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THE CAUSES OF DEFINITE ARTICLES ERRORS MADE BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS  
WRITING1 AHFAD UNIVERSITY AS A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of the study, is to identify and analyse the common and frequent grammatical errors of the students under study, and explain the reasons beyond their occurrence, with the intention of establishing the areas of definite articles errors. The study reveals the view of some errors analysis. "Both interlingual' and " intralingual' errors are explained in the theoretical part. The researcher collects the data from the students final exam sheet in 2016 randomly and analyze them to get and find the reasons of these errors.

The researcher hopes that, this study is to be beneficial for the students, and teachers too.

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INTRODUCTION

The students who study English at university in writing 1 course they made different errors through their writing paragraphs and sentences, these errors are occurs due to different purposes.

The main purpose of this study is to identify and analyse the common and frequently grammatical in the writing English language performance of the students', English Language unit at Ahfad University .

The present study tries to answer the following questions:

- What the aspects of English language grammar do these students make errors frequently?
- What are the reasons which led to the occurrence of the errors?

The researcher collected students' easy randomly from the students' answer sheet of the final exam in 2016. The students were asked to write an essay about one of the following topics:

- A holiday celebration or family tradition.
- A particular or favorite place or time of day.
- A trip with friends.

The researcher analysing the students' easy as followed:

- The students' easy were carefully investigated to identify the errors.
- The errors of definite articles subcategorized according to the types of errors into omission or addition errors.
- The sing  $\Omega$  is used to refer to an omitted item, for example:

One of  $\Omega$  students shouted.

(One of the students shouted).

- The right form of the sentence is written between parentheses under the wrong sentence, like the above example.

Errors of the students understudy, and explain the reasons beyond their occurrence, in the areas of definite articles errors.

#### **Literature Review**

English Definite Articles: Roger Berry(2012: p 89-90) mentioned that with common nouns the is basically used to help the noun refer to a thing or things that speaker ( or writer) thinks the listener( or reader) can locate or identify uniquely that is, without confusing it or them with other possible referents. This applies in the following cases:

- a) Where's the butter? - Immediate situation.
- b) The President is going to make a speech. - Larger situation.

These two 'situational ' uses involve knowledge of one's environment, and they are very common in spoken English.

Roger Berry also asserted that: (2012: 92) Generalizing with noun Phrases

If you want to make a generalization about all the members of a 'class' there are several ways to do it. The most common way with count nouns is to use a plural noun phrase with no articles:

Dogs are our best friends.

Not of course Dog... because this would be interpreted as a non-count noun. The equivalent for noncount noun would be without an article:

Cheese is made from the milk of cows and other animals.

It is also possible to use both the definite and indefinite articles with a singular noun phrase for generic reference.

The definite articles are often used with musical instruments and dances:

Can you dance the tango?

But it usually has an academic tone, when people are writing about something professionally:

The invention of the wheel was the most important development in transport.

In such cases the responsibility lies with the employer.

The definite article is also used with generic plural noun phrases in two situations.

- With generic adjectives, e.g. the poor, the long-term unemployed.
- With nationality nouns, e.g. the French, the Chinese.

The definite articles can be used before singular or plural noun whether countable or uncountable. R. Quirk, S. Greenbaum, G. Leech and J. Svartvik (1973,67:80) discussed the use of the definite articles as follows:

With definite specific reference, the definite articles are used for all noun classes:

Where is the pen I bought?

Where are the pens I bought?

Where is the ink I bought?

The definite articles "the" is used with nationality words and adjectives as head. There are two kinds of adjectives that can act as noun-phrase head with generic reference.

- a) Plural personal, for example, the rich – those who are rich.
- b) Singular non-personal abstract, for example, the evil-that which is evil.

Post modification by an of – phrase usually requires the definite articles with ahead noun, which thus has limited generic reference:

He likes the countryside of Saudi Arabia.

He likes the music of United State.

On a broad plane, we talk of the "sun", the "moon", the "stars", the "sky", as aspects of experience common to mankind as a whole.

These seem to require no

### **Error Analysis**

Error analysis was defined by Kharma (1981:21). He maintains that "Error analysis is a process based on analysis of learners' errors with one clear objective: evolving a suitable and effective teaching learning strategy and remedial measure necessary in certain clearly marked out areas of the foreign language. It is a multidimensional and multidimensional and multifaceted process, which involves much more than simply analysing errors in the written or (spoken) English of the learners and counting them for frequency. Only with the help of contrastive linguistics does error analysis become a fruitful undertaking".

Theories of second language acquisition traditionally have been the off-spring of general linguistics theory, sometimes supplement by insights from psychology. The theory of error analysis formed the alternative to the behaviorists' habit theory of language acquisition. It attempted to explain the essentially creative nature of the language acquisition process.

In order to understand the underlying reasons for the shift of emphasis from contrastive analysis (CA) to error analysis (EA), it is necessary to outline the major developments which took place in the field of first language acquisition at about the same time :

Twelve years after the onset of CA Chomsky (1957-22-42) made the important formulation language "As a powerful set of transformational rules" which was received with enthusiasm, especially by many psychologists. In the early 60s, researchers in the first language acquisition reported regularities in young children's speech, which could be characterized by a set of rules. The errors children made were seen as part of each child's developing grammar or linguistic system. The child's errors were regarded thus as results of an underlying rule-governed system which evolved towards the full adult grammar.

Thus, the child gained the status as active participant in the acquisition of language. Later, many investigators noted similarity is between the types of errors made by first and second language learners. These errors could not be accounted in the CA frame work.

Richards (1974:6) maintains that "like first language learner, the second language learner tries to derive the rules behind the data which he has been exposed and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to mother-tongue nor to the target language".

Many researchers Corder (1967 ),Dulay and Burt (1974), Richards (1971), speculated that the processes of first and second language acquisition are essentially the same. Like children learning their first language, second language learners were characterized as proceeding through a series of intermediate grammars. The contrast is to be made from the deviant target language constructions back to the mother-tongue to explain similarities and differences.

Chomsky (1959:p.26-58) maintains that, "language acquisition could not take place through habit formation, because language was far too complicate to be learned in such a manner".

Recently it has been suggested that, errors alone are of little interest; rather the entire linguistics system of the second language learner should be investigated. Hence current research tends to focus on the learner himself as generator of the grammar of his sentences in the new language. This emphasis is reflected in a growing terminology for a field of research which deals with the learner's attempts to internalize the grammar of the language is learning.

### **Types of Errors**

Corder (1973 : 20), suggested that, there are two types of errors, that second language learners commit, when learning a new language. They are seen to commit errors resulting **from** mother-tongue interference. The term "interlingual" is used here to refer to such types of errors. They are also seen to commit errors resulting from factors other than mother-tongue interference (e.g. Overgeneralization.)The term "intralingual" a term borrowed from Richards (1974) will be used here to refer to the types of errors.

Interlingual Errors:

Corder (1973: 22) suggested that, transfer or interlingual interference carries two concepts concerning first language habits. First, the concept of facilitation (positive transfer) and second the concept of inhibition (negative transfer).

Intralingual Errors

Corder (1981 : 10) made a distinction between two types of intralingual errors : systematic, and non-systematic errors, or the errors of competence, and the errors of performance. He maintains that: " the use of term systematic in this context implies of course that there may be errors which are random, or more properly, the systematic nature of which cannot be readily discerned. The opposition between systematic and non systematic errors is important".

a) Systematic errors

Systematic errors, are the errors of competence, they are regular in their occurrence; they reflect the linguistics system stored in the learner's brains. Systematic errors provide teachers with evidence about the validity of methods they have adopted in teaching a new language. They are indispensable to learn, because through them the learners can test the hypotheses they made about the target language.

b) Non- systematic errors

We have already discussed systematic errors which are a direct reflection of the rules internalized in the learner's minds. However, the learners may also produce errors which are not the product of any latent system. Such errors clearly reflected superficial influences. These influences are the strategy of communication and performance factors.

The methodology of error analysis (EA)

The methodology of EA, in so far as traditional EA can be consisted of the following steps:

1. Collecting of data (either from a "free" composition by students on a given theme or from examination answers).
2. Identifications of errors ( labeling, with varying degrees of precision depending on linguistics sophistication brought to bear on task, will respect to exact nature of deviation, e.g. dangling preposition, anomalous sequence of tenses, etc.).
3. Classification into error types (e.g., errors of agreement, articles, verb forms, etc).
4. Statement of relative frequency of error types.
5. Identification of the areas of difficulty in the TL.
6. Therapy (remedial drills, lesson, etc). Sridhar (1980).

Rossipal and Duskova went further, to include both of the following to the above methodology.

1. Analysis of the source of errors (e.g. mother tongue interference, overgeneralization, inconsistencies in the spelling system of the TL etc.)
2. Determine of the degree of disturbance caused by the error ( or the seriousness of the error in terms of communication, norm, etc.)( Cited by Croft 1980:103).

The correction of errors

Before correcting students errors, teachers need to consider whether the errors should be corrected at all, and, if so, why .Hendirichson (1980:156) noted that " when students are not able to recognize their own errors, they need the assistance of someone more proficient in the language than they are".

A technique of correction which merely draws the learners' attention to the fact of such omissions and wrong selection is unlikely to provide them with the evidence they need to discover the right system. It has been suggested that, through negative instances, the learners can correct their own errors. That is the learners, through their errors, provides plentiful examples of negative instances, but they are not controlled by teachers. He maintains that," skill in correction of errors lies in the direction of exploiting the incorrect forms produced by the learner in a controlled fashion".(Ibid,298).

In the ordinary classroom lesson there is a constant switching from one activity to the next. In the same utterance the teacher may provide data and explanations whilst the learner may form hypothesis, test it

and have it verified by the teacher. This analysis suggests, then, that there are up to four fairly well defined elements in the grammatical components of teaching materials: data and examples; descriptions and explanations; induction exercises; and hypothesis testing exercises. Each component has a function in the learning process, but the sequence in which they occur in the textbook cannot be prescribed for all cases.

**Omission of the definite article:**

The following classes do not permit the use of the definite article, only the zero-article is possible;

1. Before abstract nouns used in a general sense:  
Life is very hard for some people.  
We will have freedom or death.
2. Before names of materials used in a general sense:  
Butter is made from cream.  
Wheat is grown in Australia.
3. Before plural nouns used in a general sense:  
Books are my friends.
4. Before names of meals used in general sense:  
Come to dinner / lunch/tea with me.
5. Before most proper nouns:  
Ahmed comes from Jeddah.
6. With the names of languages:  
She speaks Spanish.
7. With words like ' school' , 'prison', when the idea expressed concerns the use made of the building:  
He has gone to school to learn.
8. Before the names of seasons and festivals:  
Winter is the best time for reading.  
We are going there in Spring.
9. With family names (relations) with unique reference:  
Mother is out; uncle will come on Saturday.
10. With geographical names:
  - a) Names of continents:  
Medieval Europe.
  - b) Names of countries, states:  
Modern Oman.
  - c) Cities and towns:  
Downtown Khartoum.
  - d) Mountains:  
Aseer mountains.

The definite Article error analysis:

Table (1)

Type	Number	Percentage
Omission of the definite article	25	31.25%
Wrong addition of definite article.	55	68.75%
Total	80	100%

The definite article errors

Table (1) above shows the types of the definite article errors and their frequencies. They are classified into omission, and wrong addition errors.

- a) Omission of the definite article:

31.25% were omissions of the definite article handled in this study. The definite article omissions noticed in the present study can be subcategorized into the following 10 groups.

1. Generic use of nouns.
2. Before nouns modified by an of- phrase.
3. Before noun modified.
4. Before nouns made particular in context.
5. Before nouns post-modified by an of –phrase.
6. Before NP's modified by preposition + NP

1. Generic use of nouns:

What is being proposed in this category is that certain generalizations remain, for one reason or another, hypothesis, and the learner is unable to give them the status of rules they are therefore open to unsettling influences. The result is that though the learner may have seemingly arrived at a hypothesis, he is not able to apply it with any degree of consistency in handing his performance data. However, this led to error like:

- One usually finds beautiful places in  $\Omega$  village, not in  $\Omega$  town.

(One usually finds beautiful places in the village, not in the town.)

- No one can deny that  $\Omega$  woman has a very important role in society.

(No one can deny that the woman has a very important role in society).

The omission of the in the above sentence due to interference of mother- tongue, since the definite article "al" is used with {garya}= the village in English language and {madina}= the town in English language. In Arabic we say {alhorma} = the woman in English. However, "the" is omitted in the misconception that, since no specific 'village' or 'town' is meant, the definite article should not be used.

2. Before nouns modified by an of-phrase:

In this subcategory sentences of the following type were produce

- One of  $\Omega$  students shouted.

(One of the students shouted).

- We claimed one of the mountains.

(We claimed one of the mountains).

The corresponding construction in Arabic of the above sentences requires article use. Thus negative interference of the mother tongue must be excluded as an explanation for these errors.

3. Before nouns modified by an adjective:

In this subcategory the definite article omissions occurred in the context where a noun is modified by an adjective:

- Last year we went to  $\Omega$  wonderful place in  $\Omega$  East of Sudan.

(Last year we went to the wonderful place in the East of Sudan.

- That is  $\Omega$  best day in my life.

(That is the best day in my life)

When the above example transfer into Arabic words there is no 'the' at all. However 'the' is omitted for the reason that, the learner is over generalizing the rule for the formation of the definite article, or applying the rule to a category to which it is not applicable.

4. Before nouns made particular in context.

Erroneous sentences of the following type were produced:

- You can see many people walking in  $\Omega$  streets.

(You can see many people walking in the streets.)

- I have learned much by reading about  $\Omega$  careers of others.

( I have learned much by reading about the careers of others.)

' the ' is omitted in the above sentences because the learner over generalizes the rule for the formation of the definite article, or applying the rule to a category to which it is not applicable.

5. Before nouns post modified by an of-phrase:

Sentences with definite article omissions of the following type were produced:

- We were felling happy all  $\Omega$  time of the picnic.

(We were felling happy all the time of the picnic.)

- We went to  $\Omega$  beach of the Red sea.

(We went to the beach of the Red sea.)

The above error is due to the interference from the mother tongue.

6. Before NP's modified by a preposition + NP:

- $\Omega$  role of educated woman is very important.

(the role of educated women is very important.)

- $\Omega$  garden of the house is very nice.

(the garden of the house is very nice.)

The errors above are not uniquely traceable to interference from the mother-tongue system. It is, however, possible that along with other factors first language features may also contribute to indeterminacy.

Wrong addition errors:

As table (1) shows, 68.75 % were wrong additions of definite article. They can be subcategorized into the following (6) groups:

1. Idiomatic expressions with "be"+ "go" and prepositions.
2. Zero article for NP's with generic reference.
3. Common nouns with zero- article (times of day).
4. Predeterminers with of- negative.
5. Co- occurrence of definite and indefinite articles.
6. Zero article before " Many".

1. Idomatic expressions with "be + go" and preposition.

Sentences of the following type were produced:

- When I was studying at the school.

(when I was studying at school).

- she was taken to the hospital.

(He was taken to hospital).

In English uses the zero article before the above mentioned words like ( school, hospital) when function is thought of .It seem that the above mentioned errors caused by negative interference from the mother – tongue. Since the Arabic sentences would require the article use.

2. Zero – article for NP's with generic reference:

In this subcategory sentences of the following type were produced:

- Most of them like the music.

(Most of them like music).

- The problems of the life.

(The problems of life).

In English abstract nouns used in a general sense take no definite article before them as they used in the above examples.

3. Common noun with zero-article ( times of day):

Sentences of the following type were produced:

- At around the noon we came back to our houses.

(At around noon we came back to our houses).

- I have met my friends at the night.

(I have met my friends at night).

Times of day and night in English are usually expressed in certain idiomatic phrase, some of them , like : " at midnight" , " at sunrise" , " at noon" occur without the definite article.

4. Predeterminers with of - negative :

Sentences of the following type were produced:

- I thought the both of them were there.

(I thought both of them were there).

- I have told the both of them about the picnic.

(I have told both of them about the picnic).

Predeterminers with an of – negative are not preceded by the definite article in English. However, students neglected this rule and produced erroneous sentences like above.

5. Co- occurrence of definite and indefinite articles.

In this subcategory sentences of the following type were produced:

- We chooses the a beautiful place to sit.

(We chooses a beautiful place to sit).

- This is the a good idea.

(This is a good idea).

The co – occurrence of definite and indefinite articles, is not very frequent errors. However, the situation with respect to " the " is much more ambiguous and misleading than situation of "a". In the face of this copious contradiction between the proffered generalization and his language experience the learner fails to generalize with any degree of definiteness or finds it difficult to accept the proffered generalization as a rule. This constitutes one of the typical situations for indeterminacy. Jain(1974:205).

6. Zero-article before "many"

Sentences of the following type were produced:

- The many of my friends.

(Many of my friends ).

- The many of them.

In the above examples the errors are due to interference of the mother tongue. In English never use the definite article "the" before "many".

Summary of the results:

Omission errors:

The detailed analysis of the data revealed that there are 31.25% cases of omissions of the definite article. The high frequency indicates that, the students employ the strategy of deleting what they are not sure of. The most frequent omissions of the definite article are in the following distinct context:

1. The generic use of the nouns.
2. Before nouns modified by an adjective.
3. Before nouns modified by an adjective.
4. Before nouns made particular in context.
5. Before nouns post modified by an of-phrase.

Wrong addition errors:

According to the analysis of the data there are 68.75 % added the definite article "the" in wrong places where no need to add "the" in these places for some reasons that mentioned in details due to the following group:

1. Idiomatic expressions with "be"+ "go" and prepositions.
2. Zero article for NP's with generic reference.
3. Common nouns with zero- article (times of day).
4. Predeterminers with of- negative.
5. Co- occurrence of definite and indefinite articles.
6. Zero article before " Many".

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