

An Analysis of Errors Made by EFL Students of Basrah Wamen- Teacher Training Institutes in the Area of Definite And Indefinite Articles

Ph.D Salman Dawood Salman
University of Basrah/
College of Arts

M.A Sabah Saudi Shihab
University of Basrah/
College of Low

Abstract

As far as the use of English definite and indefinite articles is concerned, Basra Arabic-speaking learners of English almost always make errors in their writing for they cannot actually recognize the different rules of the use of English articles especially with mass, abstract, and uncountable nouns .It has been proved that the use of the definite and indefinite articles is a serious source of difficulty to Basra Arabic-speaking EFL students partly

Because of the interference of their mother tongue and partly because of the lack of practice in the use of English articles in general and the indefinite article in particular at the sentence level.

الخلاصة

يقع متعلمو اللغة الانكليزية وممن هم في الاصل من الناطقين بلغة الضاد في عدد من الأخطاء عند استعمالهم ادوات التعريف و التكرير في اللغة الانكليزية. وطالبات معهد المعلمات في البصرة لا يشكلن استثناء في هذا المجال فتجدهن يفشلن في استعمال هذه الادوات امام الاسماء غير المعدودة عامة ومايعرف في اللغة الانكليزية باسماء الكتلة Mass Nouns والاسماء المجردة Abstract Nouns خاصة. ومن بين الاسباب الكامنة وراء هذا الفشل هو عدم احاطتهن بالقواعد التي تحكم استعمال تلك الادوات في اللغة الانكليزية. واثبتت الدراسة ان فشل عينة البحث في هذا الباب من ابواب النحو الانكليزي قد يعزى الى التباين بين اللسان العربي واللغة الانكليزية كونها لغة اجنبية هذا من جانب ، أما من الجانب الاخر ، فان عدم الألمام بقواعد التعريف والتكرير في اللغة الانكليزية هو السبب الاخر ، لا ريب. والجدير بالذكر ايضا ان هذه الدراسة الوصفية التي تضعها بين يديك اثبتت ان مجالات استعمال الاسماء النكرة في الانكليزية تأتي في مقدمة الصعوبات التي واجهت افراد العينة .

Introduction

A question that is very well explored in the literature of research in second language acquisition is to what extent the first language affects the acquisition of a second language. Until the late sixties of the twentieth century, the prominent theory regarding the issue of learning was the behaviouristic one, which suggests that learning is largely a matter of acquiring a set of new language habits; therefore, errors are considered to be the result of the persistence of the deeply-rooted mother-tongue habits

Consequently, this idea has made applied linguists devote their work largely to the comparison of the native and target languages in order to predict and explain errors. In the 1950's, Lado began to analyze the structure and usage of languages systematically and developed a theory about errors which came to be known as contrastive analysis (henceforth, CA). Contrastive linguists hypothesize that the principal barrier to second language acquisition is the interference of the first language. That is why, a scientific structural comparison of the two languages in question would enable linguists to predict and describe which aspects are similar and which are not (Xie Frang Jiang Xue -mei ,2007).

Review of Literature

Error Analysis (henceforth, EA), a branch of applied linguistics, emerged in the 1960's to demonstrate that FL learners' errors are not only because of learner's native language for they also reflect a reaction to CA theory, which considers language transfer as the basic process of second language learning .Error analysts, on the other hand ,deal with learners' performance in terms of the cognitive processes. They make use of recognizing or coding the input they receive from the target language learners . Therefore; a primary focus of EA is on the evidence that learners' errors provide researchers with an understanding of the underlying processes of second language acquisition (Erdogan, 2005).

Pit Corder (1967) states that EA has taken a new turn . He contents that these errors are important by themselves for they are "indispensable" since making errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn . Researchers are interested in errors because they are believed to provide valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language . (Dulay and Burt 1974 ; Richard, 1974; and Selinker, 1974). Moreover; according to Richards and Sampson(1974) at the level of pragmatic classroom experience , EA provides a means by

which the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines priorities for future efforts . According to Corder (Ibid), EA has two objectives: one theoretical and the other practical . The theoretical objective serves to elucidate what and how a learner learns when he studies a second language . The practical or applied objective serves to enable the learner to learn more efficiently by exploiting the knowledge of his dialect for a pedagogical purpose. That is, the investigation of errors can be at the same time both diagnostic and prognostic . It is diagnostic because it can tell us about the learner's state of the language (Corder , 1967) at a given point during the learning process , and prognostic because it can tell course organizers to reorient language learning materials on the basis of the learner's current problems.

Identification of Errors

As a linguist pays attention to the distinction between an error and a mistake it is necessary to go over the definition of the two different phenomena . According to" the *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (1992) , a learner makes a mistake when writing or speaking because of the lack of attention , fatigue , carelessness or some other aspects of performance .

Mistakes can be self-corrected when attention is called

upon, whereas an error is the use of linguistic items in a way that a fluent or native speaker of the language regards it as showing faulty or incomplete learning. In other words, it occurs because the learner does not know what is correct, and thus it cannot be self-corrected.

Classification of Errors

A number of different categories for describing errors have been identified. Errors have been divided into overt and covert (Corder, 1973) errors of correctness and appropriateness. For example, the sentence "I want to know the English" is covertly erroneous if the learner intends to say "I want to know English"

though it is superficially correct. Corder (Ibid) also distinguishes between global errors and local errors. A global error is one which involves "the overall structure of a sentence", and a local error is one which affects a particular constituent.

On the global level, Corder (Ibid) sub-classifies errors into four categories: omission of some required element; addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element; selection of an incorrect element; and misordering of elements. Nevertheless Corder, himself, adds that this classification is not enough to describe errors. It is too

superficial to be of benefit to the learner or to explain difficulties. It requires a deeper analysis to explain the cause of errors since only when we know why an error has been committed we can set about correcting it in a systematic way .

Level of language can be considered within the categories of: phonology, morphology , lexicon , and syntactical discourse. Using the course as the standard for categories , one can categorize errors into inter-lingual errors and intra-lingual errors (Richards, 1974) . Errors found to be traceable to first language interference are termed inter-lingual(Selinker, 1974) .A large number of errors , however , are found to be committed by second language learners regardless of the first language. These are termed intra-lingual errors .These include : overgeneralization , simplification, and communication – based and induced errors.

Strength and Weakness of Error Analysis

EA is important since error-based analyses are not only fruitful but also necessary to work out and test hypotheses concerning factors that set a degree of difficulty in second language learning. Applied linguists believe that EA can easily supersede CA as only some of

the errors a learner makes are attributable to the mother tongue. As a matter of fact, learners do not actually make all the errors the contrastive analyst predicts they should, and learners from different language backgrounds tend to make similar errors in learning the same target language.

By analyzing errors, teachers will get some overall knowledge about students' errors. Errors can tell the teacher how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him or her to learn. So students' errors are but a valuable feedback.

Certainly, EA is significant, but it has also got its limitation. It is inadequate especially from the teaching point of view and that analyzing only errors and neglecting the careful description of the non-errors is considered a kind of inevitable restriction of the approach. To cut a long story short, the weaknesses EA suffers from are as follows: first, the collected data for EA represent a single point by itself; therefore EA is not an efficient tool by itself for studying the development of the learners' second language. Second, EA generally deals with the learners' written verbal production only, EA is consequently concerned with performance rather than the up-to-date competence. It cannot tackle recognition which is as important as production. Third, EA is based on a linguistic paradigm

which does not describe accurately the way languageworks . Fourth , it is said that EA is not a perfect tool to categorize errors and explain them (Salebi,2004 ,211-212).

Procedure

A test was given to a random sample of one hundred Iraqi first-year students at the Women-Teacher Training Institutes in Basra at the beginning of the first term or semester of the academic year 2005-2006 . A multiple choice test was administered to cover most of the uses of he definite and indefinite articles to be tested . A text analysis was made by the tester. This included the first five books in the NECI series taken by the subjects tested in the practical part of the present research work . The purpose of the text analysis carried out here is to find out the uses of the definite and indefinite articles in this series and hence only those uses will be included in the test . This text analysis may also be useful in explaining some of the students' errors .

Analyzing errors

The analysis of the answers of the students showed that most of their responses are erroneous . Errors are classified into many types as will be shown below . However, examples of deviant answers will be given for

these types of errors. The table below summarizes the results of this analysis.

Table No. 1

Use of (a , an , and the) Redundantly

Type	Use	fo
A	Before plurals meaning classes of things	74
B	Before uncountable nouns	67
C	Before (home) when it is used alone	54
D	Before proper nouns	70
E	Before nouns used for primary purposes	50

The definite article is used redundantly in (a) because of L1 interference as in the following example :

The cow gives milk . (1)

/ ilbeqara tintti ilheli:b / (2)

The same error could also be ascribed To overgeneralization or analogy. Students encounter the use of the definite article with specific plural forms like the following in their textbooks:

The pencils are white .

The rulers are on the table.

Thus , they attempt by analogy to use the definite article with other nouns in the plural forms and hence produce the above deviant response .The use of the indefinite article (a) however, may be attributed to a chronological factor , i.e. " first learned words and structures tend to be overused and may resist replacement by later taught items "(Richards & Sampson, 1974).

Since the indefinite article is used at the beginning in the NECI series, especially in Book 1 and with high emphasis , students try to use (a) instead of omitting it .

* A cows give milk .

As regards the use of (an) redundantly in the same type of error may be due to carelessness or test pressure .

* An cows give milk .

Errors in (b) are not instances of L1 interference since the noun milk in the instance (I want milk) could be used without articles in Arabic :

I want milk . /ʔeri:d hɛli:b /

Thus , this type of errors could be attributed to lack of drills, especially explanatory exercises i.e. exercises that are accompanied with explanation (S. S. Shihab ,1984 , p.92) .

In fact there are no explanatory exercises in the first five books of the NECI series . There are two written exercises on the use of the uncountable noun which are of the type of indirect exercises i.e. exercises that have no direct relevance to practicing uncountable nouns and hence the omission of the article results in in some deviant responses such as the following:

* I want a milk .

* I want the milk .

Errors in (c) can be described as teaching-induced errors . The word "home" which does not take the article when it is used alone , occurs in few contexts in the NECI. It occurs four times in the first five books of the series . Below are some deviant responses :

* Go a home .

* Go an home .

* Go the home .

The use of the definite article in (d) may be due to L1 interference since the definite article is used with some names of cities as with

(Basra) :

* I visited Baghdad and the Basra .

/ zirit baġdād wilbašra /

Such errors can also be attributed to analogy. The definite article is usually used with other nouns such as the names of rivers like (the Tigers , the Euphrates, the Nile, and the Shatt-al-Arab,

Are concerned. This confirms Richards' assumption that " failure to observe restrictions in article usage may derive from analogy"

(Richards 1974) .

The use of the indefinite article with the proper nouns could be attributed to chronological factors . An example of the deviant responses is :

* There are a Baghdad and a Basra in Iraq.

The use of the definite article in (e) could be attributed to L1 interference :

* I go to the school to learn .

/ ?erūh lilmedrese hetteh ?etSellem/

The same error may be due to overgeneralization, which covers instances where the learner creates a deviant structure on the basis of his experience of other structures in the target language" (Richards, 1974) .

There are many sentences in which the word *school* [or any word denoting a place] is preceded by the definite article (the) . Here are two examples from NECI series :

* He is in the school now. (3)

* Is there anything in the library? (4)

The same error could also be regarded as a teaching-induced error . Such cases in which words used for primary purposes occur few times in the NECI series and in unexplanatory exercises . (5)

The use of the indefinite article in (e) may be accounted for in terms of analogy . Students make these errors by false analogy with other uses of the indefinite article .

Examples from the NECI .

read as follows:

No , he isn't working in a school .

He's working in a library .

She is working in a hospital.

Table No.2

Use of (a, an) Instead of (the)

Type	Use	fo
a	Before unique nouns	40
b	Before a noun mentioned for the second time	54
c	Before an adjective representing a class of persons	46
d	Before a noun followed by a phrase	44

It is clear that errors in (a) are not a case of interference since the definite article is used with such nouns in Arabic . It could be ascribed to generalization or transfer i.e. students are making use of a previously acquired rule in anew situation (Richards, 1974) . An example of deviant response is :

* A moon shines at night .

It seems that such errors are committed by learners of English regardless of their language backgrounds (Richards, 1974).

Errors in (b) could be regarded as teaching-induced errors as such nouns are introduced three times in the five series and in unexplanatory exercises .

Errors in (c) could also be regarded as teaching-induced errors since the frequency of occurrence of such nouns is very low in the five series of the NECI .Such nouns occur once in a written exercise . An example of a deviant response is:

We help a poor .

Errors in (d) again could be regarded as teaching-induced errors as such nouns occur in few unexplanatory exercises . Thus , students produce deviant sentences like:

* A man or the donkey is brave .

Table No.3
Use of (the) Instead of (a , an) .

Type	Use	fo
a	Before a noun used as an example of a class of things	38
b	Before a noun mentioned for the first time	65
c	Before a singular noun complement	12
d	Before a singular noun representing no particular person or thing	18

Errors in (a) could be ascribed to L1 interference as in the example below :

* The dog is an animal .

/ iččelib heywān /

Errors in (b) might be regarded as teaching-induced errors since the frequency of occurrence of such nouns (i.e. nouns mentioned for the first time) is low in the five series of the NECI below is an example of a deviant response .

* I saw the man . The man is Ali's Brother .

Errors in (c) and (d) could be accounted for in terms of

carelessness or test pressure .

* My brother is the doctor .

* I saw the man .

Table No.4

Omission of the Definite Article (the) .

Type	Use	fo
a	Before names of rivers	58
b	Before an adjective representing a class of persons	31
c	Before nouns mentioned for the second time	22
d	Before unique nouns	28

Errors in (a) may be a case of L1 interference as the definite article is not used in Arabic with the noun (the Tigris) . Thus , students produce a deviant sentence like :

* The two great rivers in Iraq are Tigris and the Euphrates .

Errors in (b) and (c) could be regarded as teaching-induced errors as the frequency of occurrence of such

nouns is low in the five series of the NECI. Below are examples of deviant responses :

- * We should help poor .
- * I saw a man . Man in my brother .

Errors in (d) could be attributed to analogy i.e. " Failure to observe restriction in article usage. Students ,therefore ,attempt by analogy to omit the article with such nouns

- * Moon shines at night .

This type of errors is not committed by Arab only . It seems to be a problem for learners of English with different linguistic backgrounds (Richards , 1974,P.176).

Conclusions and Suggestions

The researchers have arrived at the following conclusions:

1. The text analysis conducted in this study has revealed that most of the use of the definite and indefinite articles occurs in indirect oral unexplanatory exercises (6). Indeed there are few contrast exercises which are still oral unexplanatory exercises. As regards written exercises,

there are only three exercises (7). That is, the textbooks do not present a systematic approach or adequate practice to positively affect learner's performance in article usage.

2. The analysis of errors has revealed that the sources of errors are not only cases of L1 interference and that an error can be attributed to more than one source.

3. It can also be concluded that the majority of errors made by the students in the indefinite articles are the result of common learning processes and that the impact of the native language is found to be insignificant.

Finally, it can be concluded that the use of the definite and indefinite articles is extremely complex, and that learning is hoped to take place through the learners'

experience and practice in the second language .

As far as the suggestions are concerned, this study paves the way for further research that can take the form of an analysis of the errors made by more advanced EFL learners such as those who have studied all the eight textbooks of the NECI series, specially those freshmen joining the Departments of English and Translation in Basra.

The suggested replication admits the application of

advanced statistics to a more specific category such the "selection of an incorrect element".

Foot notes

(1) See NECI: Book 1 pp.35 and 64, respectively.

(2) See Al-Hamādi (2008:pp. ix-xv for the complete lists of these phonemic symbols.

(3) See Book. Three , p. 67.

(4) See Book Three, p. 87.

(5) See Book Two, 154

(6) See NECI, Book One: 2.10, 5.9, 6.5-7 and 6.9. (7) See NECI, Book Two: 10.21 and 10.23. See also NECI, Book Three: 8.13.

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Appendix

The test

Fill in the blank spaces with (a) , (an) or (the) . put (x) where no article is needed .

a.. I saw ___1___ man .

b.. ___2___ dog is ___3___ animal .

c.. ___4___ cows give milk .

d.. My brother is ___5___ doctor .

e.. I want ___6___ milk .

f.. ___7___ moon shines at night .

g.. I saw ___8___ man . ___9___ man is Ali's brother .

h.. ___10___ man on the donkey is brave .

i.. Go ____11____ home .

j.. We should help ____12____ poor .

k.. We go to ____13____ school to learn .

l .. The two great rivers in Iraq are ____14____ Tigris and ____15____
____ Euphrates .

m.. I visited ____16____ Baghdad and ____17____ Basra .