

## The Use of English Articles in Adjective-modified Contexts

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### ABSTRACT

English articles are thought to be complex, ambiguous and not salient in spoken language, which is why second language (L2) learners of English exhibit usage variability. Much of the L2 acquisition literature seems to agree that L2 learners are affected, one way or another, by their first language (L1). However, the debatable and controversial issue is whether there are other factors that affect article use, independent of potential L1 effects. The present study examines whether the presence or absence of adjectives in noun phrases influences article choice among Saudi Arabic learners of English. Both Arabic and English have articles, but Arabic adjectives are different from English adjectives to the extent that they agree with nouns in definiteness, case and gender. The study was conducted with 24 L1 Saudi Arabic speakers and 6 native English speakers. A 42-item fill-in-the-blanks task was administered. The results showed that a) native speakers of English outperformed L2 Arabic speakers in all contexts except indefinite plural contexts not modified by adjectives; and b) L2 Arabic speakers were more accurate in indefinite contexts that were not modified by adjectives than those that were. These findings show that L1 Arabic speakers are sensitive to the presence or absence of adjectives in noun phrases.

### INTRODUCTION

L2 learners' difficulties with the acquisition of English articles have been well-documented by many researchers (e.g., Bohnacker, 1997; Cho & Slabakova, 2014; Huebner, 1983; Thomas, 1989). Researchers' views vary regarding factors that affect successful L2 acquisition of English articles (Abudalbuh, 2016; Burns & Soja, 1997). They also differ concerning the types of errors that L2 learners of English make. There are two types of errors in using English articles (Trenkic, 2009): a) omission; and b) substitution. Omission errors can be attributed to the absence of articles in the L1 of L2 learners (such as the Japanese and Korean languages), whereas substitution errors are a result of difficulties in setting the semantic parameter at the correct value. Both types of errors can be attributed to the complex nature of English articles and/or to L1 transfer effects. Researchers varied with regard to their diagnoses of these errors (see Danon, 2010; Fraurud, 1990; Robertson, 2000; Zegarac, 2004). However, very few studies have addressed one often overlooked factor that may be responsible for errors in the use of English articles. This is the presence or absence of adjectives before the target nouns (e.g. Goad & White, 2004; Sharma, 2005; Trenkic, 2002, 2007, 2009). Attributive adjectives in Arabic resemble nouns in 'number, gender, definiteness and case'

(Samy & Samy, 2014: 122), which is not the case in English. To the best of my knowledge, none of the Arabic-based article studies have addressed the issue of adjectives. This study therefore examines whether the presence or absence of adjectives influences L1 Saudi Arabic speakers' article use. Investigating this will provide us with deeper insight into the potential effects of adjectives on article use.

The research questions were as follows:

1. Do L1 Saudi Arabic speakers use articles similarly to native speakers?
2. Does the presence or absence of adjectives before nouns influence L1 Saudi Arabic speakers' article use?

The next sections describe the article systems in Saudi Arabic and English, and illustrate how adjectives interact with articles in both languages.

### Articles in English and Saudi Arabic

English has the definite article *the* and the indefinite articles *a/an* and the invisible indefinite article  $\emptyset$  (Master, 1990). *The* is not sensitive to number and can be used with singular, plural and mass nouns. *A/an* is used with singular nouns, while the indefinite zero article  $\emptyset$  is used with plural nouns. Conversely, Arabic has the definite article *al-* that is joined to the beginning of a word and the zero article  $\emptyset$  (Samy &

Samy, 2014). Neither article is sensitive to number as is the case in English.

Since the present study addresses the use of articles with singular and plural nouns preceded by adjectives, mass examples will not be illustrated.

### English

Nouns not modified by adjectives.

- a) The key is not here. (definite singular)
- b) The keys are not here. (definite plural)
- c) I have a house. (indefinite singular)
- d) I have houses. (indefinite plural)

Nouns modified by adjectives.

- a) The red key is not here. (definite singular)
- b) The red keys are not here. (definite plural)
- c) I have a big house. (indefinite singular)
- d) I have big houses. (indefinite plural)

It can be seen from the examples above that English is not sensitive to the present or absence of adjectives before target nouns. If the context is definite, the whole noun phrase (adjective + noun) is modified by the definite article (this also applies to indefinite articles).

### Saudi Arabic

Nouns not modified by adjectives.

- a) al-muftah mahu hina (definite singular)  
**the-key** not here  
'**The key** is not here.'
- b) al-mafatih mahi hina (definite plural)  
**the-keys** not here  
'**The keys** are not here.'
- c) Sindi bait (indefinite singular)  
have-I **house**  
'I have **a house**.'
- d) Sindi biut (indefinite plural)  
have-I **houses**  
'I have **houses**.'

Nouns modified by adjectives.

- e) al-muftah al-ahmar mahu hina (definite singular)  
**the-key the-red** not here  
'**The red key** is not here.'
- a) al-mafatih al-hmara mahi hina (definite plural)  
**the-key the-red** not here  
'**The key** is not here.'
- b) Sindi bait kabir (indefinite singular)  
have-I **house big**  
'I have **a big house**.'
- c) Sindi biut kabirah (indefinite plural)  
have-I **houses big**  
'I have **big houses**.'

It can be seen from (e and f) above that when nouns are definite and preceded by the definite article *al-*, adjectives are preceded with *al-*. When the noun is indefinite, the adjectives are indefinite. This shows that adjectives in Arabic are identical to the nouns they describe in definiteness.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There are abundant studies in the literature that investigate the L2 acquisition of English articles, but there are few studies that tackle the role of adjectives. Before discussing these, two studies that examine general L2 learners' use of English articles are discussed.

Sun (2016) conducted a study with 18 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners from nine L1 backgrounds. The L1 backgrounds were a mixture of [+article] and [-article] languages. Based on their TOEFL scores, the participants were allocated to one of three proficiency levels (advanced, intermediate and beginners). The data collection tool was a fill-in-the-blank task. The findings showed that: a) the zero article was the most challenging article for all participants; b) the definite article was the most challenging for speakers of [+article] backgrounds; and c) the article *a* was the least problematic article for all groups. Sun argued that these results showed that L1 transfer effects were minimal since L2 learners' performances did not reflect their L1 backgrounds. However, as this was a small study with few participants from a variety of L1 backgrounds, a much larger study, or several studies with participants from a single L1 background, would be needed to replicate these findings, to be sure that this is the case.

Ivanov & Tryzna (2020) conducted a study on the use of English articles by L1 Kuwaiti English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners of English. The article system in Kuwaiti Arabic is similar to other Gulf Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, which are all similar to the Standard Arabic article system. The participants were 257 L1 Kuwaiti speakers, who were placed at low-intermediate, intermediate and advanced proficiency levels. A forced-choice elicitation task was administered to investigate how participants used articles with definite and indefinite singular and plural nouns. The findings showed that they had no difficulties using the definite article *the* in any of the contexts. Omission errors were few, and participants overused *the*. Ivanov & Tryzna believed that this is the case because Arabic has articles. However, this directly contradicts Sun's (2016) study, which appeared to show no L1 transfer effects.

It can be observed from the two studies above that regardless of their L1, L2 learners of English face difficulties using the English article system. However, these studies and many other studies in the literature overlooked the possible role of adjectives, which are frequently used before nouns. The effects of the use of adjectives before nouns on the use of articles have been addressed by three major studies: Goad & White, 2004 and 2009; and Trenkic, 2007. Goad & White (2004) conducted a case study with an end-state L1 Turkish learner of English. Turkish is an article-less language. The participant was in Canada and had received minimal formal instruction in English. She acquired her English during ten years living in Canada. A series of interviews were conducted with the learner with the objective of studying end-state grammar. Concerning the use of articles, Goad and White found that she tended to omit articles more when the nouns were modified by adjectives than when they were not.

This phonological explanation by Goad & White was later addressed by Trenkic (2007).

Trenkic's (2007) study investigated whether the presence of adjectives would affect article use. The participants were 12 L1 Serbian speaking secondary-school students. The Serbian language does not have an article system. The data collection instruments were oral task and a written translation task. The data were analysed to see if there were differences in the number of omission errors in contexts where nouns were modified by adjectives. Trenkic found that regardless of the type of task (written vs. oral), participants omitted articles more when nouns were modified by adjectives. Some may attribute this to the fact that their L1 lacks articles, but variation in the levels of omission between nouns that were either modified or unmodified by adjectives challenged this. Trenkic (2007) assumed that articles are omitted because adjectives make utterances more complex, since they tend to be less important than adjectives.

In turn, Goad & White (2009) challenged Trenkic's findings. They carried out a study with 18 L1 Turkish learners of English, with a mean age of 22.5 and proficiency levels (according to a cloze test and self-report) as follows: advanced ( $n=2$ ), intermediate ( $n=7$ ) and low ( $n=9$ ). An elicited production task was conducted. The participants were asked to retell stories in their own words. The data was then subjected to syntactic and phonetic transcriptions which were performed by native speakers. Omission errors were found in nouns modified by adjectives, leading Goad and White to propose that the omission of articles can only be explained by a phonological account since morphology and semantics do not account for this.

The studies discussed above recruited participants from article-less L1 backgrounds (i.e., Turkish and Serbian) to examine the relationship between the presence or absence of adjectives in noun phrases and the use of articles. The present study, on the other hand, examines the effects of adjectives with participants whose L1 is Arabic, a language that uses articles, and in which adjectives agree with nouns in definiteness.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out with twenty-four male Saudi Arabic EFL participants who were second-year university-level participants majoring in English (mean age 21.3 years;  $SD=1.3$ ), and six native speakers of British English who were recruited in the UK. No proficiency tests were administered. The researcher followed Trenkic (2007) in relying on the number of years' exposure to English at university, which is why all the participants were second-year students. The data collection instrument was a fill-in-the-blank task that consisted of 42 dialogues (10 distractors and 32 targets). The 10 distractor dialogues addressed the use of other linguistic targets (prepositions, adverbs and verbs). The target nouns and adjectives were placed between brackets and participants had to fill in the blanks in the target dialogues with these nouns and adjectives and add one of the three English articles. The order of the nouns and adjectives were randomised, e.g., (shirt, blue) and (blue, shirt). Half the con-

texts were definite and the other half were indefinite. The rationale behind this was to make the test more reliable and to reduce guessing and automatic responses (Gierl, Bulut, Guo, & Zhang, 2017).

An example is provided below:

Ali: Can we go to the mall?

Salim: Why?

Ali: I need to buy \_\_\_\_\_ (shirt, blue).

(Ø the a)

To avoid pressuring the participants into making random choices, the task was not timed. Participants were informed that their personal data would remain confidential and told that it was OK to ask if there were words they did not understand. Since the words were easy, none of them reported any difficulties.

## RESULTS

This section is divided into three parts. The first section presents the percentage results for each context, while the second and third present inferential statistics that address the research questions. The second section makes statistical comparisons between the L1 Saudi Arabic speakers and the native speakers of English, while to address the potential effects of adjectives on article use, the third section compares situations where adjectives were modified by nouns with situations where they were not.

### Overall Results

The mean score for native speakers across all contexts combined was 97.4%. For the Saudi Arabic speakers, the average scores for using the correct article in each of the eight contexts are presented in the following graph.

The graph shows that the Saudi Arabic speakers' accuracy level varied between contexts. Statistical analyses were run using SPSS (Version 25). Non-parametric tests were utilised because the data did not follow a normal distribution, as showed by a Shapiro–Wilk test ( $p < 0.05$ ). The Shapiro–Wilk test was preferred to the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test because the sample size was below 50 (Larson-Hall, 2016).

### Native Speakers vs Saudi Arabic Speakers

Multiple Mann-Whitney U tests were run to compare the native speakers' and Saudi Arabic speakers' uses of articles.

It can be seen from the table above that the Saudi Arabic learners of English are significantly less accurate than native speakers in all contexts except that where the indefinite plural was not modified by adjectives.

### Adjectives and Article Use

Multiple Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks tests were conducted to compare Saudi Arabic speakers' use of articles in contexts modified by adjectives with contexts that were not.

There were no differences between article usage regardless of whether or not the noun was modified by adjectives in definite contexts. In indefinite contexts, L1 Saudi Arabic

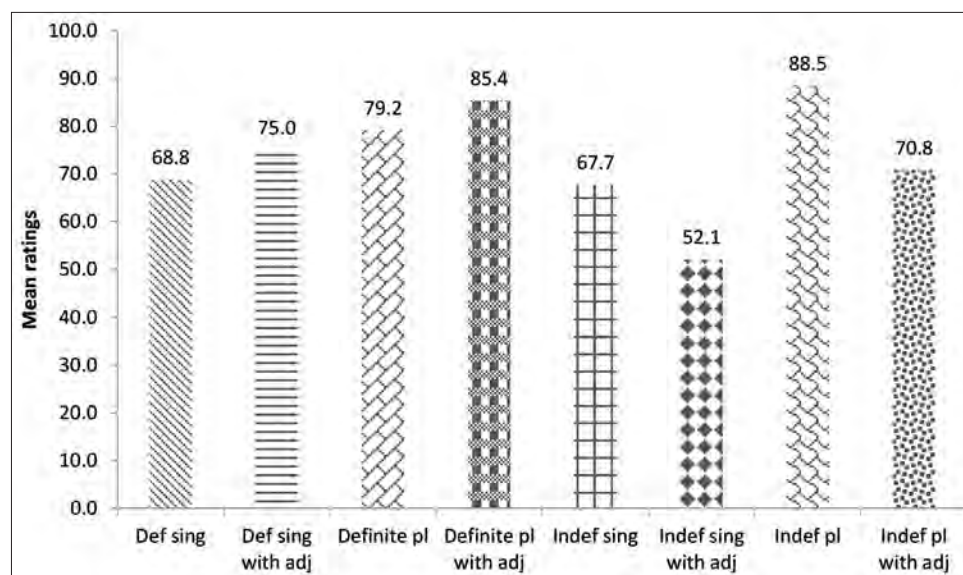


Figure 4.1. Saudi Arabic speakers' accurate use of target articles in each context

Table 3.1. Distribution of contexts

Definiteness	Adjectival modification	Singular	Plural
Definite	yes	4	4
	no	4	4
Indefinite	yes	4	4
	no	4	4

Table 4.1. Article use by Saudi Arabic speakers vs. native speakers of English

Context	No adjectives	With adjectives
Definite singular	$U = 19.500$	$U = 24.000$
	$Z = -2.884$	$Z = -2.677$
	$P = .004$	$P = .011$
Definite plural	$U = 29.000$	$U = 33.000$
	$Z = -2.542$	$Z = -2.327$
	$P = .025$	$P = .044$
Indefinite singular	$U = 19.000$	$U = .000$
	$Z = -2.900$	$Z = -3.910$
	$P = .004$	$P < .001$
Indefinite plural	$U = 42.000$	$U = 18.500$
	$Z = -1.890$	$Z = -3.104$
	$P > .05$	$P = .003$

speakers more accurately used articles in indefinite contexts in which nouns were not modified by adjectives, than in contexts where they were.

## DISCUSSION

This section is organised to address the two research questions:

1. Do L1 Saudi Arabic speakers use articles similarly to native speakers?
2. Does the presence or absence of adjectives before nouns influence L1 Saudi Arabic speakers' article use?

In relation to the first question, the statistics showed that L1 Saudi Arabic speakers performed less accurately than

Table 4.2. Article use and the presence or absence of adjectives

Context	The	A	Ø
Definite singular	$Z = -1.328$	$Z = -.707$	$Z = -.924$
	$P > .05$	$P > .05$	$P > .05$
Definite plural	$Z = -1.321$	$Z = -.541$	$Z = -1.000$
	$P > .05$	$P > .05$	$P > .05$
Indefinite singular	$Z = -1.127$	$Z = -2.397$	$Z = -3.186$
	$P > .05$	$P = .017$	$P = .001$
Indefinite plural	$Z = -2.878$	$Z = -.707$	$Z = -2.876$
	$P = .004$	$P > .05$	$P = .004$

native speakers. Although the participants' proficiency levels were not identified, the fact that they were second-year university level students makes this unsurprising. The only context in which there were no statistically significant differences was where indefinite plurals were not modified by adjectives. Although overall the results were compatible with other studies (e.g., Ivanov & Tryzna, 2020; Sun, 2016), the fact that the participants were highly accurate in the context of indefinite plurals challenges Ivanov & Tryzna's (2020) findings.

In terms of the second question, the results showed that L1 Arabic speakers were not sensitive to adjectives in definite contexts, which challenges the results of other studies (e.g., Goad & White, 2004; 2009; Trenkic, 2007). Conversely, the Saudi Arabic speakers used indefinite articles less accurately in contexts where the noun was modified by an adjective than in non-modified contexts that required an indefinite article. This supports the studies (i.e., Goad & White, 2004; 2009; Trenkic, 2007) that found that L2 learners omit articles when a noun is modified by adjectives. The participants in these studies were speakers of article-less languages. Why did Arabic speakers omit articles more in contexts modified by adjectives even though Arabic has an article system? This can be explained by noting that the majority of studies that examined Arabic speakers' article use found they used arti-



cles accurately in both definite contexts and indefinite plural contexts (e.g. Sarko, 2009). Indefinite singular contexts are more problematic for L1 Arabic speakers as there is no equivalent to the English *a* in Arabic. But the participants were less accurate in indefinite plural contexts modified with adjectives than those that were not. How can this be explained in terms of possible L1 transfer effects, as Arabic has a zero article? Maybe this is because adjectives add more information to nouns, which might explain why they overused *the* with nouns that were modified with adjectives. Nouns modified by adjectives may give an impression that the speaker has extra information about the noun described. This was not observed in definite contexts, as the contexts were already definite.

## CONCLUSION

The study examined the effect of the presence of adjectives on article use by L1 Arabic learners of English, whose L1 has an article system. The discussion revealed that L1 Arabic speakers are generally not target-like and that their article use was influenced by the presence of adjectives in indefinite contexts only. These results cannot be explained by L1 transfer. Rather, L1 Arabic speakers appear to be similar to speakers from other L1 backgrounds that do not have articles.

This study is limited by the small sample size and the fact that only second-year university level students were recruited limits the generalisation of the results. However, recruiting students from different years without administering a proficiency test may affect the homogeneity of the sample. To investigate the impact of L1 transfer a future study would need to examine speakers from different L1 backgrounds.

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