configurations given in *Table 1*.

3.1. Articles in zero modifier noun configurations

The analysis of the above configuration shows that the subjects' performance in 'an + noun' configuration is higher than their performance in other configurations. But their performance in 'the + noun' and 'a + noun' configurations is more or less the same. The results of the ANOVA showed that there was some significant variance among noun configurations as P values for configurations were 0.027 (P < 0.05), 0.035 (P < 0.05) and 0.022 (P < 0.05) for the pre-test, post-test and the delayed post-test respectively. In other words, they indicate that the changes in noun configurations affect the performance of the students' use of articles.

3.2. Articles in single modifier noun configurations

When analysis of the above configuration is concerned, it is clearly visible that the subjects' performance in the 'an + single modifier + noun' configuration is the highest when compared with the other two configurations in both tasks of all the tests conducted. It also confirms that subjects perform better in noun configurations of 'an' than the other two. The results of the ANOVA in this context showed that there was some substantial variance among configurations as P values for noun configurations in the cloze task and the free writing task were 0.007 (P < 0.05), 0.018 (P < 0.05) and 0.046 (P < 0.05) for the pre-test, post-test and the delayed post-test respectively. Once again it restates the fact that the change in noun configurations affects the performance of the subjects' use of articles.

3.3. Articles in multiple modifier noun configurations

The results shown in the above configuration are also similar to the ones obtained for the previous contexts. Here also it indicates that subjects' performance in noun configurations of 'an' is better than in the other two configurations. The results of the ANOVA for this configuration showed that there was some noteworthy variance among configurations as P values for configurations in the cloze task and the free writing task were 0.042 (P < 0.05), 0.031 (P < 0.05) and 0.041 (P < 0.05) for the pre-test, post-test and the delayed post-test respectively. It confirms the results obtained for the zero modifier and single modifier noun configurations. So it can be concluded that subjects' performance is affected by the noun configuration in which the article is placed.

When the subjects' performance of the definite article is considered against their performance of the indefinite article ('a' and 'an' together), *Figure 1* shows that the subjects' performance is slightly higher in the definite article than their performance in the indefinite article. *Figure 2* shows that the subjects' best performance was

reported in noun configurations in which the indefinite article 'an' is placed, their worst performance was reported in noun configurations in which the indefinite article 'a' is placed. This result supports what Pica (1983), Robertson (2000) and Trenkic (2007) have found in their studies.

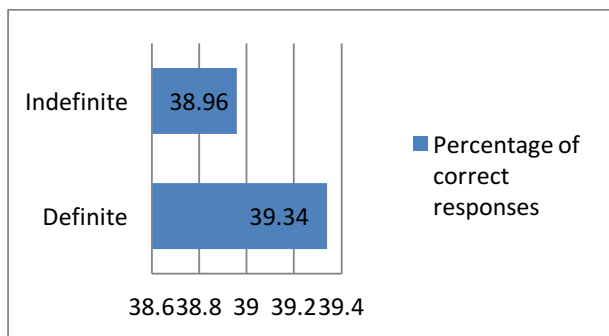


Figure 1: Overall performance of definite and indefinite articles

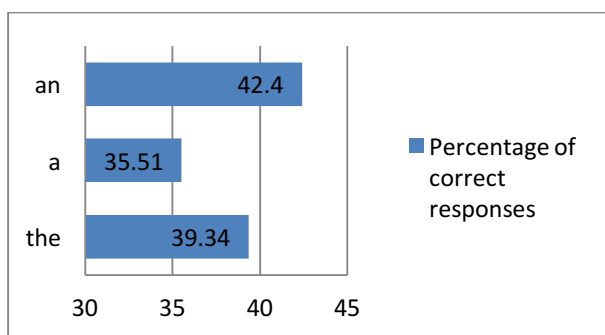


Figure 2: Overall performance of each article

4. DISCUSSION

This study too confirms that the article system of English can pose problems for ESL learners as the data show a lot of variability in these students' interlanguage. In addition, this investigation is notable among the studies based on article usage by ESL learners as articles used in different noun configurations are given more prominence and compared in three tiers; tests, tasks and configurations. It is rare to find studies which attempt to analyse the data across a broad range of comparisons. Although their performance in using indefinite article 'an' was the highest when individual articles were concerned, the overall performance of using the definite article in definite contexts was better than their usage of the indefinite article in indefinite contexts. Since the analyses of the present research were based on all possible comparisons, they further consolidated the findings of the previous studies in a broader setting.

4.1. Limitations of the Research

It is imperative to consider some of the limitations of the study carried out. The main concern with regard to the

cloze task was that it was not possible to include all basic uses of articles as the scope of the uses that the definite and definite articles encompass is vast. In addition, the article uses tested in the cloze task are not a true representation of the items discussed in the lesson. Moreover, the researcher did not have any control over the output of the free writing task as it was a production task. The data yielded just one or two examples of some noun configurations while for others, there was no evidence. Thus when the subjects' performance in these two tasks was compared they might not have fully represented the subjects' ability to manipulate the English article system.

4.2. Future Directions

Although 'missing articles' in obligatory contexts was a frequent occurrence along with incorrect use of articles, in the present study it was also considered under the category of incorrect use of articles, not as a separate phenomenon. However, it is important to identify whether omission of articles is deliberate or unintentional as it is difficult to determine whether the learner has omitted the articles or replaced it with the zero article. One future area of research would be to look into the learners' omission of articles and to identify whether they are intentional or unintentional.

Another phenomenon which is worth studying is the use of articles in configurations other than with common nouns. It has been observed that ESL learners tend to use articles in front of words such as verbs, prepositions, pronouns, etc. Although these errors have been disregarded in the present study, the researcher feels that these errors are also prominent in their interlanguage and command attention.

4.3. Conclusions

Although the students' performance in definite contexts is slightly better than in the indefinite contexts, this research also suggests that there is a sequence in the acquisition of articles. 'An' seems to be mastered prior to the other two and 'a' requires more time in comparison with the other two. This particular pattern of variation in the performance on the different types of articles suggests that ESL learners may not acquire all forms of articles simultaneously.

However, these findings indicate that ESL research on articles should be replenished by identifying whether learners' omission of articles is intentional or unintentional as well as the reasons for their using articles in places other than with common nouns.

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Appendix I – Tests Conducted

Task 1. Write the missing articles (a, an or the) in the blanks.

Nimal Perera; A profile

Nimal Perera recently became chief minister in a local government institution. Mr. Perera is honest person and has had varied career. He was professional cricketer in 1980s. He used to be all-rounder and some people considered him to be most skillful player of his generation. After series of injuries, he became manager of Colombo branch of ABC bank. Most of staff considered him to be ambitious branch manager. Nevertheless he was very popular among his colleagues as easy – going character. Later he became actor for brief period of time. He won best supporting actor award for his only film in which he acted as marriage broker who always carried umbrella. Some years later, he was offered executive position in one of biggest supermarket chains in country. After that he became active member of leading political party. The party asked him to contest for the local government election as he was attractive down-to-earth politician. Now he also holds ministerial portfolio there and wants to be member of parliament one day.

Appendix II – Answers for the Task 1

Nimal Perera; A profile

Nimal Perera recently became *the* chief minister in a local government institution. Mr. Perera is *an* honest person and has had *a* varied career. He was *a* professional cricketer in *the* 1980s. He used to be *an* all-rounder and some people considered him to be *the* most skillful player of his generation. After *a* series of injuries, he became *the* manager of *the* Colombo branch of *the* ABC bank. Most of *the* staff considered him to be *an* ambitious bank manager. Nevertheless, he was very popular among his colleagues as *an* easy – going character. Later he became *an* actor for *a* brief period of time. He won *the* best supporting actor award for his only film in which he acted as *a* marriage broker who always carried *an* umbrella. Some years later, he was offered *an* executive position in one of *the* biggest supermarket chains in *the* country. After that he became *an* active member of *a* leading political party. The party asked him to contest for the local government election as he was *an* attractive down-to-earth politician. Now he also holds *a* ministerial portfolio there and wants to be *a* member of parliament one day.