

A PAPER ON ENGLISH ARTICLE ACCURACY OF EFL LEARNERS: AN INVESTIGATION

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Abstract. *In English grammar, English article system is considered as one of the difficult aspects. It is not only a subject of inquiry for linguists but also it is very much appealing for its wide variety. Article is an important topic because of its interactions with linguistic and nonlinguistic knowledge. Warden (1976) has presented articles as 'referring expressions' which enable a speaker to introduce or comment upon an item in a discourse. For non-native English speakers, article becomes one of the major reasons to make grammatical error if they do not have sound knowledge about it. For example in Bangla Language, there is no functional equivalent of an English article. From the various kinds of resources, it is found that Bangladeshi learners always find it difficult to use articles properly; in fact in many cases they use wrong articles. Though there is high frequency of usage, English article system always remains a difficult part for them. In this paper, two important points are investigated; one is the 'accuracy' of the English articles (a, the, and Ø) and another one is the accuracy order of various semantic articles uses in different noun phrase (NP) environment.*

Key words: *article, accuracy order, Bangladeshi EFL learners, Semantic Wheel Mode,*

1. INTRODUCTION

Generally, grammar is treated as an insipid subject. But we cannot avoid grammar as we cannot avoid rules of game while we play any. Normally, while speaking or writing our sentences, we follow grammatical rules. Still at times grammatical errors creep in and put us in an embarrassing situation. The English article system is one of the most difficult parts for the EFL learners as they frequently make errors. Non-native learners often find it difficult to use a, an, the, or zero article at the beginning of a noun phrase (NP). This happens to them because of the difficult structural elements of article. From the various kinds of research work four kinds of principle facts are found about the article system: (a) it is the system of the most frequently functioning words in English language; (b) it makes continuous rule application which is difficult over an extended stretch of discourse; (c) the functional words are normally unstressed (d) the article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999, Master 2002). The purpose of this study is to investigate acquisition and underlying processes in terms of 'article accuracy' and the 'accuracy order' of various semantic articles uses in different noun phrase (NP) environment. D. Bickerton's (1981) semantic wheel model, marked by the features [Specific Reference (SR)] and [Hearer's Knowledge (HK)], is the backbone of this study.

2. THE ENGLISH ARTICLE SYSTEM

A, an, the, and the zero (null)/ (Ø) article are the main elements of this article. Among these 'the' is used to indicate definiteness and the other two are used to indicate definiteness. Article has two important areas: (i) Noun phrase and (ii) Determiners. According to Collins (2005), noun phrases (NP) or noun groups are matters or people talked about in a discourse. So a noun phrase is used in their discourse in two main ways: (i) Specific reference (the speaker refers to someone or something, knowing that the hearer understands what is talked about), (ii) General reference (the speaker refers to someone or something of a kind but without specifying a certain person or thing), (Collins 2005). According to Leech (1994), the English article is one kind of determiners which is used to specify the types of reference of a noun. Determiners include articles, demonstrative determiners (this, that, these), possessive determiners (my, your, one's, etc), quantifiers (a few, a little, etc), and so on (Leech 1994). So from the opinion of Collins and Leech, it is clear that noun is a significant part of article and article specifies the types of reference of a noun.

3. ARTICLE USE IN DIFFERENT NOUN PHRASE ENVIRONMENTS

Bickerton's (1981) semantic wheel has been one of the most widely used models for classifying NP environments in English article acquisition studies and was modified and used in this study as well. In his model, the use of English articles is determined by the semantic function of the NP in discourse. According to his model, English NPs are classified by two features of referentiality—namely, specific reference [SR] and hearer's knowledge [HK]. These two aspects of referentiality thus give rise to four basic NP contexts that determine article use. The four basic NP contexts are herein denoted as uses of type 1 ([SR, HK], generics), type 2 ([SR, HK], referential definites), type 3 ([SR, HK], referential indefinites), and type 4 ([SR, HK], nonreferentials). This classification illustrates clearly that the four semantic types of NPs each have different discourse and referential constraints and thus call for the selection of a specific article or articles from among a, the, and zero to mark these constraints. If the grasp of the use of the English article system entails a command of the discourse and referential constraints on NPs, the acquisition of the article system must in turn involve the learning of these constraints - a task that research has shown, directly or indirectly, to be especially challenging, albeit possible, for L2 learners.

4. ARTICLE ACQUISITION BY L2 LEARNERS

As English article system is a complex phenomenon because there is no tool for the learners to acquire it easily. In fact, there is no formal instruction to learn it. As Bangla language does not have any article system, there is less possibility that first language affects the acquisition of English articles by Bengali EFL Learners. EFL learners generally misuse 'the' and 'a'. In a language, where article system is absent, generally 'zero' article controls all the environments (Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987).

Parrish (1987) has showed that the zero article was acquired first, then definite article, and finally indefinite article. Master (1997) has commented that zero is the first article which is learnt by speakers. He also says that as there is no particular difference between

zero and non-use of article. So zero articles are learnt by the learners automatically without following any rules. 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 also reports that overuse of zero decreases with an increase in proficiency level, although the overuse of zero persists more than overuse of the other articles.

Liu and Gleason (2002) have given a new idea about overuse of 'zero' article and underuse of 'a' and 'the'. They told that the overuse of zero article and the under use of the at the advanced stage may suggest that the two articles are acquired rather late. Young (1996) has supported this opinion and in his work it is proved. So it can be said that the problem of 'the' does not occur in the early stage, it occurs in the advanced stage and beside this, indefiniteness is indicated by article 'a', 'an' and the pattern became more consistent as acquisition progressed.

5. TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH ARTICLES IN BANGLADESH

Bengali students start to learn English grammar from the primary school, they get the opportunity to learn article at the early stage of their education life. Though they learn how to use article but they are not enforced to achieve the mastery of English article. As article is a functional word, this does not have any significant effect on the meaning of the sentence, so learners do not feel any necessity to use article properly. Beside this there are few reasons for giving less attention on article: (i) complicity about the usage of the article; (ii) less impact on the whole sentence; (iii) giving less preference on language learning syllabus; (iv) not inspiring the learners to learn the depth of article. All these are the teaching and learning English article situation in Bangladesh.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1. Participants

Participants were native Bangla speakers who learned English as a secondary language and to do this research a 'cross sectional approach' was adopted. The participants were undergraduate students from various universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Total number of participants were 30. Fifteen boys and 15 girls participated in each group. To get the expected result some criterion were adopted, such as duration of studying English, various experience of learning English articles, etc.

6.2. Models for analysis

To examine the 'accuracy order' of the English articles and levels of difficulty of various semantic article usage, a modified version of Bickerton's (1981) model was adopted. According to this model, semantic functions of articles depend on whether or not the noun phrase has a specific referent [\pm SR], and whether or not the noun is assumed to be identifiable by the hearer [\pm HK]. These two aspects of referentiality thus give rise to four basic types of semantic article uses, namely - Type 1: generics in the [-SR, +HK] environment, Type 2: referential definites in the [+SR, +HK] environment, Type 3:

referential indefinites in the [+SR, -HK] environment, and Type 4: nonreferentials in the [SK, -HK] environment.

Tables 1 summarize the classifications and the coding of *a*, *the*, and \emptyset in the article contexts and in the semantic NP environments respectively.

Table 1 Summary of the classifications of *a*, *the*, and \emptyset in the semantic NP environments

Feature / Environment	Type of semantic article use	Target Article	Examples
Type 1 [-SR, +HK]	Generics	<i>a</i> , \emptyset , <i>the</i>	<i>A paper clip comes in handy.</i>
Type 2 [+SR, +HK]	Referential definite	<i>the</i>	
Subcategories	(i) Unique referent		<i>The sun is shining.</i>
	(ii) Referent physically present		Pass me <i>the pen</i> .
	(iii) Referent previously mentioned		I saw a man. <i>The man</i> is very handsome
	(iv) Specific referent		A: <i>The girl</i> is very beautiful. (A is pointing to a girl) B: Yes, she is.
Type 3 [+SR, -HK]	Referential indefinites	<i>a</i> , \emptyset	I keep sending \emptyset messages to him.
Type 4 [-SR, -HK]	Non-referentials	<i>a</i> , \emptyset	Alice is <i>an accountant</i> .

7. MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES

7.1. Story-retelling test

One story ('The old tree') (See Appendix A) was constructed and recorded on MP3 by a native American male voice. In order to eliminate extraneous factors and enhance the subjects' understanding of stories, the learners had been told the background and the content of the stories in Bangla before they listened. The difficult vocabularies were also explained. The participants were asked to listen to the stories twice and retell the whole stories in their own words. They were allowed to write down notes in English during the listening process. The story was read twice, with one minute pause separating the repetitions. After listening to the story, they had to retell it (without time limit) and the whole process was recorded. The speeches were further transcribed, marked and coded for analyzing their acquisition of the English article system.

8. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

8.1. Accuracy order of a, the, and Ø

In Table 2 the percentages of the correct use and incorrect use of a, the, and Ø on the story-retelling test are listed. Total 810 articles were used by the students. As the usage of article is increased, the language proficiency of the learners is also increased. As shown in Table 2, most of the users have used definite article, followed by the indefinite article, and finally the zero article. This is the very appearance of article usage. According to Sinclair (1991) in English language 'the' is the article which is used by the users frequently and a/an is used less by the users. Article 'the' is generally used by user in introductory function, and to make noun phrase definite, article 'the' is necessary.

As shown in Table 2 the percentages of correct use of a, the and Ø on the story retelling test, learners scored 88.24% for the definite article, 64.59% for the indefinite article, and 58.33% for the zero article. It is clear that when the learners are in the process of development, they start to use correct articles and from the result we can see clearly that the users use definite article more properly than indefinite article. So, it is clear that the usage of definite and zero (Ø) article are easier and accurate than the usage of indefinite article.

Table 2 Percentages of correct use and incorrect use of a, the, and Ø on the story-retelling test

Article Type	Total no. of articles produced	Percentage of correct use	Percentage of incorrect use
<i>a</i>	325	64.59%	35.41%
<i>the</i>	450	88.24%	11.76%
Ø	35	58.33%	41.67%

8.2. Accuracy of the four semantic article uses in different noun phrase (NP) environment

In Table 3, accuracy of four semantic article (a, the, Ø) uses are shown. Four different noun phrase environments [-SR, +HK], [+SR, +HK], [+SR, -HK], [-SR, -HK] with the distribution of a/an, the, Ø are also shown in the table. From the list, it is clear that there is a significant difference in the accuracy rates among these four semantic article uses. In all four NP environments, the correct use of articles marks the development of the learners. The accuracy rates of the undergraduates were with 58.33% for generic use ([-SR, +HK]), 88.24% for referential definites ([+SR, +HK]), 64.59% for referential indefinites ([+SR, -HK]), and 89% for non-referential use ([-SR, -HK]).

From the result it is clear that the uses of four semantic uses creates different kinds of proficiency level, in fact, it creates a different level of difficulty for the participants. Referential definites show high percentage of accuracy level in the story retelling test. And in the case of the referential indefinites, it shows the high level of difficulty in NP environment [+SR,-HK].

Table 3 Distribution of a, the, and Ø in the four noun phrase environments and accuracy rates of the four semantic article uses on the story-retelling test (given as frequency, underlined figures indicate the correct responses)

Feature	Types of semantic article use	Total no. of articles used			Accuracy rate
		a	the	Ø	
[-SR,+HK]	Generics	95	10	105	58.33%
		10	30	15	
		75	91	25	
[+SR,+HK]	Referential definites	150	60	3	88.24%
[+SR,-HK]	Referential indefinites	85	35	3	64.59%
		4	1	3	
[-SR,-HK]	Non-referentials	7	1	0	89%
		0	1	2	

9. CONCLUSION

Finally, in this paper 'accuracy' of the English article system of EFL learners and 'accuracy order' of various semantic articles uses in different noun phrase (NP) environment are shown. The findings of the story-retelling test show that users can use definite article more accurately than the indefinite article, with the zero article in between. From the story-retelling test, it is found that referential definite and generics are easy, whereas referential indefinites are not easy for the user. In general, the accuracy is improved significantly with the learners' proficiency level. More importantly, it is clear that there is an overgeneralization of the across the proficiency levels, particularly in the referential indefinite environment. Besides, in this paper, it is clear that EFL acquisition of the various uses of them seems to be use dependent.

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APPENDIX A

The old tree

An (A2) old tree had lived for many years. She was over one hundred years old. She had seen many things happen, good and bad, happy and sad. She knew many animals. One day, a (A2) hunter wanted to catch some animals to sell. He decided to set a (A2) trap near the (T2) old tree. He dug a (A2) big hole and laid a (A2) huge net over it. Then he covered the (T2) net with many leaves. Finally he put some meat on the trap (T2) and went away. In the (T2) night, the (T2) moon hanged in the (T2) sky. A (A2) small naughty lion had left his home while his mother was outside looking for food (Ø1). He had been playing with his friends and was tired and hungry. When he came close to the

(T2) trap, he saw some meat. "The (T2) meat looks very nice!" he said. He wanted to get it to fill his stomach and started to walk towards it. The (T2) old tree quickly warned him by shouting loudly, "Run away! Don't go near the (T2) meat! There is a (A2) trap there!" The (T2) small lion stopped and looked up. In front of him he saw the (T2) old tree. Then he said, "Oh, be quiet! I won't listen to you! What do you know? Lions (Ø1) are very powerful and I am the (T2) cleverest one. I am different from the (T2) animals which are fearful and weak." Then he jumped on the (T2) meat and down he fell into the (T2) trap! "Help me!" he cried, but it was too late. The (T2) hunter soon arrived and put him in a (A2) cage.

Remarks:

Number of items in each category:

The three types of use of <i>The</i>	Code	No. of Items
Generic use	T1	0
Referential definite use	T2	17
Referential indefinite use	T3	0
Non-referentials	T4	0

The three types of use of <i>A/An</i>	Code	No. of Items
Generic use	A1	0
Referential indefinite use	A2	8
Non-referentials	A3	0

The three types of use of Zero article (Ø)	Code	No. of Items
Generic use	Ø1	2
Referential indefinite use	Ø2	0
Non-referentials	Ø3	0

Adapted from Cash (2002).