

A Study of Yemeni Secondary School Students' Article Errors in their English Writing

Bushra Thabit Ahmed Qasem

Dr. B.A.M. University, India

Sabri Thabit Saleh Ahmed

University of Aden, Yemen

Corresponding mail: sabri-t2010@hotmail.com

Sunil V. Pawar

Dr. B.A.M. University, India

Abstract

Indefiniteness is one of the problems encountering Arab learners of English generally and Yemeni learners of English particularly. Therefore, this study was designed to investigate Yemeni secondary school students' articles errors with a reference to Labooza secondary school and AL-Samood secondary school in Radfan district. Data were collected through a writing test which targeted 100 students. After collecting the test papers, the researchers followed the steps of error analysis namely assessing students' answers, identifying students' errors, classifying students' errors into categories and finding out the causes of these of each error. The results revealed that 53.6% of students' uses of the articles were wrong. It also showed that these errors can be subdivided into article omission errors 41.79%, article addition errors 23.88%, and article substitution errors 34.32%. These errors can be attributed to two sources, namely a- interference with students' mother tongue (interlingual interference), constituting 39.93% and b- students' insufficient knowledge of English articles as well as poor English teaching (intralingual), constituting 60.07%. As per these findings, this study provides some recommendations to syllabi designers, teachers and students of the Yemeni secondary schools.

Keywords: *article errors, error analysis, Yemeni secondary school students*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indefiniteness is one of the problems encountering Arab learners of English generally and Yemeni learners of English particularly. Such difficulty may be due to the difference between the Arabic and English systems and the complexity of the English article system itself. In this regard, Al-Qoafi (2011, p. 136) argued that Arabic does not have the indefinite articles 'a' and 'an' and the distinction between definite nouns and indefinite nouns in Arabic is determined by the presence and absence of the definite article /AL/ and this creates some difficulties for the Arab learners of English.

If a noun is definite and known to both the speaker and the hearer, the definite article 'al' is used in English while the indefinite articles (a, an, the, zero) are used when the hearer doesn't know enough information about a specific noun (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002, pp. 108-109). The definite nouns can be those nouns which are unique such as "*the sun, the earth...etc.*" and those whose reference is known to the hearer from linguistic and non linguistic contexts as in "*The boss wants you*" or "*Nancy introduced me to a young man and his wife at the reception. The young man was her nephew*" (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2002, pp. 108-109).

The indefinite articles 'a' and 'an' are used with indefinite nouns that are countable as in these sentences '*He bought a book*' or '*Give me an apple*'. In the case of a plural indefinite noun or an uncountable indefinite noun, the *zero* article is used as in '*cows give milk*' or '*I like tea*'. The use of 'a' and 'an' before the indefinite singular countable nouns is determined by the first sound preceding the indefinite articles. When the sound preceding the indefinite article is consonant, the article 'a' is used while the article 'an' is used when the first sound is a vowel. The following are examples of indefinite articles:

Ahmed is *a* student and his brother is *an* engineer.

He is *an* honest man.

Give me Ø cakes and Ø butter.

Due to the above-discussed differences between English and Arabic articles and the difficult English article system, Indefiniteness is one of the difficult areas for Arab learners of English generally and Yemeni learners particularly. It is for this reason that this study was designed to investigate what errors the Yemen EFL learners make in their writing in English and the reasons behind these errors.

1.1. Objectives of the study

This study aims at investigating the articles errors made by the Yemeni secondary schools students in their writing in English. It attempts to achieve the following objectives:

- To investigate Yemeni secondary school students' article errors with a reference to Radfan district secondary school students.
- To identify the sources of students' article errors.
- To find out if there is any significant differences in students' article errors that can be attributed to students' gender.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH)

According to Keshavarz (2011), contrastive analysis (CA) is “the systematic study of a pair of languages in order to identify their structural differences and similarities, usually for translation and teaching purposes” (p.5). It aims at comparing learners' mother-tongue with their target language in order to find out the differences between the first language and the target language of the learner and how to overcome such difficulties in the teaching process. In this regard, Keshavarz (2011) argued that:

Modern contrastive linguistics intends to show in what ways the two respective languages differ, in order to come up with some solutions to tackle practical problems. That is, two languages are compared and contrasted with the aim of assisting second-language learners by identifying the probable areas of difficulty they may encounter in learning the target language. (p.5)

It was influenced by the behaviorist theory of language learning and it rests, according to Dulay and Burt (1974), on two major assumptions rooted in the behaviorist theory of language learning:

1. *Language learning is habit formation.*
2. *An old habit (that of using one's first language) hinders or facilitates the formation of a new habit (learning as second language) depending on the differences or similarities, between the old and the new. (p. 97)*

Since the contrastive analysis hypothesis based on the behaviorist view of language learning, its proponents believe that through the contrastive analysis they can expect learners' potential errors or potential areas of difficulty through studying the similarities and differences between the habits of learners' mother language and his/ her target language. Those language habits that are similar will be easier to learn while those that are different can be of potential difficulty for the learners. In this regard, Lado (1957, p. 2) argued that:

When the learners are exposed to the language, they find that some features are easy to them to grasp and others are difficult. Those elements that are similar to their native language will be simple for them, and those elements that are different will be difficult.

2.2 Error Analysis

As discussed in the previous section, the contrastive analysis hypothesis is a technique for predicting and analyzing learners' errors in a foreign language and it receives criticism for its inability to analyze and predict all errors. It pays its attention to the errors resulting from the interference between learner's mother tongue and his target foreign language. This criticism necessitates the need for a new technique that analyzes all types of learner's errors. It is for this reason that error analysis has come into existence in the field of applied linguistics to identify, classify and explain all types of learners' errors. It can be highlighted here that error analysis and contrastive analysis are both of a high value in diagnosing and improving foreign language teaching and learning. The difference between them lies in the fact that the error analysis analyzes the learners' errors generally while the

contrastive analysis pays its focus to learners' errors related to their mother tongue. In this regard, Brown (2007) argued that:

The EA became distinguished from CA by its examination of errors attributable to all possible sources, not just those which result from the negative transfer of the native language. Errors arise from several possible general sources: interlingual errors of interference from the native language and intralingual errors with the target language. (p. 166)

Error analysis can therefore be defined as a branch of applied linguistics that analyzes learners' language errors through documenting such errors, classifying them and explaining their causes. Brown (1980, p. 160) defined error analysis as "the process to observe , analyze , and classify the deviations of the rules of the second languages and then to reveal the systems operated by learner" (as cited in Hasyim, 2002, p. 43). In the word of VanPatten and Benati (2010), error analysis is "a research tool characterized by a set of procedures for identifying, describing, and explaining L2 learners' errors" (p. 28). Ridha (2012) also defined error analysis in line with Brown (1980) as "the process to observe, analyze, and classify the deviations of the rules of the second languages and then to reveal the systems operated by learner" (as cited in Hasyim, p. 26).

2.3 Article Errors Made by Arab Learners of English

Indefiniteness is one of the problems encountering Arab learners of English generally and Yemeni learners of English particularly. Such difficulty may be due to the difference between the Arabic and English systems and the complexity of the English article system itself. In this regard, Al-Qoafi (2011, p. 136) argued that Arabic does not have the indefinite articles 'a' and 'an' and the distinction between definite nouns and indefinite nouns in Arabic is determined by the presence and absence of the definite article /AL/ and this creates some difficulties for the Arab learners of English. In the following lines some previous studies will be presented in discussed.

Alhaysony (2012) investigated the article errors made by the Saudi female students in their English writing. Data were collected from written samples of 100 first-year female EFL students at the Department of English in the University of Ha'il University Students. The results revealed that while students made a considerable number of errors in their use of articles according to SST, omission errors were the most frequent, while substitutions were the least frequent. Additionally, among all types of omission errors identified, the omission of the indefinite article 'a' was the most frequent. In sharp contrast, the omission of the indefinite article 'an' was the least frequent error. Errors relating to the addition of the definite article 'the' were the most frequent, which correlates with the fact that the definite article is used more widely in the Arabic language than in English. Findings showed that 57. % of the errors were interlingual ones, indicating the influence of the native language. Thus, interlingual errors are the most commonly occurring types. On the other hand, intralingual errors represented 42.56% of article errors. This result also indicates that L1 interference strongly influences the process of second language acquisition of the articles.

AL-Qadi (2017) conducted a study to identify and categorize the errors made by Saudi learners in their use of the English Articles. The study revealed that while Saudi learners made errors in all categories, article addition errors were the most frequent. It also showed that most of article errors could be attributed to L1 interference. In many areas, the Arabic Article System was negatively transferred into English where learners seemed to resort to their mother tongue to decide on the appropriateness of using the article in question. However, English, in other cases, was the source of errors. Ignorance or incomplete application of the rule brought learners to commit intralingual errors.

Elmahdi (2015) investigated the article errors made by the Sudanese students in their English writing. The analysis of the results indicated significant differences between different types of errors made by the participants. Sudanese EFL learners had the most problems in terms of the errors related to the redundant use of articles. Results obtained in this study showed that intralingual factors had the most impact on advanced Sudanese EFL learners' error commitment.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a grammar test which targeted 100 secondary school students from Radfan district. The students were selected from two schools, namely Labooza Secondary School (Boys' School) and AL-Samood Secondary School (Girls' School) by the method of convenience sampling. There are six secondary schools in the district and the researchers selected these two schools as they are close to their place and have easy access to. The test includes four sentences in which the students were requested to use the correct articles in five spaces given in these sentences. The test was also assessed for its validity and reliability before its implementation. In terms of validity, the referees appreciated the test and gave some comments which have been added to the test. As far as the reliability is concerned, the Cronbach alpha showed a high reliability (0.85). After collecting students' test papers, the researchers followed the steps of errors analysis in their analysis of students' article errors, namely identifying students' errors, classifying students' errors into categories and analyzing the reasons behind each of these errors.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

After assessing the students' test papers and calculating the errors, the results revealed that the concerned students made 268 errors in using articles. When comparing the number of the errors made by the students to the total number of students' uses of the articles in their test, the percentage of the errors is 53.6% as shown in table no. 1 below.

Table 1. Students' article errors in their grammar written test

Frequency of article errors	Frequency of article correct uses	Unattempted articles
268	224	8
53.6%	44.8%	1.6%

It can be seen from the above table that 53.6% of the articles written by the students in their test were wrongly used and this reflects students' poor ability in using articles in their writing. These errors made by the students in using the articles can also be divided based on the surface strategy into three sub-categories, namely article omission errors, article addition

errors and article substitution errors as shown in the fig. no. 1 below. The omission errors gained the highest level in article errors sub-categories followed by the substitution errors then the addition errors. These results go in line with Alhaysony (2012) and contradict with AL-Qadi (2017) who found that the article addition errors are the most frequent. In addition to this, these results reflect that a big number of the concerned students do not know how to use the articles properly.

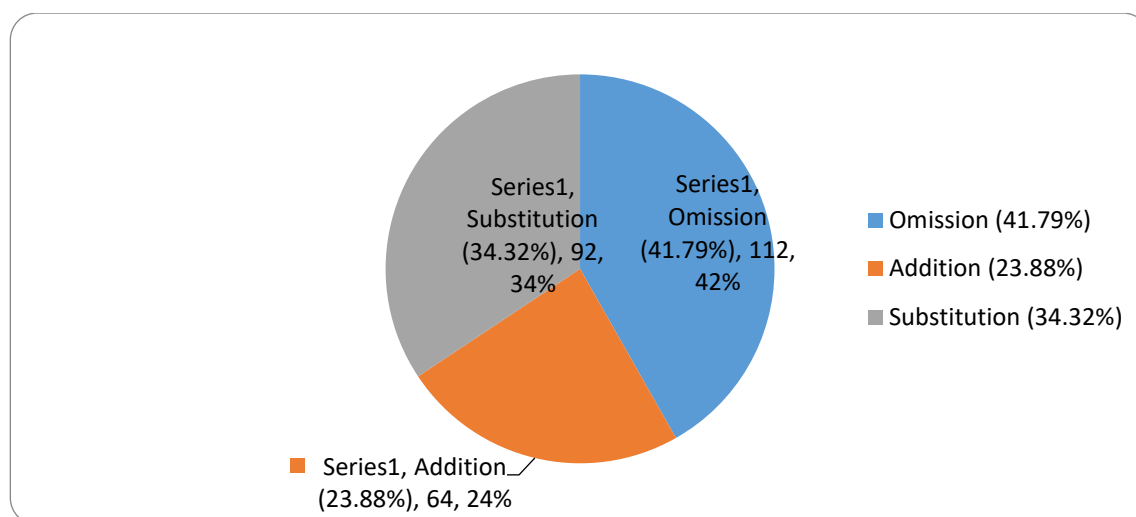


Figure. 1. Sub-categories of students' article errors

In order to examine the sources of students' errors, the researcher has studied the erroneous structures carefully and attempted to find out the possible factors for making such errors. To identify the sources of students' errors, the researcher has studied these errors in relation to two major sources, namely a. interlingual interference and b. intralingual interference. While the former refers to students' errors which result from students' negative transferring strategy from his/her mother tongue (Arabic) into the target language (English), the latter refers to students' errors which result from his/her insufficient knowledge of English and the other negative strategies he/she uses to compensate his grammar insufficiency in addition to those errors resulting from the classroom teaching. The following table no. 4.5 provides a detailed account for all the article errors made by the concerned students in their grammar test with explanations for why each of these errors was made. Surely, some errors may result from different sources but the researcher attempted to explain each error in its most possible source.

Table 2. Students' article errors and its explanations

Students' Errors in Articles	Its Frequency	Its Explanations
a. Omission errors I am Ø engineer.	36	Interlingual errors Interference with the students' mother tongue. As

My friend is Ø pilot.	39	the students do not know the English article rules, they utilized the transferring strategy from their mother tongue where the indefiniteness is usually marked by the omission of the definite article 'al' (the). <i>Interlingual errors</i> Interference with the students' mother tongue. As the students do not know the English article rules, they utilized the transferring strategy from their mother tongue where the indefiniteness is usually marked by the omission of the definite article 'al' (the).
Wait for Ø hour.	32	<i>Interlingual errors</i> Interference with the students' mother tongue. As the students do not know the English article rules, they utilized the transferring strategy from their mother tongue where the indefiniteness is usually marked by the omission of the definite article 'al' (the).
Ø sky rains in summer.	5	<i>Intralingual errors</i> Students' incomplete application of article rules.
b. Addition errors I cannot eat a butter.	41	<i>Intralingual error</i> Students' overgeneralization of article 'a'. The students wrongly used the article 'a' with a noun that is uncountable due to their incomplete knowledge of countable and uncountable nouns and their overgeneralization of the article 'a' to any singular indefinite noun that does not contain the plural inflection 's'.
I cannot eat the butter.	23	<i>Intralingual error</i> Students' incomplete application of article use rules. The students do not have sufficient knowledge about the articles and they wrongly apply the articles.
c. Substitution errors I am a engineer.	10	<i>Intralingual errors</i> Students' incomplete application of article rules. The students do not have sufficient knowledge about the articles and they wrongly apply the articles.
Wait for a hour.	36	<i>Intralingual errors</i> Students' overgeneralization of the indefinite article 'a' to any indefinite noun that begins with a consonant letter, not a consonant sound. Faulty teaching is responsible for such errors as students are not taught English sounds and teachers

Wait for <i>the</i> hour.	10	introduce the rules of using the indefinite articles 'a' and 'an' based on what letter preceded them whether it is consonant or vowel. This leads students to make errors in nouns which begin with a consonant letter that is silent while the first sound is vowel.
A sky rains in summer.	36	<i>Intralingual errors</i> Students' incomplete application of article use rules. It seems that the students are not well aware of article uses.
		<i>Intralingual errors</i> Students' incomplete application of the articles. It is due to their insufficient knowledge of articles.

It can be seen from the above table that students' errors in using articles can be attributed to both interlingual and intralingual interferences. Those errors associated with the omission of the indefinite articles as in the first three sentences can be due to the interference with the students' mother tongue (Arabic) as indefiniteness in Arabic is marked by the omission of the definite article /AL/ which means 'the'. This does not mean that English has no role in these errors. Students, according to Hourani (2008), usually fall back on transferring strategy (transferring rules from their mother tongue to their target language) when they feel that their target language proficiency falls short in achieving their communicative needs. Such an omission of the indefinite articles was found in some of the previous studies conducted in Arab context (Abu Jarad, 2018; Alasfour, 2018; Alsahafi, 2017; Shuga'a, 2008) and it was attributed to the interferences between Arabic and English. However, no one can deny that these errors reflect students' knowledge insufficiency about English article rules. As far as the last sentence '*... sky rains in summer*', is concerned, it seems that the students who omitted the definite article '*the*' are still unaware of the uses of the definite article '*the*' or not aware of the meaning of the word 'sky' as such an omission of the article '*the*' is not acceptable in Arabic and it cannot be explained in terms of the interference with Arabic. For the other types of errors (article addition errors and article substitution errors), they seem to be associated with English language itself and its teaching techniques. Many students, for example, were found using the indefinite article 'a' with the noun '*hour*' as they learn that the article 'a' usually precedes any indefinite singular noun beginning with a consonant, not realizing that the letter 'h' in this word is silent and the first sound is the vowel sound 'a' and then it should be preceded by the article 'an'. This is an example of the faulty teaching where teachers teach their students that the article 'a' is used with any singular indefinite countable noun beginning with a consonant letter while the article 'an' is used before any indefinite singular countable noun beginning with a vowel letter such as (a, e, i, o, u) and leading students not to differentiate between vowel sounds and vowel letters. This happens because the teachers in these schools do not pay sufficient attention to the teaching of English sounds and oral skills (Ahmed & Qasem, 2019) and for this reason when teaching these articles they adapt the rules of indefinite article uses to

letters instead of sounds. These errors can be attributed to students' insufficient competence in English itself and the faulty teaching. For the other substitution errors, it seems that they resulted from students' insufficient knowledge of article rules which leads them to apply articles wrongly. Thus, it seems that all the article addition errors and the article substitution errors made by the students in their grammar test are attributed to their incomplete knowledge of English articles and the faulty teaching as the students' mother tongue 'Arabic' seems to have no role in such errors and these errors reflect students' grammatical competence in this stage.

Based on the researcher's analysis of the article errors made by the concerned students in their grammar test, she came to a conclusion that all the addition and substitution errors in addition to 5.89% of the omission errors resulted from the target language itself such as students' overgeneralizations of rules, students' incomplete application of article rules, and the faulty hypothesized concepts and faulty teaching techniques (intralingual interference) while the other errors (94.11% of the omission errors) can be explained in terms of the interference with the students' mother tongue 'Arabic'. As mentioned earlier, there is no doubt that the students stepped back on their transferring strategy because of their insufficient knowledge of the English article rules. It can be concluded here that the source of students' article errors are both interlingual interference and intralingual interference where 60.07% of the errors are intralingual errors and 39.93% are due to interlingual interference as shown in the fig. no. 2. below. These results go in line with other studies conducted in Arab contexts which showed that students' article errors are caused by both the interference with the mother tongue and the target language article system itself (Alhaysony, 2012; AL-Qadi, 2017; Elmahdi, 2015)

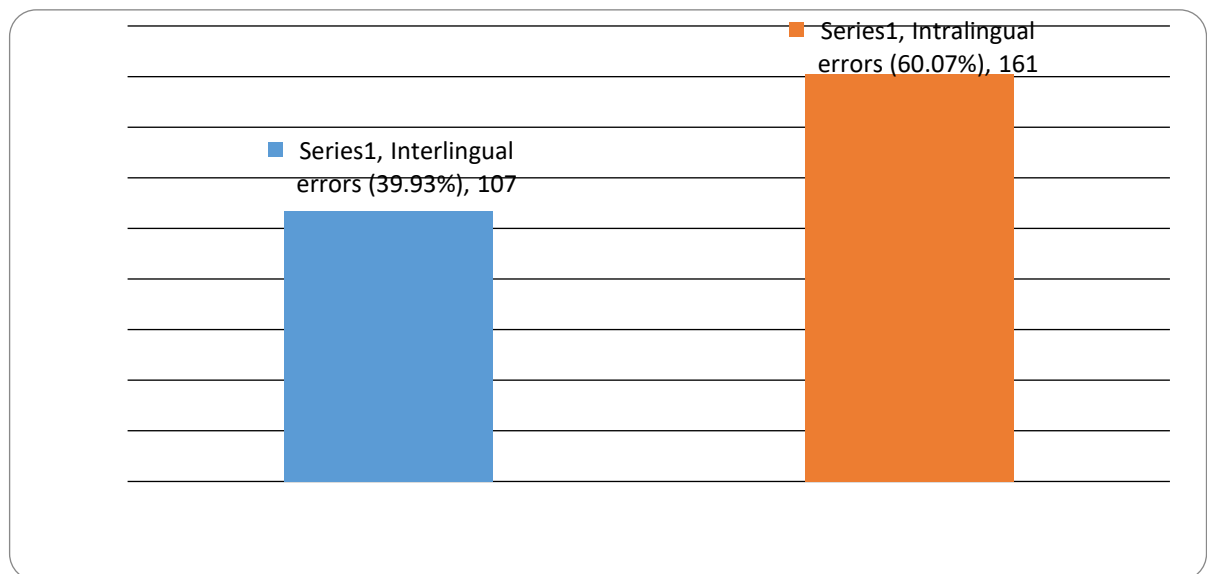


Fig. 2. Sources of students' article errors

5. CONCLUSION

This study has investigated Yemeni secondary school students' articles errors with a reference to Labooza secondary school and AL-Samood secondary school in Radfan district through a writing test which targeted 100 students from two schools in Radfan district. The results revealed that 53.6% of students' uses of the articles were wrong. It also showed that these errors can be subdivided into article omission errors 41.79%, article addition errors 23.88%, and article substitution errors 34.32%. These errors can be attributed to two sources, namely a- interference with students' mother tongue (interlingual interference), constituting 39.93% and b- students' insufficient knowledge of English articles as well as poor English teaching (intralingual), constituting 60.07%. Therefore, this study recommends the syllabi designers and English teachers of the Yemeni schools to pay attention to the differences between Arabic and English and to increase article use exercises to help students develop their ability in using English articles. It also recommends the Yemeni secondary school students to practice English writing and to read English texts critically to develop their grammar.

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