Errors Made By IRAQI EFL Non-departmental Undergraduates in Using Definite & Indefinite Articles

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Abstract

This study aims at identifying the kinds of errors that Iraqi FEL Non-departmental undergraduates made in the use of definite and indefinite articles . These errors are: (1) deletion of the indefinite article (2) substitution of the indefinite for the definite article (3) substitution of the definite for the indefinite article (4) substitution of *a* for *an*. Native language transfer was found to play a role in committing such errors. The study also concluded that little opportunities were given to EFL non-departmental undergraduates for illustrating English contexts through which definite and indefinite articles are used, and the absence of the opportunities to train them to think in the target language(English) not the mother tongue(Arabic) while using English articles.

Chapter One 1

1.1Statement of the problem:

The English article system can be troublesome for ESL/EFL learners, if they do not have its equivalent in their mother tongue. Master (2002:54) attributes this trouble to three facts about the article system: (a) Articles are among the most frequent function words in English(Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999:85), making constant rule application difficult over an extended stretch of discourse; (b) function words are normally unstressed and consequently are very difficult for non-native speakers to discern, which affects the availability of input in the spoken mode; and (c) the article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme, which constitutes a considerable burden for the learner who usually looks for a one-to-one correspondence between form and function, especially in the early stages of language learning.

Despite the fact that articles are important functional structures, they are hardly crucial communication devices, which is supported by the fact that they are dropped in telegraphic exchanges. Thus, unlike content words, function words are generally overlooked by learners when processing language primarily for meaning. According to Pienemann (1998:112), the difficulty of the meaning expressed by an article is determined by the novelty and abstractness of the concept, not to mention learners' changing hypotheses about article usage at different stages in interlanguage development and the potential influence of the native language which may further complicate the task. Articles do not impede understanding, for in oral communication, they are generally unstressed and almost inaudible. Nevertheless, given the fact that they are among the most frequent words in English, it is of the utmost significance that university students have some control of their usage. The English articles a(n), zero, and the are quite difficult to acquire not only for ESL/EFL learners but also for children learning English as a first language. Articles are believed to be a source of difficulty for learners (and teachers) of English as a second/foreign language,

especially for those whose native languages do not have articles or do have articles or article-like morphemes which are used in ways that
differ from English articles (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999:87)
In a morpheme study by Brown (1973:23), the articles *a* and *the* came at numbers nine and ten in the acquisition of fourteen morphemes. They were found to be less difficult than the prepositions and regular plural and possessive inflection -s but more difficult than the present progressive inflection -ing, regular and irregular third person singular (e.g. cleans and has), regular and irregular past tense (cleaned and went) and contracted and uncontracted copula and auxiliary be. The Arabic article system is similar to that of English in meaning; however, form is highly varied. While the Arabic system manifests a binary distinction between the defined and the undefined, the English system exhibits a tripartite distinction. The Arabic defined (marked by the definite article /al/) and the undefined (marked by the absence of /al/) correspond to the English defined (marked by the definite article the) and the undefined (marked by the indefinite articles *a(n)* and zero). In other words, even though the concept is present in the two languages, indefiniteness in English is marked by lexical items such as the and a while it is marked in Arabic by affixes such as the prefix /al/ and the suffix -n, both to mark definiteness and indefiniteness respectively (Lyons, 1999)

Despite efforts by EFL instructors to eliminate article errors, these errors have been found to plague the speech and writing of their students all over the world. Thus, the study tries to explore the types of these errors that are made by Iraqi EFL Non-departmental undergraduates who learn English as a general course throughout their academic study.

1.2 The aim of The Study:

The study aims at identifying the kinds of errors that Iraqi FEL Non-departmental undergraduates made in the use of the definite and indefinite articles .

1.3 Hypothesis: It is hypothesized that there are certain errors that are related to first language interference of Iraqi FEL Non-departmental undergraduates

1.4 The limitation of the study: The study is limited to Iraqi EFL first year students in both History & Arabic Dep., College of Education/Safi El-dein El-Hilli, of Babylon University during the academic year (2009-2010).

Chapter Two

2.1The related literature

The use of English articles by second/foreign language learners has been researched by many scholars. They focused on native speakers of languages that do not have article systems similar to English. That is, the main focus of these scholars was languages in which an article system does not exist such as Chinese, Polish, Japanese, Russian, or Korean, compared to English and Dari which do have an article system. Most prominently, Master (1997:87) discussed the acquisition, frequency, and function of English articles and suggested that successful learning depends on the learners' first language as predicted by markedness theory (MT). From a MT perspective, articles are marked features for ESL/EFL learners whose first languages

lack an article system Therefore, it is more difficult for native speakers of these languages to acquire the English article system than perhaps other features of English, like nouns and pronouns He found that learners whose language lacks an article system acquire the zero article early. He added that acquisition of *the* article may happen by default because there is no evidence that learners' successful production of results from the fact that the learners have control over the form; they may simply be unaware of zero .

Master's data showed that zero accuracy is close to 100% for the low-ability level participants, which then drops, and rises to nearly 100 % again for the high-ability level participants. He further reported that the overuse of zero article decreases with the increase in proficiency level, although the overuse of zero article persists more than the overuse of the other articles. Liu and Gleason (2002:5) reexamined Master's data and offered a new interpretation of the overuse of the zero article and underuse of *a* and *the* this overuse of the zero article and the underuse of *the* at the advanced stage would suggest that the two articles are acquired rather late. Liu and Gleason's hypothesis was supported by Young's (1996) data on the use of articles by Czech and Slovak learners of English, for while definiteness was not encoded by the at the early stages of acquisition, it persisted even at the more advanced stages However, participants encoded indefiniteness by means of the indefinite article a at all levels of proficiency with rising frequency as acquisition progressed Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman

(1999:112) claim that the problematicity of the use of the article system is due in part to whether or not the lexical classification into countable versus uncountable nouns corresponds in the native and target languages. For example, while FURNITURE and EQUIPMENT are uncountable in both Arabic and English CHALK and INFORMATION are countable in Arabic and uncountable in English. This mismatch may very well add to the complexity of the learner's task, for he/she needs to learn Research findings show both the article system and other noun distinctions . similarities in the kind of problems facing ESL/EFL learners, of which some are believed to be more serious for learners from certain language backgrounds. The findings of comparative studies of first and second language acquisition are widely varied. Some morpheme studies (cf., for example, Cook,1973:65) report similar stages of development, while others (cf., for example, Larsen-Freeman(1975:43) report apparent variability in the order of acquisition of different groups. A third group (cf., for example, Ervin-Tripp, 1974;65) yet limits the similarity to natural learning situations. Corder (1973:41) maintains that unlike natural language learning, where learners make and test their own hypotheses about the language, second language learners in tutored situations follow an externally imposed syllabus .The review of research on the effects of instruction on second language development suggests that instruction has a positive effect on second language learning, the rate of acquisition and learners' ultimate level of attainment. Some even go as far as claiming that certain structures may not be acquired if not taught (Cook, 1973:87). Certain findings, however, exclude any potential influence on the order of acquisition which is believed to be independent of the kind and amount of instruction the learner receives (Long, 1983:91)

Articles need to be taught because not only do they carry meaning but using them erroneously often causes misreading and confusion (Wrase, 1982; Rinnert and Hansen, 1986:122). This is made more plausible by Rinnert and Hansen's (1986:89) report of significant improvement in article use by more than one thousand learners from different native language backgrounds following a systematic instructional approach using self-developed material. It has been reported that very few EFL/ESL textbooks present a systematic approach or adequate practice to positively affect learners' performance in article usage. Ekiert (2004:67) studied the order of acquisition of articles by twenty Polish adult learners, including ten learners of ESL, ten learners of EFL, and five native English speakers as a control group. The non-native participants were in three levels in each group: three of low ability, three of intermediate ability, and four of high ability. She used a cloze test consisting of seventy-five deleted obligatory uses of 'a/an', 'the', or zero, and based on referentiality distinctions made by Huebner (1983:70) and Thomas (1989:32), she found that Polish ESL/EFL learners make errors even in more advanced stages of acquisition. Her subjects at both higher levels of proficiency (intermediate-ability and high-ability) overused the zero article while the definite article ' the' and the indefinite article were overgeneralized by intermediate speakers more than by the advanced participants. Polish is compared to English because Polish lacks an article system while articles exist it is difficult for Polish learners to acquire the system of articles in English. In the area of second language learning, teachers had for many years believed that the major source of errors in their students' second language performance was directly attributable to interference from the learner's native language. The classic view of this issue is clearly stated exemplified in Lado's (1957) Linguistics Across Culture "individuals tend to transfer the form and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and cultures both productively when attempting to speak the language and act in the culture, and receptively, when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives. Lado's method, known as contrastive analysis, relied upon a systematic comparison of the native language with the target language in order for the researcher/teacher to predict areas of difficulty for the second in English; therefore, language learner. Contrastive Analysis (CA) was deeply rooted in the behavioural and structural approaches of the day. Lado claimed that the principle barrier to second/foreign language acquisition is the interference of the first language system with the second language system According to Lado (1957:33) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis stressed that second language learning is primarily, if not exclusively, a process of learning whatever items are different from first language. Such a narrow view of interference ignored the intralingual effects of learning among other factors. It was believed that contrastive analysis would predict the difficulties a learner would encounter and so enable the teachers to concentrate on them and prevent them. But further studies suggest that even in adult learners where mother tongue is deeply entrenched and transferred errors are at peak, only a minority of errors are attributable to mother tongue interference (Ferris 2004; Kubota 2001). By the late 1960s, the second language learning began to be examined in much the same way that first language acquisition had been studied for

sometime. Learners were considered not as producers of ill formed imperfect language replete with mistakes but as intelligent and creative beings proceeding through logical, systematic stages of acquisition Richards (1971) claimed that studies of second language learning have tended to imply that contrastive analysis may be most predictable at the level of phonology and least predictable at the level of syntax. In the 1970s, empirical research revealed that native language was the only one of the several factors that influenced the second language learning. George (1971) found that "one-third of the deviant sentences from second language learners could be attributed to language transfers". There are other sources such as intra-lingual confusions and faulty pedagogical procedures which contribute to error production. Hence Lado's approach was challenged by Richards (1971) who claimed that many second language learners made errors which did not have their sources in the native language. Such errors can be explained in terms of:

1. Overgeneralization.
2. Ignorance of rule restrictions .
3. Incomplete application of rules .

In the recent work on error analysis, errors found in any of the foregoing categories are called intra-lingual and developmental errors. Supporting Richard's recent studies, Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982:67) pointed out that many errors, though systematic in nature, cannot be explained in terms of transfer from the native language. Chomsky (1964:45) and Krashen (1981:32) have put forth a different view of errors, which has gained wide acceptance .The argument in its strong form suggests that a learner must make errors as an unavoidable and necessary part of learning process. So, errors are not bad as once thought but visible proof that learning is taking place. As the student learns a new language, very often they do not know how to express what they want to say, so they make a guess on the basis of their mother tongue and of what they know of the foreign language. The process is one of the hypothesis formulation and refinement, as the student develops growing competence in the language they are learning. They move from ignorance to mastery of the language they are learning through transitional stages and errors they make are to be taken as a sign that learning is taking place (Lardiere 2005:127).

2.2 Previous Studies

These studies are not adequate empirical studies on the same topic but they refer generally to the topic of the study. They are arranged chronologically as follows:

2.2.1 Barrett(1999)

This study, which is entitled *English article errors in Taiwanese college students' EFL writing,* examined English L2 article use with Taiwanese English learners to their academic writing. The corpus-based analysis used natural data collected for the Academic Writing Textual Analysis (AWTA) corpus [3]. A detailed online corpus tagging system was developed to examine article use, covering semantic (specific and hearer knowledge) as well as the other features of the English article. The results indicated that learners overused both the definite and indefinite articles but underused

the zero article. The definite article was substituted for the indefinite article in specific environments. Although no significant difference existed between specific and non-specific semantic environments in zero article errors, a significant difference emerged between plural and mass/non-count nouns. These results suggest that, in regard to writing, learners need to focus on the semantic/pragmatic relationships of specificity and hearer (or reader) knowledge .

2.2.2 Khoshgowar(2002):

This research, which is entitled *English Article Production in Guided Conversation by Afghan Dari EFL Learners*, analyzed patterns of use of English articles (a/an, the, zero) in guided conversations with Afghan Dari speakers who are intermediate or advanced English learners and who do have an article system in their primary language, Dari. In this research, six intermediate and six advanced learners participated by discussing similar topics (their first impressions of the USA, their life in Manhattan, their classes, and their future plans). These conversations were recorded and transcribed. The collected data were analyzed on the basis of referentiality, information status and various properties of nouns. The results indicate that the participants were most accurate in their production of the indefinite article ' a/an ' in referential and non-referential contexts with new information, the definite ' the ' in referential contexts with known information, while the zero was difficult for both ELP (intermediate) and Post-ELP (advanced) learners mostly in referential contexts .

2.2.3 Sarani (2003)

This research, which is entitled *Use of Articles in Learning English as a Foreign Language: A Study of Iranian English Undergraduates* , was conducted on the basis of the following observations: (1) to restrict to the study of one area viz articles. (2) to avoid comparison in terms of the systems of native and target language. In this study the major areas of difficulties that students face in the target language, i.e. the occurrence of articles in different syntactic features was examined and an attempt was made to establish a hierarchy of difficulties 40 undergraduates faced in the use of articles. For testing the correct retrieval, a slightly modified version of Leacok's essay 'My Financial Career' was prepared. It included sufficient examples of almost all the important uses of articles. The test was given to the subjects in the form of a running text. The responses of the subjects were analyzed in terms of noun or noun phrases preceded by articles, noun or noun-phrases preceded by no article, and grammatical categories other than noun or noun-phrases proceeded by no article. The findings revealed that most of the errors the students committed were due to the nature as well as

the grammatical complexity of the articles in English, i.e. L1 independent which cannot be explained in terms of transfer from the native language. .

2.2.4 Ekiert(2004):

This paper which is entitled *Acquisition of the English Article System by Speakers of Polish in ESL and EFL Settings*, examines the second language (L2) developmental sequence of article acquisition by adult language learners in two different environments: English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a

Foreign Language (EFL). On the basis of an existing classification of English articles (a, the, zero), data on article usage were obtained from adult learners who were native speakers of Polish, a language that has no articles or article-like morphemes. Data analyses led to some limited conclusions about the order of acquisition of the English article system, and contribute to a more detailed understanding of the nature of interlanguage representations.

Chapter Three
Procedures

3.1 The population: It consists of Iraqi EFL non-departmental first year undergraduates of both History & Arabic Dep. in college of education-of Babylon University during the academic year (2009-2010).

3.2 The sample: (40) male and female first year students from each of both History & Arabic Dep. were chosen as the sample of the study.

3.3 The research instrument: A written test form was chosen as the tool of the study.

3.3.1 constructing the test: The test form consists of two questions. The first question is a multiple choice test which is designed to check the recognition level of the testees. It contains ten items through which their distribution is matched with different levels of difficulty .The items were carefully selected to serve the aim of the study which is to identify different types of errors in using indefinite articles. Each item contains four choices whereby the testees are required to choose one as a correct answer. The second question is a cloze test which is designed to check the production level of the testees. It contains a short paragraph about a unified topic through which the indefinite articles are the missing words. The testees are required to fill in the blank spaces with the suitable article.

3.3.2 Content Validity: Items of the test were designed to cover the area of the study.They were constructed to examine the testees' expected errors which were the subject of the study.

3.4 Statistical means: the percentage formula and Chi-A square test were adopted to obtain results for the study.

Chapter Four
The Analysis of Results

After implementing the test, the correction was made for the answer sheets of the sample of the study. To obtain test results,(o-1) correction strategy was adopted for both questions of the test. Each item in each question gets either one or zero mark as there is one defined answer and the total mark of each question was computed by the summation of the scores of all items.The results of the testees were computed separately with reference to their department. The following tables shows the results of succeeded and failed answers in both questions of the test with percentage:

Table (1/A): Testees' results of Arabic Dep Question 1

items	Numbers of correct	percentage	Number of wrong answers	percentage

	answers			
1-1- Diana is _____ very nice person. a. an b-a c-zero d-the	19	47%	21	53%
2- Make sure you put your name at _____ end of the report. a. a b-zero c-the d-an	12	30%	28	70%
3-I read_____ amazing story yesterday. a. a b-the c-an d- zero	15	37%	25	63%
4- My brother doesn't eat _____ chicken a. the b-a c-an d- zero	9	22%	31	78%
5- Sara can play_____ guitar a. a b-zero c-an d-the	7	17%	33	83%
6- Juan is_____ university student. a. zero b-the c-an d- a	5	12%	35	88%
7- Have you already had _____ lunch? a. zero b-the c-a d-an	20	50%	20	50%
8--_____ uncle of mine gave me many books. a. a b-an c-the d- zero	26	65%	14	35%
9- I would like_____ piece of cake. a. the b-an c-a d- zero	21	53%	19	47%
10- We need to do more for _____ poor. a. zero b-a c-the d-an	13	32%	27	68%

Table (1/B): Testees' results of History Dep Question 1

items	Numbers of correct answers	percentage	Number of wrong answers	percentage
1- Diana is _____ very nice person. a. an b-a c-zero d-the	17	42%	23	58%

2- Make sure you put your name at _____ end of the report. a. a b-zero c-the d-an	14	35%	26	65%
3- I read_____ amazing story yesterday. a. a b-the c-an d- zero	17	42%	23	58%
4- My brother doesn't eat _____ chicken a. the b-a c-an d- zero	8	20%	32	80%
5- Sara can play_____ guitar a. a b-zero c-an d-the	4	10	36	90%
6-Juan is_____ university student. a. zero b-the c-an d- a	3	8%	37	92%
7- Have you already had _____ lunch? a. zero b-the c-a d-an	18	45%	22	55%
8-_____uncle of mine gave me many books. a. a b-an c-the d- zero	22	55%	18	45%
9- I would like_____ piece of cake. a. the b-an c-a d- zero	20	50%	20	50%
10- We need to do more for _____ poor. a. zero b-a c-the d-an	11	27%	29	73%

Table (2/A) Results of the Testees of Arabic Dep in Question 1 as a total mark

Succeeded	Percentage	Failed	Percentage
14	35%	26	65%

Table (2/B) Results of the Testees of History Dep in Question 1 as a total mark

Succeeded	Percentage	Failed	Percentage
13	32%	27	68%

As question two is a cloze test in which the items of the test are blank spaces in supplied in a short paragraph, the following tables show only the given number of the space item in the question sheet:

Table (3/A): Testees' results of Arabic Dep Question 2

items	Numbers of correct answers	percentage	Number of wrong answers	percentage

1-	14	35%	26	65%
2-	10	25%	30	75%
3-	9	22%	31	78%
4-	7	17%	33	83%
5-	8	20%	32	80%
6-	13	32%	27	68%
7-	22	55%	18	45%
8-	6	15%	34	85%
9-	12	30%	28	70%
10-	11	27%	29	73%

Table (3/B): Testees' Results of History Dep Question 2

items	Numbers of correct answers	percentage	Number of wrong answers	percentage
1-	12	30%	28	70%
2-	7	17%	33	83%
3-	8	20%	32	80%
4-	7	30%	33	70%
5-	5	12%	35	88%
6-	13	32%	27	68%
7-	20	50%	20	50%
8-	7	30%	33	70%
9-	10	25%	30	75%
10-	8	20%	32	80%

Table (4/A) results of the testees of Arabic Dep in Question 2

Succeeded	Percentage	Failed	Percentage
10	25%	30	75%

Table (4/B) results of the testees of History Dep in Question 2

Succeeded	Percentage	Failed	Percentage
8	20%	32	80%

4.1 The Idetification of the types of errors that are made by the testees:

4.1.1 Deletion of the article:

Testeess responses indicated that they omitted articles due to first languge interference . They were giving the equivalent native language structure as the result of their inadequate knowledge of the article sysem of the target language.The following table shows the percentage of this kind of error in both questions:

Table (5/A) frequency of the testees error in article deletion of Arabic Dep

Frequency of the error	Percentage
122	60%

Table (5/B) frequency of the testees error in article deletion of History Dep

Frequency of the error	Percentage
126	62%

Chi-A squre test was made for this kind of error to record (2.4) as a computed value and when compared with the table value which is (3.8) with (1) as the free degree ,the nill hypothesis was accepted which proved that this kind of error exisits when the sample of the study is using indefintie articles.

4.1.2The substitution of the indefinite article *a(n)* for the definite article *the*:

Testees responses indicated that they used the indefinite articles in stead of the definite article;that is becuase of their overlap of the uses both kinds of articles in English contexts. This kind of error is clearly manifested in both questions as shown in the following table:

Table (6/A) frequency of the testees' error in the substitution of the indefinite article *a(n)* for the definite article *the* of Arabic Dep

Frequency of the error	Percentage
163	72%

Table (6/B) frequency of the testees' error in the substitution of the indefinite article *a(n)* for the definite article *the* of History Dep

Frequency of the error	Percentage
169	75%

Chi-A squre test was made for this kind of error to record (2.7) as a computed value and when compared with the table value which is (3.8) with (1) as the free degree ,the nill hypothesis was accepted which proved that this type of error appears in using indefinite articles on the part of the sample of the study.

4.1.3The substitution of definite article *the* for the indefinited aticles:

Testees responses indicated that they used the definite article in stead of using indefinite articles.This error is due to fisrt language interference as they were giving the equivalent native language structure as the result of their inadequate knowledge of the article system of the target language.

The results analysis revealed high percentage of the testees who made such error in both questins as shown in the following tables:

Table (7/A) frequency of the testees' error in the substitution of the definite article *the* for the indefinite articles of Arabic Dep

Frequency of the error	Percentage
174	77%

Table (7/B t) frequency of the testees' error in he substitution of the definite article *the* for the indefinite articles of History Dep

Frequency of the error	Percentage
177	79%

Chi-A squre test was made for this kind of error to record (1.9) as a computed value and when compared with the table value which is (3.8) with (1) as the free degree ,the nill hypothesis was accepted proving that this kind of error is clearly found throughout the responses of the sample of the study.

4.1.4 The substitution of *a* for an or *an* for *a*:

Testees responses indicated that they used the indefinite article (a) in stead of (an) or vise versa.The reason lies in their misunderstading of the phonetic system that binds the uses of both article.In stead, they are following the letter system for the word that directly follows the indefinite article.High percentage of the testees shed this error in their responses for both questions as shown in the folowing tables

Table (8/A)) frequency of the testees error in the substitution of the substitution of *a* for *an* or *an* for *a* of Arabic Dep

Frequency of the error	Percentage
183	83%

Table (8/B) frequency of the testees error in the substitution of *a* for *an* or *an* for *a* of History Dep

Frequency of the error	Percentage
186	85%

Chi-A squre test was made for this kind of error to record (2.9) as a computed value and when compared with the table value which is (3.8) with (1) as the free degree ,the nill hypothesis was accepted which proved that this kind of error exisits in the answers of the the sample of the study.

Above all,the testees showed low suceeded answers in both recognition and production levels though the percentage of the succeeded answers are higher in the question which tests the recognition level than in the question which tests production level .The testees in both Arabic and History Dep. showed approximate results which indicates that there is no significant difference of influence related to the subject of the study of the chosen in the responces of the test.

Chapter Five
Conclusions & Recommendations

5.1 Conclusions: The study reached the following conclusions:

1- Four errors were recognized in using the indefinite articles partly because of the first language interference and partly because of the overlap or the miscconception of the rules binding the use of the these articles on the part of EFL Non-departmental undergraduates.
2-It is clearly noticed that the grammatical rules of English article system received little attention on the part of English grammar courses for EFL non-departmental undergraduates, more specifically the rules by which learners can draw a clear distinction between the uses of indefinite and definite articles.
3-Little opportunities were given to EFL non-departmental undergraduates for illustrating English contexts through which definite and indefinite articles are used, and the absence of the opportunities to train them to think in the target language(English) not the mother tongue(Arabic) while using English articles.

5.2 Recommendations: The study recommends the following:

1-Grammaticla rules of English article system should be emphasized in English courses for non-departmental undergraduates.
2-Teachers of English grammar courses have to follow the techniques that help learners to recognize the uses of definite and indefinite articles and to provide opportunities to train EFL learners to think in English when using English grammatical forms.

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