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Errors Made by Saudi Students in Speaking English: A Case Study of the English Article System

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Abstract

The examination of error sources has been considered as an interesting topic in the study of learner errors. Syntax and particularly the article system is one area in which studies of this nature seem to have potential for drawing important pedagogical implications. The importance of the English article system is manifested in the fact that articles are among the five most incessant words in the English language (Sinclair, 1991). It is hypothesized that if we improve our comprehension of the sources of learners' errors, teachers will be in a superior position to help their students develop their language proficiency levels. As an English language teacher, the researcher knows for sure that generally Saudi students and particularly students at the University of Taibah make errors in their writings. Therefore, this study is set to explore errors commonly found in Saudi ESL students in their use of articles at Taibah University. It is hoped that this research will give means and an insight to the ESL teachers to understand the English article errors made by Saudi students and provide guidelines for improvement and correction of writing skills.

Keywords: Errors; L1, L2, Articles, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), Error Analysis (EA), English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL), Language Learning and Teaching, Interlingual Errors, Intralingual Errors, Source Errors, Interference.

Introduction

The introduction of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and later Error Analysis (EA) as two interrelated theories of second language acquisition (SLA) directed to a series of discussions on the nature of concepts such as "difference" and "difficulty" and a consideration of their pedagogical implications in teaching English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) (Ellis, 2003; Odlin, 1989). CAH argued that the main obstacle to second language acquisition is the interface of the first language system with that of the second language (Lado, 1957). However, a lot of problems are associated with the CAH. Although the hypothesis accounts for transfer to some extent but sometimes over-predicts in the sense that some contrasts do not lead to negative transfer and also under-predicts in that not only different areas but also some areas of similarity may still constitute problems for learners. Hence, EA was proposed and distinguished itself from CAH by its analysis of errors attributable to all sources, not just those subsequent from the negative transfer of the native language (Corder, 1967). The sources of errors include the L1 influence errors, developmental errors (overgeneralization, simplification) and the induced errors from the classroom or other practices. Research conducted within the framework of EA is still popular today because of its practical applications to the immediate context of language classrooms.

More specifically, the examination of error sources has been considered as an interesting topic in the study of learner errors. It is hypothesized that if we improve our comprehension of the sources of learners' errors, teachers will be in a superior position to help their students develop

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their language proficiency levels. As an English language teacher, the researcher knows for sure that generally Saudi students and particularly students at the University of Taibah make errors in their writings. Therefore, this study is set to explore errors commonly found in Saudi ESL students in their use of articles at Taibah University. It is hoped that this research will give means and an insight to the ESL teachers to understand the English article errors made by Saudi students and provide guidelines for improvement and correction of writing skills.

The Article System Acquisition

Syntax and particularly the article system is one area in which studies of this nature seem to have potential for drawing important pedagogical implications. The importance of the English article system is manifested in the fact that articles are among the five most incessant words in the English language (Sinclair, 1991). Odlin (1989) has studied the article system in different languages to conclude that it follows different syntactic categories in different languages. He goes on to suggest that these differences in syntax can indeed lead to language transfer. Not only does the article system involve a large number of inconsistencies and exceptions, but also the rules governing the systems of different languages are usually distinct. Hence, the acquisition of the article system is considered to be one of the most troublesome aspects of English for students (Master, 1990; Park, 2006; Mizuno, 1999).

In an attempt to locate the areas of difficulty and propose solutions, many researchers have compared and contrasted the article system of English (classified by Moore (2004) as definite, indefinite, and zero article) with that of other languages. For example, Ionin et al. (2008) found that second language learners whose mother tongue has an article system, transfer article semantics from their first to their second language. Similarly, García Mayo (2008) focused on the article system in Spanish (L1) and English (L2) and noticed that learners overused the definite article because of substantial transfer from their first to the second language. Moreover, Barrett (1999) examined the use of English articles by Taiwanese English learners in their academic writings. The findings showed that participants overused both the definite and indefinite articles however underused the zero article. Transfer has also been discerned by Diez-Bedmar and Papp (2008) and by Trademan (2002) and in their corpus-based learner corpus study in which they compared Chinese, Spanish and English L1 speakers' use of the English article system.

The issue is even more complex with Arab learners of English since there is only definite article (al) and zero article but no indefinite articles in Arabic. According to the CAH, then, Arab learners of English will have more problems with indefinite articles. This was confirmed by Kharma (1981) who examined the errors made by learners of English whose first language was Arabic. He came to the conclusion that the article system is among the most troublesome elements of the English language to deal with. As it was expected, indefinite articles were the most problematic, while the definite article (the) was the easiest to master. Schulz (2004) holds that Arab learners of English are expected to ignore the indefinite articles because all words in Arabic are considered indefinite. In addition, Smiths (2001) explains this by referring to the dual role of transfer as both positive (the case of definite article) and negative (as with the indefinite articles). Other similar examples are when Arab learners of English use the definite articles with proper nouns. This is because English does not allow the use of definite articles with proper nouns, but Arabic does. These examples make it clear that L1 (Arabic) indeed influences performance and negative transfer does exist. Other examples of negative transfer are reported which can happen as a result of the notions of countability and definiteness (Butler, 2002) since it is difficult for language learners to identify the countability or definiteness of the words with precision. For example, the word "money" as a non-count noun in English can be accounted count in Arabic.

However, aside from the issue of transfer, other accounts have been provided for the errors committed by Arab learners of English. Bataineh (2005) considers transfer responsible only for indefinite and zero errors, citing overgeneralization, teaching transfer, learning and communication strategies as other possible causes. Hence, the present study attempts to examine the use of articles among Saudi learners of English in K.S.A and provide explanations for the errors that may occur within this undertaking.

Significance of the Study

To the best of researcher's knowledge, unfortunately only one study has been carried out by Alhaysony (2012) to investigate the errors made by Saudi Female ESL Students. So, the lack of study about the errors in utilizing the English articles by the Saudi students in the K.S.A learning and teaching sittings has encouraged the researcher to investigate this issue going for discovering successful solutions to deal with it. In addition, an essential issue to be considered with this appreciation is the learners' first language. Teachers are better off if they can analyze student utterances and break them up into their constituent parts. Teaching can also be more effective if teachers are familiar with the structural similitude and contrasts between the first language of the learners and the second language. Teachers require this sort of information to have the capacity to make plans for their teaching and enable the learners to avoid the most obvious errors associated with the article system. The present study is an endeavor to answer the following research questions:

What are the most frequent errors (Interlingual and Intralingual) committed by Saudi learners of English in the context of K.S.A universities?

What are the possible sources of these errors?

What learning and teaching strategies should be applied to address these difficulties and challenges?

Literature Review

Second-language acquisition (SLA) is the procedure by which individuals learn a second language. Second language means any language learned in addition to a person's first language (mother tongue). In spite of the fact that the concept is named second language acquisition, it can likewise include the learning of third, fourth or some other languages. Furthermore, Second-language acquisition means what learners do and it does not mean practices in language teaching although pedagogical implications can be drawn from the theories suggested.

A plethora of hypotheses and theories about how individuals learn a second language have been proposed in the field of second-language acquisition. Theories of second-language acquisition have drawn the consideration of scientists since they attempt to shed light on the processes involved during the learning of a second language. These theories have drawn things from different sciences such as linguistics, neuroscience, psychology and sociolinguistics.

Recently there have been a large number of interesting researches in the area of error analysis. The basic reason behind these studies has been to classify and identify errors and thereby raise teachers' awareness of the problematic areas that language learners are struggling to learn. These studies support either or both of the two different views toward the sources of errors (interlingual and intralingual) which were discussed before. Of course, both perspectives have been supported by different research findings and there is a sufficient empirical proof for each one of them to be confirmed.

Accordingly, many researchers have been studying the acquisition of the English article system by Arab second language learners. Results from these studies are also extremely mixed. Some of them have indicated that the language interference is the major reason behind the misuse use of the English article system while others have provided other intralingual accounts for the

occurrence of such errors. We start with studies that contribute the errors mainly to the first language interference.

For instance, AbiSamra (2003) believes that most of the syntactic errors committed by Arab EFL learners in their writings are caused by interference of the Arabic language as their mother tongue. More specifically, Crompton (2011) studied the article system errors made by Arabic learners of English from different Arab countries. To identify the errors, he analyzed the regular essay assignments submitted by students. He discovered that the most frequent error was the misuse of the definite article "for generic reference" and ended that most errors result from L1 interference as opposed to being interalingual in nature. He claimed that even for foreign language learners with a first language such as Arabic in which there is an article system, L1 transfer may be a problematic issue.

Similarly Abushihab et al (2011) classified the grammatical errors made by the Jordanian ESL learners. He found that the most frequent error is the addition of 'the' and the least frequent error is the omission of the. He concludes that basically the difference between English and Arabic languages as far as the articles system causes these errors. Moreover, the L1 interference was found to contribute negatively to the occurrence of these errors.

In yet another study, Alhaysony (2012) studied the sorts of errors committed by female students of English in Saudi Arabia. By asking the participants to write life- related descriptive topics, she identified the errors that they made in terms of the English article system. She found that many female Arab EFL learners tend to omit the articles as well as making a few substitution errors. With regard to the error of omission, "a" is the most frequent article omitted while the omission of "an" is the least frequent error. She identified the native language interference as having the greatest role in making such errors followed by strategies of instruction when teaching the English articles.

To shed more light on the role of interference in making such errors, Sarko (2008) compared Arab learners of English with French English language learners. While French has both a definite and an indefinite article, Arabic has only one definite article. Preliminary findings suggest that compared to Syrian Arabic speakers, the French speaking learners indicate more advance in learning the article system regardless of their capability levels. He concludes that the presence of indefinite article in French contributes to the process of acquisition while the absence of an obvious morphological form for the indefinite article with singular nouns in Arabic hinders the acquisition of the morphological classification in the L2 by L1 Syrian Arabic speakers.

On the other hand, another camp of researchers has demonstrated that the source of errors in the English articles system is mainly due to the learning strategies used by language learners. For example, Bataineh (2005) carried out a study on Jordanian EFL learners. The results demonstrated that the majority of the errors are developmental in nature, for example, simplification and overgeneralization. These errors are believed to be the result of wrong learning methodologies. In fact, the omission of the indefinite article is the main L1 interference error that is distinguished in this study. In addition, Alsulmi (2010) found that the errors made as a result of the wrong learning and teaching strategies are more common than those resulting from the Arabic language negative interference. Adway (2013), too, studied the Arab students in the United Arab Emirates in terms of their use of English articles. His data collection method included multiple choice and cloze tests. Discoveries of his research revealed that the sources of errors are more intralingual rather than being the result of interference.

The apparent mixed results are of course natural and even beneficial to the research community. In fact, this controversy helps develop our comprehension of the English article system acquisition by Arab learners from different perspectives. Furthermore, it paves the way to conduct future study with new methodologies and contexts. In other words we can conclude that

different participant populations, methodologies, and techniques of data collection and analysis are among the factors that may lead to such mixed results. Therefore researchers are suggested to try to come up with creative and sound methodologies to make the results of their study reliable and generalizable to other contexts of language learning.

Taxonomy of Learner Errors

One of the often-cited error taxonomies is proposed by Richards (1971). Accordingly, the errors that students are expected to produce are classified into interference and intralingual errors. Interference errors refer to the errors that result from first language (Arabic in this study) interference such as when "the" is used wrongly by students instead of "a", "an", or zero article. Developmental errors or intralingual, on the other hand, are errors that result from incorrect learning methods that are improved during the time of learning the English article system. These errors are in turn characterized into substitution and omission errors. As the names suggest, a substitution error happens when an article is substituted with a wrong article such as the use of "a" instead of "the" and an omission error occurs when a necessary article is erroneously left out of the sentence.

Four reasons behind intralingual errors have also been discussed by Richards (1971) as ignorance, overgeneralization of rule restrictions, incomplete utilization of rules, and false hypothesis. An overgeneralization error happens when an error is made based on other similar linguistic structures. In addition, utilizing a rule to the inappropriate structure regardless of restrictions or not consider using a fully developed structure are two other reasons. Finally, if learners do not completely understand a difference in the target language, they may develop false hypotheses leading to errors.

In order to develop the taxonomy, Richards (1971) involved participants from different language background (French, Polish, Chinese, Japanese, Czech, as well as west African and Indian languages) and presented the different kinds of errors relating to the use of questions, distribution and production of verb groups, articles and prepositions. By using Richards' distinction of learners' errors — intralingual and interlingual— as a basis of analysis, different studies (Alhaysony, 2012; Adway, 2013; Sarko, 2008) have been done in the area of article acquisition which will be discussed in the following sections.

The English Versus Arabic Article System

In linguistics, an article is usually defined as determiner (or a word) used with a noun to show the sort of reference made by the noun. The English article system has three main kinds of articles: definite, indefinite, and the zero article. The definite article include only "the". The indefinite article embraces both articles "a" and "an". Quirk et al. (1972) hold that "a" or "an" is used with singular non-specific whereas "the" is used with specific nouns. In other cases such as plural non-specific nouns, mass nouns, proper nouns, and non-count nouns the zero article is used. The concept of definiteness has been defined in various ways. Halliday and Hassan (1976) believe that definiteness only relates to the fact that the item in question is identifiable. In other words, it is possible for the reader/listener to recover the necessary information in order to identify that item. They mention two general functions for the use of "the" namely, endophoric (cataphoric as forward pointing and anaphoric as backward pointing) and exophoric functions. The former refers to the items within the text while the latter provides reference to items outside the text. To be considered as definite Hawkins (1991) believes that the referent set should be identifiable by the reader/listener via a complex interplay of different pragmatic parameters (knowledge shared by the interlocutors). The indefinite articles, on the other hand, occur in an indefinite singular noun phrase (NP) environment to signal the countability of the NP. The use

of "a" indicates that there exists other referents of the same set that are not included in this act of reference.

Master (1990) holds that the English article system is one of the most difficult parts of the English grammar for nonnative speakers. It is also one of the areas that are acquired very late by second language learners. He adds that it is very difficult to provide metalinguistic explanations for the article usage in English even for native speakers. A comparison of the article system between English and Arabic makes it clear that whereas English has zero, definite and indefinite articles, Arabic utilizes two of these definite articles (i.e., the zero article and "al" which is a prefix) and lacks indefinite articles. Along these lines, Arab learners of English are expected to have more challenges with indefinite articles. Kharma's (1981) study in an Arabic ESL context was also evidence to support the claims made by Master (1990). He examined the kinds of errors committed by Arab learners of English and reported the article system to be among the most difficult components of the English language to deal with.

Because of absence of indefinite articles in Arabic, Arab learners of English are expected to delete the use of the indefinite article "a" or "an" due to the way that all words in Arabic are indefinite by nature (Schulz, 2004). While English does not allow the use of definite articles with proper nouns, Arabic, on the other hand, makes it obligatory. Apparently, L1 (Arabic) plays a very crucial role in making such choices. This is what is referred to as negative transfer in studies of contrastive analysis.

Other examples of negative transfer can be seen because of the differences between English count/non-count nouns and their counterparts in Arabic. For instance, non-count nouns such as "money" and "information" in English are usually considered count in Arabic. However, there may be other explanations for the kinds of errors that Arab ESL learners make regarding the article system. These sources of errors are explained in more detail in the following section when studies on the errors made by Arab learners of English are elaborated upon.

Studies of Arabic ESL/EFL Learners' Article Errors

The following section illuminates on the methods used in the present study. More specifically it discusses the population and sample of the study as well as the methods for data collection and analysis.

Methodology

The research design applied in the present study can be regarded as a mixed method research design. This is because the study is drawn upon the triangulation method, which is characterized as using more than one technique for collecting data. The explanation for this choice is to incorporate more viewpoints on this specific topic, to strengthen the validity of the findings and to be more confident about the discoveries. Dörnyei (2007) also agrees that "using a mixed methods model gives accurate results and clear findings than do either qualitative and quantitative methods alone by allowing the researcher to get to data from both information sorts" (p.62).

A mixed methods research includes the advantages inherent in both quantitative and qualitative designs. In other words, it offers the in-depth, contextualized, and natural insights of qualitative research as well as the more-efficient quantitative research. The qualitative interview used in the study can help enrich the results while the quantitative data adds compelling predictive power.

To achieve the aim of study and triangulation purposes, data was gathered through a translation test with 14 items as well as qualitative data which included quotes from the interviews with five teachers of English from Taibah University in K.S.A. These interviews with the 5 teachers provided the researcher with a valuable input on how amendable plans ought to be applied when dealing with errors in the English articles.

Analysis

The collected data included two types of data quantitative and qualitative. Results from the translation test were entered into the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software program to be analyzed quantitatively. Formula of percentage and Chi -Square test were utilized to discuss and analyze the errors made by students from two levels (levels One and Two) in the preparatory year at Taibah University in Saudi Arabia. The analysis contains the percentages of the students' wrong answers regarding the translation test. In addition, a point bi-serial correlation analysis was conducted to explore the possible relationship between the level of English and performance regarding the use of English articles. These analyses were enriched through an inclusion of a qualitative analysis of the interview data.

Interference Errors

There are three types of errors that can be regarded as interference errors. The first type is a substitution error caused from Arabic interference when "the" is written wrongly by students instead of "a", "an". This is regarded as an interference error since it is hypothesized that because "a" or "an" do not exist in Arabic article system, students draw on their knowledge of Arabic to replace them with "the", the definite article which has the counterpart "al" in Arabic. The following is an example of such error in the data.

Example 1. *Jeddah is the beautiful city in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The second type is an addition error in which "the" is overgeneralized to contexts where no article is needed. This is because the definite article is more widely used in Arabic than in English. Example 2 is one such error in the data.

Example 2. *What did you have for the lunch?

Finally, the third type is when students omit the English definite articles. This error is considered interlingual because there are no indefinite articles in Arabic.

Example 3. *The sun is star in the sky.

Following, the instances of the produced errors were counted for the participants. The percentage of the occurrence of these errors is reported in table 3 below.

Interference Errors	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Substitution of "the" for "a" or "an"	14	12.07	12.07
Addition of "the" where not necessary	73	62.93	75
Omission of "a" or "an"	29	25	100
Total	116	100	100

Table 1. Frequency of Interference Errors

As the table shows, students overuse the definite article 'the' in places where it is not necessary (73 cases). This of course is explained when we see that the definite article is more widely used in Arabic than English. Therefore, the overuse of the definite article by Saudi learners of English is obviously an interlingual error which is the result of Arabic interference. This finding is in line with Crompton (2011) and Abushihab et al (2011) who also found an overgeneralization of the use of the definite article by learners.

Intralingual Errors

Whereas interlingual errors can be explained by the interference from students' native language, for intralingual errors we must look for other explanations. These errors can be either

substitution or omission errors. As the names suggest, a substitution error happens when an article is substituted with a wrong article such as the use of “a” instead of “the” and an omission error occurs when a necessary article is erroneously left out of the sentence. These errors are intralingual since they cannot be related to students’ relying on Arabic article system. In fact, the indefinite articles do not exist in Arabic for us to conclude that substituting “a” or “an” with other articles is an interlingual error.

Intralingual Errors	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Substitution of “the” for “a” or “an”	11	14.67	14.67
Addition of “the” where not necessary	16	21.33	36
Omission of “a” or “an”	48	64	100
Total	75	100	100

Table 2. Frequency of Intralingual Errors

The most frequent omission of the definite article ‘the’. This finding seems to contradict the findings of the previous section in which the overuse of the article “the” was found as the most frequent interlingual error type. However, when we consider the large number of inconsistencies and exceptions in the English article system, we can expect both error types to have a high chance of occurrence. In other words, both overuse and underuse of the article “the” occurs but for each of these errors a different explanation should be provided. Therefore, in line with AbiSamra (2003), the errors in this case are not interlingual but intralingual errors caused by reasons other than first language interference. The second most frequent intralingual error (n=16) happened when students added the indefinite articles in areas where they were not appropriate. Finally, students used indefinite articles instead of the other article types in a few cases (n=11). Of course, this should be attributed to factors other than the mother tongue influence.

Sources of Errors

A test of chi square was run in order to see whether there are any significant differences between the error types. The test results yielded a test statistic of 0 with 2 degree of freedom. The results manifest that there is a statistically meaningful difference between interference and intralingual error types in the performance of Arab ESL lea

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi Square	34.335a	2	.000
Ratio of Likelihood	35.761	2	.000
Linear by Linear Association	13.055	1	.000 (N)

Valid Cases	191

0 cells (.0%) counts < 5. The count is >= 9.82.

Table 3. Chi-Square Tests for error types

Following the observed significant difference, a comparison of the frequency counts in tables 3 and 4 showed that most of the errors could be traced back to the first language interference (interlingual errors). In other words, in line with AbiSamara (2003) and Crompton(2011), we can conclude that the primary sources of Arab ESL learners' errors with regard to the article system is the fact that learners' first language (Arabic) is negatively transferred into the second language (English in this case).

Conclusion

This study reports on an effort to understand the nature and sources of English article system errors made by Arab learners of English in KSA. The proposed approach is grounded in the theory of language transfer and involves comparisons between the Arabic article system (L1) and that of English (L2). We identify major differences across the two languages, which are believed to heighten the perceived interference or transfer features and lead to errors. For example, it was discovered that students overuse the definite article 'the' in places where it is not necessary. Similarly, two other errors (although less frequent than the addition of "the") found in the study were the omission of "a" or an" as well as substitution of "the" for "a" or "an". These are regarded as interlingual errors since the definite article "the" is the main article in Arabic besides the zero article. Therefore Arab learners of English tend either to overuse it or substitute it for other articles. Moreover, the absence of indefinite articles in Arabic may lead to the omission of "a" or "an" in the data.

Therefore, there is proof that the students' L1 (Arabic) have an impact on their developing interlanguage which in turn leads to errors in the production of the article system of English. In other words, the data demonstrate that there are some examples in which language transfer was obvious. Consequently, the participants transferred some characteristics of the article system from their L1 to their L2. However, numerous cases demonstrated that the students made some article system errors that the CAH did not foresee and for which other accounts must be given.

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