The Presence or Absence of Definiteness in the Native Language and Its Impact on ESL Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine if first language interference does play a significant role in the use of articles in English by native speakers of Arabic as compared to other ESL learners. An error analysis was conducted on the use of English articles in essays taken from two groups of advanced ESL learners. The essays were composed by undergraduate students at Texas A&M University located in Commerce during the period 2011-2013. The first group was comprised of 18 native speakers of Arabic while the other was comprised of 18 other non-native speakers of English. The use of English articles was categorized numerically using a taxonomy of formal obligatory contexts. None of the statistical tests used in the study revealed significant differences between the groups even though over 90% of group two participants were native speakers of languages that do not have a system which contrasts articles as definite and indefinite like English does, or a system that separates article function from indexical use of the morpho-syntactic unit. Since Arabic does have an article system, these findings provide evidence that the strong version of the contrastive analysis hypothesis has little predictive import with respect to the English language article system in the written language of advanced ESL learners. The major factors affecting the use of English articles by these subjects are intra-lingual rather than inter-lingual.

Keywords: definiteness, indefiniteness, ESL learning, intra-lingual errors, inter-lingual errors

1. Introduction

It may be claimed that "a knowledge of English is a sign of culture and education, besides being helpful in getting a job" (Abu-Absi, 1982, p. 134). For the vast majority of people throughout the world, English is considered as the international language. It is also used as a "lingua franca" in many parts of the world (Kim, 1983, p. 21). ESL learners in the Arabic speaking world are no different than their counterparts in other parts of the world. A large number of Arab students as well as students from other countries go to the United States of America and other English speaking countries in an effort to pursue their post secondary education. This highlights the growing need for good English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction in American colleges and universities.

In the case of native speakers of Arabic, (Naser, 1983) points out that Arab students represent a large portion of international students in America. They usually lack proper preparation in the English language. Thus, most of them have to take a full course of English before entering colleges and universities. Since Arabic and English differ greatly in several linguistic aspects, students whose native language is Arabic encounter some serious difficulties in their endeavors to learn English.

One area of the English language that is particularly troubling to native speakers of Arabic is the use of articles. In a study conducted by (Kharma, 1981) concludes that it has been proven without any doubt at all that the use of English definite/indefinite articles is a serious source of difficulty to Arabic speaking students. To this effect, Naser (1983) claims that in the case of Arabic and English, the perceived language distance is relatively great (pp. 21-27). Therefore, the effect of Arabic on its native speakers' use of English articles and other syntactic elements would be expected to be relatively weak. Richards (1974, p. 172) also stresses the developmental aspects of learning syntax. He states "contrastive analysis may be …least predictive at the syntactic level". Furthermore, he urges that more attention needs to be paid to errors the source of which is not inter-lingual. More specifically,

Richards (1974) classifies inter-lingual errors as those resulting from overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized.

Building upon Richards' (1974) and Corder's (1975) theoretical framework regarding error analysis and how it may be used to explain ESL learners' errors, James (1998) makes a solid contribution to the area of error analysis and its impact on aiding non-native speakers of English to understand reasons behind the mistakes made during the process of second language learning. James explains how error Analysis occupies a central position within applied linguistics, and seeks to clarify questions such as 'Does correctness matter?', 'Is it more important to speak fluently and write imaginatively or to communicate one's message?' Furthermore, James provides a scholarly and well-illustrated theoretical and historical background to the field of error analysis. The reader is led from definitions of error and related concepts, to categorization of types of linguistic deviance, discussion of error gravities, the utility of teacher correction and towards writing learner profiles. Throughout, the text is guided by considerable practical experience in language education in a range of classroom contexts world-wide.

In a study investigating reasons of difficulties by Pakistani ESL learners in acquiring English articles, Mahmood et al., (2011) found that zero article usage fluctuates to be acquired earlier as it is not a part of the learners' native language i.e. Urdu. For intermediate learners, there were more mistakes identified than those of graduate learners. "Usage of articles in idioms created a problem for the learners at all levels". It seems that even the type of dictionaries used by ESL learners may have an impact on their ability to learn English articles (Miller, 2006). Japanese learners also seem to face a problem in learning English articles as (Kubota, 1994, p. 1) claims "As the English article system is one of the most difficult grammatical items for Japanese learners of English to acquire since Japanese has no article system".

At any rate, there is no doubt that a clear controversy exists among ESL researchers concerning the source of students' errors when attempting to learn English syntax in general and English articles in particular, such researchers include (Haiyan & Lianrui, 2010), (Mede & Gurel, 2010), (Liu & Gleason, 2002) and (Geranpayeh, 2000) for example.

2. Purpose

In light of the controversy regarding the cause of difficulty in learning English articles by non-native speakers discussed above, this study was designed to determine if first language interference does play a significant role in the use of English articles using native speakers of Arabic and other non-native speakers of English as subjects.

3. Methodology

Data for this study were collected by analyzing the essays written by a number of international students on the Junior Level Essay Examination (JLEE). This exam is a writing proficiency test administered to undergraduates at Texas A&M University located in Commerce, Texas. The purpose of this exam is to ensure minimal competence in written English by all students receiving degrees from the university. The test was developed by the university faculty and scored on a 12-point rating system by a panel of faculty members.

Subjects for this study were selected from the entire population of students at the university who took the JLEE from Fall 2011 through Summer 2013. Students chosen as subjects fro this study were divided into two groups: The first group consisted of 18 students whose native language is Arabic. The second group was made of 18 students who speak other international languages including: Chinese (7), Farsi (6), Gujarati (2), Bengali (1), Kisi (1), and Urdu (1).

Five of the six languages mentioned above are known not to have article systems (Seah, 1980, p. 68; Lambton, 1967, p. 3; Gilchrist, 1970, p. 38). Kisi is the only exception to the rule in the second group of languages although the speaker of the language himself did not know for sure whether his language has an article system. In contrast, Arabic has a very complex article system similar in many aspects to the English article system. However, it has been claimed by some linguists that only definiteness is formally marked in Arabic. Al-Johani (1982, pp. 159-173) clearly shows that this is not the case. He clarifies this misconception by stating that neither early nor modern Arabic studies sufficiently define or discuss indefiniteness or the use of indefinite nouns. Whenever these studies have to deal with definiteness and indefiniteness, they give the lion's share to the former and define the latter negatively in terms of the former.

4. Limitations

This study is limited to the analysis of errors in the use of English articles in written compositions and does not deal with errors in phonology or speech.

5. Discussion

All 36 essays used in this study were analyzed numerically using a taxonomy of formal, obligatory context taken from "A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language" (Quirk et al., 1985, pp. 265-287).

After the essays were arranged numerically, each article usage was coded by formal, obligatory context, as well as by whether the usage was correct or incorrect, so that a percentage of correct usage could be obtained for each obligatory context in each essay. The first group was compared to the second using students' tests and a probability of $p<.05$ to test the following hypotheses formulated when the study was begun:

Hypothesis 1. There is no statistically significant difference between group one and two in the use of the definite article "the".

Hypothesis 2. There is no statistically significant difference between group one and two in the use of the indefinite articles "a and an".

Hypothesis 3. There is no statistically significant difference between group one and two in the use of the "zero article".

Hypothesis 4. There is no statistically significant difference between group one and two in the total usage of English articles.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 display the data and analyses made to test hypotheses 1 through 4. Subjects are numbered by the chronological order in which their essays were analyzed.

Table 1. Proportions of correct article usage (group one)

Subject	Definite Article	Indefinite Article	Zero Article	Total Articles	Native Language
5	1.000	0.857	0.952	0.936	Arabic
6	1.000	0.933	1.000	0.978	Arabic
8	0.667	0.750	0.444	0.620	Arabic
12	0.909	0.833	0.935	0.829	Arabic
13	1.000	0.800	1.000	0.933	Arabic
14	1.000	1.000	0.500	0.833	Arabic
16	0.964	0.500	1.000	0.821	Arabic
18	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	Arabic
19	0.786	0.857	0.813	0.819	Arabic
21	1.000	0.926	0.900	0.942	Arabic
24	0.950	1.000	1.000	0.983	Arabic
25	0.909	1.000	1.000	0.970	Arabic
26	0.800	0.556	0.619	0.658	Arabic
28	0.800	0.706	0.900	0.802	Arabic
30	0.955	0.636	0.971	0.854	Arabic
31	1.000	0.500	0.913	0.804	Arabic
32	1.000	1.000	0.938	0.979	Arabic
34	0.786	0.900	1.000	0.895	Arabic

Table 2. Proportions of correct article usage (group two)

Subject	Definite Article	Indefinite Article	Zero Article	Total Articles	Native Language
1	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	Gujarati
2	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000	Kisi
3	1.000	0.909	0.900	0.936	Farsi
4	0.889	0.769	0.667	0.775	Urdu
7	0.818	0.400	0.842	0.687	Bengali
9	0.900	0.857	0.818	0.858	Chinese
10	0.952	1.000	0.444	0.799	Chinese
11	0.778	0.857	1.000	0.878	Chinese
15	0.769	1.000	1.000	0.923	Farsi
17	0.929	0.900	0.929	0.919	Chinese
20	0.875	0.889	1.000	0.921	Chinese
22	0.765	0.900	1.000	0.888	Chinese
23	1.000	0.833	0.929	0.921	Farsi
27	0.939	0.950	1.000	0.963	Gujarati
29	0.800	0.917	1.000	0.906	Farsi
33	0.960	0.857	1.000	0.939	Chinese
35	0.813	0.571	0.933	0.772	Farsi
36	0.688	1.000	1.000	0.896	Farsi

From inspecting the data, the reader can observe that subject 18 in group one and subjects 1 and 2 in group two made no errors in the use of articles. Subjects 6, 24, 25, and 32 in group one and subject 27 in group two also scored very high in their total usage of the articles. These scores are encouraging because they indicate that the use of the English articles can be mastered by EFL post secondary students regardless of whether their native languages have article systems.

The lowest score (0.400) occurred in the use of the indefinite articles (subject 7, group two). Alternately favoring the zero article and the definite article, this subject seemed to have no clear hypothesis about where to use the indefinite articles. This also seemed to be the case with subject 26 in group one. Subject 16 in group one preferred the definite article where an indefinite article would have been correct. Subject 31 in group one appeared to avoid context where the indefinite article would be used; thus, this subject used only 2 contexts involving indefinite articles and made only one error in this category. Two low scores where made by subject 8 in group one and subject 10 in group two, both in their usage of the zero article. Interestingly, inspection of their essays revealed that they both had a tendency to use the definite article in situations where the obligatory context did not require its use. Subject 14 in group one and subject 4 in group two had the same tendency. Subject 26 in group one, however, seemed to be using the hypothesis that the indefinite article was the correct usage in zero article contexts.

By examining the means in Table 3, one can note that group one scored highest in the use of the definite article and that group two scored highest in the use of the zero article. Both groups scored lowest in the use of the indefinite articles. The highest t-value was produced in the comparison between group one and group two in the use of the definite article. A very low t-value was produced in the zero article comparison, and the two groups where nearly equal in their total article usage (t=0.47). The means of the two groups for total article usage where separated by only one and one-half percentage points.

None of the t-tests produced statistically significant probabilities; hence, all of the differences between the two groups would be expected to have occurred by chance. Accordingly:

1) Hypothesis 1 was not rejected.

2) Hypothesis 2 was not rejected.

3) Hypothesis 3 was not rejected.

4) Hypothesis 4 was not rejected.

It is significant, however, that no statistically significant differences were observed, since the strong version of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) would have predicted that a language with an article system comparable to the English one would have produced more transfer than a language with no article system at all, and that group one would have scored significantly higher than group two especially in the use of the definite and indefinite articles.

Table 3. T-tests for independence by article type and native language

Variable	Group	Subjects	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t-Value	Degrees of Freedom	Probability
Definite Article	1	18	0.918	0.104	0.025	1.07	34	N.S.
	2	18	0.881	0.098	0.023			
Indefinite Article	1	18	0.820	0.175	0.041	0.86	34	N.S.
	2	18	0.867	0.157	0.037			
Zero Article	1	18	0.883	0.176	0.042	0.59	34	N.S.
	2	18	0.915	0.148	0.035			
Total Articles	1	18	0.873	0.135	0.032	0.47	34	N.S.
	2	18	0.888	0.084	0.020			

One other relationship bears comment in these analyses. Observing the differences between the means of the definite and indefinite article categories in group one, keeping in mind Al-Johani's (1982, p. 254) claim about the influence of Arabic dialects on ESL learner's ability to learn English articles "modern Arabic dialects drop indefinite marking except in certain set phrases or proverbs". To test this claim, a t-test for related measures between these two categories in group one was administered. Table 4 shows that this difference too was not statistically significant. This analysis did produce the highest t-value of any analysis performed, however, and might be worth bearing in mind in possible future studies. No other analyses were performed.

The fact that scores were high overall can perhaps be explained by the relatively advanced level of writing instruction these students had all previously received. Perhaps the lack of significant differences between group one and two could be attributable, therefore, to this high level of proficiency.

Table 4. T-tests for related measures by Arab definite article usage and Arab indefinite article usage

Variable	Group	Subjects	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t-Value	Degrees of Freedom	Probability
Indefinite Article			0.918	0.104	0.025			
	1	18				2.279	17	N.S.
Definite Article			0.820	0.175	0.041			

6. Conclusions

Recent research in the areas of error and contrastive analysis comes down solidly in favor of inter-lingual interpretations for errors made by non-native speakers of English attempting to learn it as a second or foreign language (Jian, 2013) and (Mei, 2013) for example. This study is no exception. It may be worth clarifying here that all participants' learning backgrounds in English are comparably similar prior to participating in this study. None of the statistical tests performed in the process of data analysis revealed significant differences between the two groups studied, even though over 90% of group two participants were native speakers of languages that do not have a system which contrasts articles as definite and indefinite like English does, or a system that separates

article function from indexical use of the morpho-syntactic unit. Moreover, since all of group one participants were native speakers of Arabic, a language with an article system similar to that of English, it has been demonstrated that no mother tongue interference was detected in the written language of these advanced ESL learners. These findings provide relatively substantial evidence that the strong version of the CAH has little predictive import with respect to the acquisition of the English language article system as reflected in the written language of advanced ESL students. Therefore, it may be safe to claim that the major factors affecting the use of English articles by these subjects are intra-lingual rather than inter-lingual.

Accordingly, this study shows that native speakers of Arabic have no more or less trouble with this area of English syntax than do other non-native speakers of English.

7. Recommendations

In light of the findings discussed above as they pertain to this particular study and specific informants, the following recommendations may be reached:

1) A fresh look should be taken at error analyses previously conducted which attributed the difficulty native speakers of Arabic have with English articles to mother tongue interference.

2) More attention should be paid to intra-lingual factors which inhibit learning to use English articles correctly.

3) ESL teachers should take Liao's (1984, pp. 142-148) advice in doing the following:

a) Teach the countability of nouns.

b) Teach the contrast between the zero article and the other two articles at the very beginning of English lessons.

c) Tell students that the article system in English is largely rule-governed.

d) Teach basic and compact syntactic forms and functions relative to English article usage.

e) Devise a self-study program that students would be required to take until they could pass a screening test.

f) Evaluate English grammar textbooks and recommend students purchase those that receive favorable book reviews.

Finally, ESL students should be encouraged to have more language contact with native speakers of English in order to ensure exposure to the proper use of elements of the target language, including the article system.

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