English Article Errors in the Writings of ESL Advanced Arab Students

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Abstract: **This paper examines the errors of English articles in the writings of the advanced Arab students. It is believed that ESL advanced Arabs, if not trained well, face the problem of employing the English article system due to the difference between their L1 and English. The participants were 20 ESL students who spoke Arabic as a first language, 11 males and 9 females. All of them were students at the ELI, Missouri State University, at level 502 which is the most advanced level. Students in this level are expected to pursue their graduate studies when they pass it. Examining their essays, Six categories of errors were found: the for Ø, Ø for the, a/an for Ø, Ø for a/an, the for a/an, and over-avoidance. The category that has the most errors is the Ø for a/an (27 errors). The second most-erred category is Ø for the (14 errors); then, the third, Over-avoidance (11 errors); next, the fourth, the for Ø (8 errors); followed by, the fifth, the for a/an (4 errors); and finally, the sixth, a/an for Ø (2 errors). It might be said that these students need to be taught articles separately and be given extensive exercises on the articles in different contexts. It is also recommended that they be taught the rules of the articles as mentioned in the different books of grammar and be asked to follow them.**

Keywords: **English article system, Arabic article system, language interference.**

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I am addressing the definite and indefinite English article errors in the writings of the ESL advanced Arab students. It is believed that mastering English articles is one of the most difficult areas in learning English as a second or foreign language (Master and others). Therefore, this cross-sectional study examines essays written by advanced Arab students who are enrolled in level 502 at the English Language Institute (ELI) which belongs to Missouri State University. 502 is the most advanced level which is designed for students who will pursue their graduate studies after they pass it. By looking for the errors of the English articles in these essays, six categories of errors were found: *the* for Ø, Ø for *the*, *a/an* for Ø, Ø for *a/an*, *the* for *a/an*, and over-avoidance. Although those students are advanced, they still are a step behind in mastering the English articles. The reason why is multifold. First, the article system in English is difficult and not easy to master as researchers and learners conclude. Second, there exists a disagreement among the native speakers of English and/or researchers on when to use some articles and when not (as the literature review section shows). Third, unlike English, Arabic which is the first language of those students doesn't employ a system of indefinite articles as English does. Also, Arabic—which belongs to a different language family, Semitic, not like English which belongs to the Germanic Indo-European language family—employs a system of a definite article differently.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A Randolph Quirk et al. defines eight uses of the definite article *the*. 1. Immediate situation (e.g. the roses are very beautiful [said in a garden]). 2. Larger situation (e.g. the moon, the sun, the stars, the universe, the sky, the earth … etc.). 3. Direct anaphoric reference, which refers to X noun or phrase is that is preceded by a given information earlier in the context (e.g. John bought a T.V and a video recorder, but he returned the video recorder). 4. Indirect anaphoric reference, which refers to X noun or phrase that start to exist in the hearer's knowledge indirectly through other words. (e.g. They got married in grand style. The bride wore a long brocade dress, and the bridesmaids wore pin taffeta). 5. Cataphoric

reference, which refers to the case when what follows the article *the* defines the noun or the phrase rather than what precedes it. (e.g. a) The president of Mexico is to visit China. b) the girls sitting over there are my cousins). 6. Sporadic reference, which refers to the case when *the* refers to a human society institution. (e.g. a) my sister goes to the theatre (any theatre or a specific one) every month. b) what's on the radio/TV this evening?). 7. The 'logical' use of *the* (e.g. this is the only remaining copy). 8. The use of *the* with reference to body parts. (e.g. a) I shook him by the hand. b) Mary banged herself on the forehead).

Regarding the indefinite articles, Quirk et al. differentiate between referring and non-referring indefinite articles. 1. Referring indefinite articles *a* and *an* are used when the cases of the definite *the* don't exist and the noun is singular count. (e.g. an intruder has stolen a vase). 2. Non-referring indefinite articles *a* and *an* are used to complement a clause. (e.g. Paganini was *a* great violinist). Concerning the zero article, Quirk et al. defines eight cases where no article is used. 1. Generic use (e.g. Ø cigarettes are bad for your health). 2. Parallel structure (e.g. arm in arm, face to face, man to man, day by day, mile upon a mile, hand in hand … etc.). 3. Illnesses (e.g. Ø anemia, diabetes, influenza … etc.). 4. Meals (e.g. breakfast, lunch, supper … etc.). 5. Seasons (e.g. spring, summer, fall … etc.). 6. Times of the day, particularly when proceeded by *at*, *by*, *after*, and *before*. (e.g. at dawn, at/by night, before morning came, (by) day and night ... etc.). 7. Means of transport and communication if proceeded by *by* (e.g. by car, bicycle, bus, train, plane … etc.). 8. Some institutions of human life and society (e.g. go to hospital, be at school, go to sea, go to college … etc.) (272-281).[1]

Paul Christophersen's *The Articles: A Study of their Theory and Use in English* is one of the first papers that address the issue of English articles. Christophersen discusses the uses of the three substantive forms in English, zero-article, definite article, and indefinite article. He approaches the issue from a historical perspective where he studies the origin of the articles tracing them in Old English forms. He claims that the definite article *the* developed in the Old English from the demonstrative pronoun. In this paper, Christophersen sets ground for the notion of familiarity; "Now the speaker must always be supposed to know which individual he is thinking of; the interesting thing is that the *the*-form supposes that the hearer knows it too" (28). He agrees with the trend that the zero-form should be extended for the sake of mass words to become universalized (35).

Agreeing with Christophersen, Peter J. Thorne argues that the English definite article *the* is an unstressed form of demonstrative pronoun *that*, and both *the* and *that* are derived from the underlying structure of the locative *there*. He suggests that *the man* or *that man* are derived from the structure *man who is there*. Thorne argues that "The main argument in favor of this proposal is that taking the expression which is there as the meaning of the definite article provides a basis for an explanation of its use" (563). Similar to Quirk et al., Thorne discusses the different uses of the definite article *the*.

Beverly L. Robbins covers and illustrates the noun phrases that contain the definite article *the* such as: all types of relative clauses (*who*, *whom*, *that*, *which*, and *whose*), anaphoric *the* (i.e. *the* which refers back to an antecedent word), prepositional phrase adjuncts (e.g. *the king of Arabs*), nominalized sentences (e.g. *the possibility that Sara will win*), participial adjuncts (e.g. *the boy eating food* or *the car chosen by him*), and infinitive adjuncts (e.g. *the class to attend*). David Perlmutter argues that the indefinite articles are different from the definite in terms of category. That is, the indefinite ones, according to what he proposes, comes from the numeral *one*, even if it doesn't carry the semantic characteristics of the numeral *one*. Therefore, he calls for a segregation of the definite articles (and hence one) from the numerals.

Noel Burton-Roberts presents a classification of four different categories or interpretations of the indefinite article *a*. A) "Genetic *a*," which defines whale in *A whale is a mammal*. B) "The specific indefinite article *a*," which defines the subjects of non-generic statements as in *A man was in the garden last night*. C) "The attributive indefinite article *a*," which defines "complement noun phrases in predicates" as in *John is a scientist*. D) "The non-specific indefinite article a" as in *I'm going to buy a loaf of bread*. This classification "[+SPEC] *a*, COP *a*, GEN *a*, and [-SPEC]" *a* leads the researcher to posit that the second and the third type (i.e. COP *a*, GEN *a*) are congruent. All of those categories determine the nouns which are "complements of the copulae" (427-444).

R. L. Whitman hypothesizes that the structure of the English article system is, indeed, "a sequence of quantification and determination rather than a choice between specified and unspecified" (253). Similar to Master, Whitman proposes six

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[1] Quirk et al. detail all these cases and mention some exceptions.

phases for determining the correct article in a context. These are: 1. quantity (*Joe has* [*a*] *car* versus *Joe has [0] three cars*); 2. Generic plural ([*All*] *animals don't think* versus [*0*] *Animals don't think*); 3. Noncount nouns (*I ate [an] apple* versus *I drank [0] milk*); 4. Determiners (*Which* [*0*] *houses are red*? Versus [*The*] *red houses are on National Ave.*, *I bought* [*a*] *magazine*. Versus [*The*] *magazine was called National Geographic*); 5. Quantity and determiner (*One of* [*the*] *boys in the classroom is my son.*); and 6. Generic articles ([*0*] *Monkeys are smart,* [*a*] *monkey is smart, and* [*the*] *monkey is smart*). Whitman argues that although the 'generic' with articles is correct, it is not commonly used (261).

In terms of the articles for the learners, P. L. McEldowney detects three general article-related errors by learners of English as a second language. She believes that these errors occur due to the interference of their first language. These three kinds of errors are: 1. omission of *a/the/-s* where there should be one; 2. misplacement of *a/the/-s* where one is wrongly placed in the place of another; and 3. confusion of *a/the/-s*. Hence, she introduces steps for acquiring or mastering the article system in English (110). First, 'classification' "*a* + n. (-spec.) versus *the* + n. (+ spec.) (E.g. *pick up a book*. versus *pick up the red book*). 2. 'Plurality' "some + n. (-spec.)+ s" (E.g. *pick up some books from the collection*. Versus *pick up the red books*). 3. 'Mass or substance n.' (E.g. *Sand* (-spec.) *is found on the beaches* versus *the sand* (+spec) *of this beach looks golden*). 4. 'Numbered specific; generic' (E.g *Lions are strong, the lion is strong,* and *the lions are strong*) (110).

Na-rae Han, Martin Chodorow, and Claudia Leacock believe that one of the most difficult areas in English as a second language for students to master is articles, either definite or indefinite (i.e. *a, an, the*, or *0*) initially in a noun phrase. The authors argue that this problem is even more problematic for ESL speakers of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Russian, and other languages that don't employ an article system. Consequently, the authors have developed a tool that can help provide these learners with choosing the article. They trained the tool on six million noun phrases from published papers, and the tool gets 83% correct. Then the authors apply it to the TOEFL essays written by native speakers of Chinese, Japanese, and Russian, and the tool detected one article (either definite or indefinite) error in every eight noun phrases. The authors recommend this tool for the learners of English.

In his "Consciousness Raising and Article Pedagogy," Peter Master examines the article-related errors in the writings of advanced Asian students through a longitudinal study that lasted for 3-4 weeks. He concludes that most of the article-related errors of the students were the omission. In another paper titled "Teaching the English Articles as a Binary System," Master believes that English articles are better taught as a "binary division." This system rotates around two things: first, the "classification of (*a* and *0*), and second, the identification *the*." For this system to be comprehended, a student 'must' answer a series of six questions about the noun in a certain discourse to determine what correct article to bus used. These six questions are: 1. Is the noun countable or uncountable? 2. Is the noun indefinite or definite? 3. Is the noun post-modified or not? 4. Is the noun specific or generic? 5. Is the noun common or proper? 6. Is the noun non-idiomatic or idiomatic? (e.g. a set phrase, a title or label reduction (461- 464).

Trying to understand how the ESL learners develop articles and other things, Thom Huebner conducted a year-long study of Ge, a young Hmong immigrant through 17 taped interviews, and saw how Ge developed his way using the English articles. One of the interesting findings in this book is that the researcher found that Ge use the article "the" with all nouns phrases because of a wrong generalization hypothesis he made for himself, and then when he (Ge) discovers that this was wrong, he, through a 'backtracks process' cuts the usage of "the" down to almost nothing, and then increases it again when he believes he starts to know the right usage.

Wondering where the problem of the ESL students being unable to master the articles might be, T. Pica reexamines how grammar books teach the articles compared to how natives speakers use them in communication (in ordering food in restaurants, for instance). She argues that English articles have to do more with "communicative competence than with grammar and linguistic competence" (231). Therefore, she presents the following conclusions: first, activities like ordering food should be done when teaching the articles; second, the common piece of information that books teach (i.e. *a* comes at first mention then *the* in the followed mentions) is not common in everyday use of articles; third, knowing if the hearer is familiar with the noun or not is not simple, so students are encouraged to use *the* with the 'qualifying description' (e.g. *the best sea food restaurant* versus *the sea food restaurant*); fourth, conversations are encouraged to assimilate the native usage of the articles; and fifth, students ought to be involved in real activities and situations outside the classrooms to master the article usage in a more natural environment (232).

III.   THE STUDY

Methodology:

The participants were 20 ESL students who spoke Arabic as a first language, 11 males and 9 females. All of them were students at the ELI, Missouri State University, at level 502 which is the most advanced level. Students in this level are expected to pursue their graduate studies when they pass it. The essays were written as in-class assignments so that they are plagiarism-free, and they represent a good variety of general topics. The length of each essay is around 400 words, and the time given for the students to write the essays were 90 minutes. These essays were examined and all article errors were identified and then put in the six categories. However, some few errors were skipped because the whole sentence which included these errors were all messed up and were full of other grammatical and structure mistakes. So, I couldn't define the context and, hence, couldn't determine the article error precisely.

Research Questions:

What kinds of English article errors did the students make?

Was there any interference of Arabic as a first language on the students to have these errors?

Results:

Below are the errors classified by the category, and the gender of the students who made the error is stated. The parenthesis [ ] indicates the location of the error. If it is empty, it indicates a lack of a certain article of the category. If the parenthesis contains an article, it means that this article is misplaced (wrongly used).

The **for Ø:**

➢ In [the] short, (male 1)[2]

➢ [The] knowledge will give them the ability to not make [the] crimes again. (male 3)

➢ This is the government roles to find from where [the] bad behavior came. (male 4).

➢ The author argument doesn't give enough information about [the] Galore's ten movie-rental stores. (male 9).

➢ What are the proses when [the] customers rent [the] movies. (male 9).

➢ The author provides when they reduce [the] time from 6:00 p.m to 9:00 p.m (male 9).

➢ I changed my mind about [the] tourism in United States of America. (female 2).

➢ He compares between [the] two stores in the same company. (female 8)

Ø for *the***:**

➢ The government has [ ] right to intervene. (male 1)

➢ They don't want make problem for the children in [ ] future. (male 3)

➢ On [ ] other hand. (male 4).

➢ In the lite of weakness of [ ] author's provides … (male 9).

➢ The author writes all [ ] reasons that can cause student success. (male 10).

➢ It is the wrong time and [ ] wrong place. (female 1).

➢ I have big and fancy house in fancy neighborhood in [ ] U.S with good price. (female 2).

➢ I changed my mind about tourism in [ ] United States of America. (female 2).

➢ The person who has experience is more powerful than [ ] person who does not. (female 3).

➢ Money is not [ ] only thing for people to be happy. (female 4).

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[2] This numbering helps identifying what kinds of errors the same student makes in each category.

➢ Parents who have trouble should think they are not [ ] only ones who are being punished. (female 5).

➢ How can [ ] writer know about the 30% more accidents than [ ] other company? (female 7).

➢ Many of [ ] directors would say this argument. (female 7).

➢ What kind of work are [ ] employees working in both companies? (female 7).

A/an **for Ø:**

➢ The juvenile gets [a] good knowledge and culture. (male 3)

➢ Children's rights are to have [a] good education, [a] good food, good clothes, and a good life. (male 4).

 Ø for *a/an***:**

➢ People believe that Islam has [ ] solution for any problem. (male 1)

➢ It is not [ ] complete solution. (male 1)

➢ I think that [ ]similar juvenile delinquency system applying in (my country) would be … (male 1)

➢ Why the government should have this right to prevent people to have [ ] baby. (male 1).

➢ This child is going to be [ ] resource. (male 1)

➢ There is no one allowed to kill [ ]other person. (male 2)

➢ Young people are the most significant key to have [ ] better future. (male 2).

➢ The juveniles are released from [ ] juvenile detention center. (male 3).

➢ They don't want make [ ] problem for the children in future. (male 3)

➢ Move the children to other places like [ ] orphanage. (male 3)

➢ Everyone can travel … in [ ] couple of hours instead of [ ] couple of days or weeks. (male 5).

➢ Many people don't like to use [ ] smart phone. (male 6).

➢ Many people said [ ] smart phone is not [ ] good invention. (male 6).

➢ We don't have [ ] idea about parents and coache's opinions. (male 7).

➢ Raising the prices is [ ] bad option. (male 8).

➢ The author didn't give [ ] survey to compares. (male 9).

➢ To improve the students' grades the author has to do [ ] research. (male 11).

➢ The right to give [ ] opinion, when a person opinion in not contain an insult to [ ]other person. (female 1).

➢ I made [ ] relationship with my American neighbors. (female 2).

➢ I have [ ] big and [ ] fancy house in [ ] fancy neighborhood in U.S with [ ] good price. (female 2).

➢ when you have [ ] good job you will have a good life. (female3).

➢ If … relationships are in [ ] great shape, and strong enough, you will be so happy. (female 4).

➢ I agree that happiness is [ ] right for all citizens. (female 4).

➢ The use of [ ] good human power in these centers will open up jobs (female 6).

➢ Can they take [ ] vacation? (female 7).

➢ Movies Galore is located in [ ] bad and dirty area. (female 8)

➢ His argument was not based on [ ] research. (female 9).

The **for** *a/an* **:**

➢ Some celebrities do not represent [the] good way of person living. (female 1).

➢ Giving someone [the] strong power to absolutely control … (female 6).

➢ The writer gives an example of [the] private school in town called Acorn Academy. (female 8)

➢ Wearing uniforms alone will make [the] difference. (female 9).

Over-avoidance:

➢ Why the government should have (this) right to prevent … (male 1).

➢ [Our] children today are [our] leaders in the future. (male 4).

➢ We should invest [our] money. (male 4).

➢ The advantages of [these] great inventions. (male 5).

➢ The author argues for [his] assumption. (male 9).

➢ These things made [this] argument weak. (male 10).

➢ Having a job is very important for each person in [our] life. (female 3).

➢ If people spend money to the others, they will be happier than spending [their] money for themselves. (female 4).

➢ The author doesn't support [his] argument precisely. (female 8)

➢ The author doesn't give more evidence about [this] information. (female 8)

➢ [His] argument was not based on research. (female 9).

TABLE I: THE NUMBER OF ERRORS FOR EACH CATEGORY

Type of Error						
Number Of Error	The for Ø	Ø for the	A/an for Ø	Ø for a/an	The for a/an	Over-avoidance
	8	14	2	27	4	11
Total	Errors					

Discussion:

Six categories of English article-related errors were found in the samples of the present study. The category that had the most errors is the Ø for *a/an* (27 errors). The second most-erred category is Ø for *the* (14 errors); then, the third, Over-avoidance (11 errors); next, the fourth, *the* for Ø (8 errors); followed by, the fifth, *the* for *a/an* (4 errors); and finally, the sixth, *a/an* for Ø (2 errors). The most-erred category was the one which students use zero article where they should have used an indefinite article. Almost no essay was error-free from this article. In the example, "It is not [ ] complete solution," the student uses a singular count noun "solution" proceeded by an adjective "complete" but doesn't use the article 'a,' though.

When examining these errors, the category that contains the biggest number of errors is that of Ø for *a/an*. Examples of these include *I have [ ] big and [ ] fancy house in [ ] fancy neighborhood in U.S with [ ] good price*. This sentence follows the Arabic style because Arabic does not employ an indefinite article system. Therefore, students transfer the rule from Arabic and apply it to English, which led them to make this category of errors. Another possibility of why students might make this error is the distance between the article and the noun that requires this article. For instance, a student wrote *I think that [ ]similar juvenile delinquency system applying in (my country) would be* … It is clear that there are three words between the required indefinite article [a] and the singular count noun that requires it [system]. This long distance might have been the cause of why the student missed the article. Nevertheless, in many of the other cases, there is no distance at all, and yet the student missed the article.

Also, the confusion of which article goes with which noun might cause a problem for choosing the correct article. For instance, a student wrote *Everyone can travel ... in [ ] couple of hours instead of [ ] couple of days or weeks*. The student

might have thought that there was no need to use an article because of the word "hours" which confuses him with the word "couple." In general, I didn't find a reason for this error except that students transfer the Arabic system and apply it to English, maybe unconsciously.

Unlike Ø for *a/an*, *the* for Ø results from the concept of generalization. At some points of the learning process, students start to generalize the use of the definite article *the*. For instance, a student wrote *What are the proses when [the] customers rent [the] movies*. The two plural nouns *customers* and *movies* are neither pre- nor post-modified, and they were mentioned for the first time. Hence, the right usage is the one which has no articles, i.e. *What are the proses when customers rent movies*.

A/an for Ø as in *The juvenile gets [a] good knowledge and culture* might be a reason of lack of differentiating between the count and non-count nouns. The student might have thought that the noun *knowledge* is count and so inserted an indefinite article *a*. In the other example *Children's rights are to have [a] good education, [a] good food, good clothes, and a good life*, it might be said so where the student was not able to know if the nouns *education* and *food* were count or non-count. It is noticed that the student inserted articles for all the words that seemed singular to him, *education*, *food*, and *life*, but didn't insert an article to the noun that seemed plural to him, *clothes*. While the problem of the students in this category is whether or not they can differentiate between the count and non-count nouns, the students' errors of the *the* for *a/an* category lie in their lack of distinguishing between the first or second mention, or, in other word, their lack of using the pre- and post-modified nouns. For instance, a student wrote *Giving someone [the] strong power to absolutely control …*, and another wrote *the writer gives an example of [the] private school in town called Acorn Academy*. In the first example, the student neither previously mentions which kind of power she is talking about nor post-modifies it.

The last category of errors which is over-avoidance releases consciousness, in my point of view. Although it might not be a typical error, but it is when students overuse it. A student can make this mistake when he/she is afraid of inserting the wrong article, so they tend to elude by using some modifiers, demonstratives, or possessive pronouns. Examples of this category would include *We should invest [our] money*, *The advantages of [these] great inventions*, *The author argues for [his] assumption*, and *These things made [this] argument weak*.

Males and females did not show any important divergence although the errors of *a/an* for Ø category were made by only males, and the errors of *the* for *a/an* category were made by only females. Coincidence might be an interpretation of this incident, and if there were more essays from both genders to examine, this difference might disappear, and both genders are expected to have the same kinds of errors.

IV.   CONCLUSION

 In this paper, I examine the errors of English articles made by advanced Arab students in their writings. It is believed that ESL learners usually face the problem of using the English article system due to the interference of their L1. Analyzing the participants'—who were 20 ESL Arab students at the ELI in Missouri State University, writings, six categories of errors were found: *the* for Ø, Ø for *the*, *a/an* for Ø, Ø for *a/an*, *the* for *a/an*, and over-avoidance. The category that has the most errors is the Ø for *a/an* (27 errors). The second most-erred category is Ø for *the* (14 errors); then, the third, Over-avoidance (11 errors); next, the fourth, *the* for Ø (8 errors); followed by, the fifth, *the* for *a/an* (4 errors); and finally, the sixth, *a/an* for Ø (2 errors). It might be said that these students need to be taught articles separately and be given extensive exercises on the articles in different contexts. It is also recommended that they be taught the rules of the articles as mentioned in the different books of grammar and be asked to follow them.

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