

An Analysis of Articles' Usage among Students Studying English in Selected Universities in Sudan

¹AKINKUROLERE Susan O. and ²HAMID Rashid A.

^{1,2}Department of Educational Foundations, Kampala International University, Uganda.
Corresponding email address: olujoke2126@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper investigated how the articles are used by Sudanese university students studying the English language in Khartoum to highlight their effective mastery of “a”, “an” and “the”. Specifically, the descriptions of proper and improper use of articles by students of Khartoum State universities were done in relation to factors propelling them. The data for the study were drawn from the essays of university students in Khartoum. Through the research design, collection and analysis of first-hand information were done using qualitative approach and techniques. The findings revealed that most Sudan University students are not aware of the right usage of English articles and their application, and using English articles is considered a daunting task during language learning. In addition, most of the challenges faced by students in using articles in English require that both students and teachers pay attention to ways of overcoming them. Hence, teachers should implement academic activities to help English language learners improve their writing abilities, especially on proper usage of articles in English.

Key words: error, inter-language, articles, written work, competence, grammar

1. Introduction

People in the twenty-first century communicate with people on different continents, countries, states, and areas. Everyone requires a link language that is understood by everyone, or at least the speaking community, to communicate effectively with individuals all over the world. As a result, English serves this purpose, and people strive to learn it to achieve their objectives. That is why people master all English language skills

because they are so important in their communication (Hamid, 2022).

To acquire the English language, students must master all four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). For foreign or second language learners, each of these four abilities is extremely important, and they should not overlook any of them. Listening and reading are receptive skills in which the learner just receives and comprehends

the information; there is no need for the learner to produce words to perform these tasks. Speaking and writing, on the other hand, are productive skills that require learners to produce language. Furthermore, speaking and writing are more visible to others, as well as being regulated guided activities with a major focus on accuracy (Hamid, 2022).

It is known as a common fact that good proficiency in foreign language learning is difficult to attain. This has been a subject of significant inquiry and heated debate. Researchers have always shown interest in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), either in their speech or writing or both, for a long time. Tense, aspect, subject and verb agreements and the use of articles are certain ways through which gaps could easily be identified between a native speaker's and non-native speaker's usage of a language (Miller, 2005).

In the article system of the English language, the words 'a', 'an' and 'the' present problems for most speakers of English as an additional language. This is not surprising, since there is no equivalent construction in many languages, and those languages that do have articles do not necessarily use them in the same way as the English language (The University of Adelaide, 2014).

The comprehensive examination of learners' usage of articles allows for the identification of areas that require reinforcement in language instruction. Learning English as a second language is vital, and the need to guide educators to contribute to good teaching is considered a huge necessity. The article system is correctly being used by native speakers even though they are mostly unaware of such. They do not follow any specific regulations when it comes to the articles. They utilize them without thinking about

it. Even though the English article system is difficult to grasp for non-native speakers, formal English article training can have a positive impact on English article acquisition. As a result, many teachers make every effort to provide and explain the norms for using articles (Hamid, 2022).

The article system is one of the aspects of English grammar that has been known to pose significant difficulty for some students, particularly those whose native languages do not employ articles. In Khartoum universities today, it is increasingly becoming impossible to encounter more than 10 submitted answer sheets and one of them has no grammar problems. Writing is a complex, challenging, and difficult exercise for adult learners of the English language. The country's historical Arabic background in Sudan makes it difficult to master articles due to the differences between English and Arabic article systems. As a result, many teachers make every effort to provide and explain the norms for using articles. There are three articles in the English article system: "a", "an", and "the". Each of these articles has a separate definition for the noun or noun phrase (NP) it precedes. Those short words have the unique ability to encode, postulate, specify, and identify the NP for the listener or reader. The speaker's notion of being unique to the NP that they want to address is referred to as specificity.

Understanding these difficulties in using the English article system deserves scholarly attention, bringing to light the challenges associated with their usage. It is, therefore, imperative to unravel the reasons why Sudanese university students face difficulties in mastering articles in English since much attention has not been paid to this area.

2. Objectives of the Study

For this study, the following are the specific objectives:

1. To examine the extent to which Sudanese university students are aware of the articles through their applications.
2. To analyze the frequency and pattern of misuse of articles in the students' written essays for specific recommendations in the teaching of English as a Second Language in Sudan.

3. Review of Literature

An article is defined as a word (or a determiner) used with a noun to indicate the type of reference made by the noun is commonly defined as an article. It is a well-known fact that making mistakes while learning a new language is tough. Researchers have long been fascinated by the errors made by EFL students, whether in speech, writing, or both. Mahmoud (2011) insisted that error analysis is a never-ending field of study, and it will continue to be so as long as people participate in the language acquisition process. In addition, mistake analysis, as a diagnostic tool, has a significant impact on language teaching and learning by addressing questions and offering answers to some pedagogical issues.

The thorough study of learners' errors allows for the identification of challenging areas in language instruction that require reinforcement. The study of EFL learners' writing errors is important for teachers to understand the types and sources of these errors so that they may employ more professional teaching methods and approaches to help EFL learners learn English more effectively and improve their language production skills.

It has been well acknowledged that articles are extremely difficult for ESL or EFL learners to acquire and use, regardless of whether they are

learning English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL). The process of learning and using English articles becomes significantly more difficult when there are no articles in the learners' first languages (L1) (Mahmoud, 2011).

Hewson (2017) has dubbed the English article system a "psycho-mechanism". (p. 132). According to this theory, native speakers correctly employ articles but are ignorant of their use. They do not follow any specific regulations when it comes to the articles. They utilize them without thinking about it, and they do not even realize it. Even though the English article system is difficult to grasp, formal English article training can have a positive impact on the acquisition of English articles (Master, 1997).

As a result, the amount of specificity encoded on such nouns contradicts the notion that learners can easily comprehend meanings when the connection is outlined by distinctive characteristics because each article can convey multiple meanings about the NP it modifies (Andersen's 1984 cited by Shalaby 2014). Many ESL students, on the other hand, cannot understand when articles should be used to convey those different meanings. Instead, they start with mother tongue parameters and subsequently reorganize them into target language parameters, resulting in full transferability and, as a result, acquisition violations.

English-article errors are common errors in English language usage. According to Miller (2005), the most common error among Arabic/English bilingual learners was the omission of "a". No wonder, Kharma (1981) discovered a mean error rate of over 25% for all articles (a, the, and the), with the greatest for "a" and the lowest for "the". However, Kharma (1981) indicated that

half of all errors in production data – a corpus of essays - are due to the employment of “the”. The teacher's guides of Kharma and Hajjaj (1997) and Smith (2001) highlighted the parallels and contrast between the Arabic and English article systems, in terms of positive transfer.

According to Smith (2001), the definite article is sometimes used in Arabic, as it is in English, to refer back to indefinite nouns from past discourse and for unique references (the floor). In terms of negative transfer, both studies offer a similar list of potential issues because Arabic lacks an indefinite marker (article), initial underuse of “a” in “This is a book” is to be expected, and overuse is likely to develop (“These are a books”). In generic plural noun phrases, Kharma and Hajjaj (1997) introduced four further uses of the definite article, which are obligatory in Arabic.

According to Rao (2019), Writing, on the other hand, is a useful talent and the most difficult of the four language abilities. Because they cannot ignore the knowledge, the ELLs have written down their thoughts and ideas. Because of the complexity of its structure and language, writing in English is regarded as the most challenging skill. Furthermore, the English language's spelling system differs significantly from its pronunciation. Most ELLs find it challenging to write in English since there is no one-to-one correlation between spelling and pronunciation. In addition, when composing paragraphs, cohesion and organization are crucial.

4. Methodology

The study was designed as a descriptive cross-sectional survey. The design was adopted because it takes a cross-sectional look at the population. The design allowed the collection and analysis of first-hand information using quantitative or qualitative or both approaches and techniques (Onen & Oso, 2008).

155 English students from five universities in Khartoum state (Bahri University, Khartoum University, Omdurman Islamic University, AL Neelain University and the Sudan University of Science) were chosen for this study. These were the final year students studying English as a course in the selected universities. To serve the purposes of this research, the researcher's instrument was test. The test was part of the student's final examination in 2020-2021. Students' written assessment was an appropriate instrument for collecting data and the analysis of data involved identifying the themes of discussion related to the objectives of the study. This process was followed by the qualitative analysis of the data. That is, by the description or content analysis of the subject matter.

5. Data Analysis and Discussion

The articles' errors in the English language have been classified under two main headings: omission of articles, and wrong choice of articles as identified in the five universities mentioned above as Universities A, B, C, D and E.

58% of the research subjects were male students, whereas female students represented 42%. According to the study, the numbers of male students were more than female students. The tables below indicated the extent to which Sudan University students are aware of the articles and their applications.

Table 5.1: Results from university A

| ARTICLE | OMISSION/NON-USE | WRONG USE/MISS-USE | CORRECT USE | TOTAL |
|---------|------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------|
| “the” | 15 | 10 | 2 | 27 |
| “a” | 8 | 7 | 1 | 16 |
| “an” | 3 | 4 | 1 | 8 |
| Total | 26 | 21 | 4 | 51 |

Sources: Primary Data, 2021

Results in the table above indicated that 15 students from University A did not use the article

“the”, 10 students wrongly used article “the” and only 2 students correctly used article “the”. The results still indicated that 8 students from the same university did not use article “a”, 7 students wrongly used the article and only 1 student correctly used the article. Article “an” was not used by 3 students, yet 4 students wrongly used it and only 1 student correctly used the article.

Table 5.2: Results from University B

| ARTICLE | OMISSION/NO N-USE | WRONG USE/MISS-USE | CORRECT USE | TOTAL |
|---------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------|
| “the” | 13 | 11 | 3 | 27 |
| “a” | 7 | 9 | 1 | 17 |
| “an” | 5 | 2 | 0 | 7 |
| Total | 25 | 22 | 4 | 51 |

Sources: Primary Data, 2021

Results in the table above indicated that 13 students from University B did not use the article “the”, 11 students wrongly used the article “the” and only 3 students correctly used article “the”. The results still indicated that 7 students from the same university did not use article “a”, 9 students wrongly used the article and only 1 student correctly used the article. Article “an” was not used by 5 students, yet 2 students wrongly used it and none of the students correctly used the article.

Table 5.3: Results from University C

| ARTICLE | OMISSION/NO N-USE | WRONG USE/MISS-USE | CORRECT USE | TOTAL |
|---------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------|
| “the” | 14 | 13 | 0 | 27 |
| “a” | 10 | 6 | 0 | 16 |
| “an” | 7 | 1 | 0 | 8 |
| Total | 31 | 20 | 0 | 51 |

Sources: Primary Data, 2021

Results in the table above indicated that 14 students from University C did not use the article “the”, 13 students wrongly used the article “the” and only none of the students correctly used the article “the”. The results still indicated that 10 students from the same university did not use article “a”, 6 students wrongly used the article

and none of the students correctly used the article. Article “an” was totally not used by 7 students, yet only 1 student wrongly used it and none of the students correctly used the article.

Table 5.4: Results from University D

| ARTICLE | OMISSION/NON -USE | WRONG USE/MISS-USE | CORRECT USE | TOTAL |
|---------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------|
| “the” | 14 | 9 | 3 | 26 |
| “a” | 10 | 6 | 2 | 18 |
| “an” | 1 | 6 | 2 | 9 |
| Total | 25 | 21 | 6 | 53 |

Sources: Primary Data, 2021

Results in the table above indicated that 14 students from University D did not use the article “the”, 9 students wrongly used article “the” and only 3 students correctly used article “the”. The results still indicated that 10 students from the same university did not use article “a”, 6 students wrongly used the article and only 2 students correctly used the article. Article “an” was not used by 1 student, yet 6 students wrongly used it and only 2 students correctly used the article.

Table 5.5: Results from University E

| ARTICLE | OMISSION/NON- USE | WRONG USE/MISS-USE | CORRECT USE | TOTAL |
|---------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------|
| “the” | 12 | 13 | 4 | 29 |
| “a” | 8 | 11 | 3 | 22 |
| “an” | 4 | 1 | 1 | 6 |
| Total | 24 | 25 | 8 | 57 |

Sources: Primary Data, 2021

Results in the table above indicated that 12 students from University E did not use the article “the”, 13 students wrongly used the article “the” and only 4 students correctly used article “the”. The results further indicated that 8 students from the same university did not use article “a”, 11 students wrongly used the article and only 3 students correctly used the article. Article “an” was not used by 8 students, yet 1 student wrongly used it and 1 student correctly used the article.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings of the study, it is clear that the majority of Sudanese university students are not able to effectively apply the rules of articles' usage in English language. This might be related to the fact that prominence is not given to the academic and communicative skills programme among Sudan University students. That is, out of the total scripts that were analyzed, the majority of the students misused the articles.

This is a situation that needs immediate attention to help the students, who are supposed-experts in the language, to be well equipped in academic writing and communicative skills in order to enable them compete confidently both at the international and local levels. It is also concluded that the wrong use of English articles is associated with the poor attitudes of students towards the English language.

The English article system has been demonstrated to be a highly complex aspect that poses great challenges to university students. However, like every other aspect of the English language, mastering the English article system takes time. It necessitates a lot of effort and hard work on the learner's behalf. Mastery can be attained by increasing proficiency.

7. Recommendations

To improve the proper use of English articles, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration:

1. Lecturers should use process-based approaches like group discussions, peer teaching, and oral presentations in the learning of writing skills to promote creative writing.
2. Rote learning is promoted and essays are repeated in examinations. So, reforms must be made in the education system on an emergency basis to stop the repetition of essays.

3. Essay writing competitions must be arranged at the province level and rewards should be given to participants. This can motivate students and boost their confidence.

4. Lecture duration should be increased and the number of students in each class should be limited to 20 students. It will help lecturers to attend to individual learning challenges.

5. Government must induct qualified English lecturers to reduce the workload on currently employed lecturers. Moreover, the salaries for English lecturers should be increased and pieces of training should be arranged for their professional development.

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