

# Definite and Indefinite Article Misuse Among Saudi Students Learning English as a Second Language

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**Abstract:** This study was designed to observe and demonstrate common errors with regard to definite and indefinite English articles made by language learners. An in-depth quantitative analysis was then conducted to discover the causes behind the errors, and recommendation for improvement was suggested. For the purpose of the study, thirty (30) Saudi ESL students were randomly selected to test their awareness of definite and indefinite English articles. They were given the task to translate 28 simple Arabic sentences to English and were allowed thirty minutes to complete the job. Following an analysis of responses, it was revealed that while many errors were made by students when using articles, the misuse of the definite article "the" was the most frequent error, followed by the omission of the indefinite article "a". However, the omission of the indefinite article "an" was the least common error. The facts and figures also showed that along with Arabic interference, the misuse of a particular rule of English grammar, the target language, was also a major source of errors. Results exhibited that 87% of the errors were interlingual, illustrating the influence of the native language. In contrast, intralingual errors indicated 12.5% of article errors. The result clearly pointed to the fact that L1 interference had drastically affected the process of acquiring English articles.

**Keywords:** Definite and Indefinite Articles, Interlingual Errors, Language Misuse, L1 Interference, Second Language Acquisition, Target Language

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## 1. Introduction

Many research have examined and studied the frequency and reasons behind errors made by speakers of second languages when using English articles. Academics and language specialists have attempted to comprehend their causes and offered solutions [3-4, 38]. The current inquiry into the underlying reasons for the errors committed frequently by students is expected to reveal whether L1 plays a significant role in making those errors. Once the causes are uncovered, a better remedial solution can be worked out to help language learners resolve their difficulties in using English articles. It is quite obvious that errors in the usages of English articles are a sign of a serious lack of language proficiency. Taking this problem into consideration, Hasyim (2002) reflected that error analysis is helpful for learners and teachers [41]. It helps teachers to get a complete information and understanding of the students' errors, to improve their teaching and to concentrate on those areas that need reinforcement. Errors in writing have always been a source of

great concern and discomfort for language teachers, and errors have offered continuous challenges that called for effective and strong strategies to overcome them [6].

Researchers today consider errors as opportunities and not an embarrassment. They are now regarded as tools or mechanisms that can contribute to the learning process. They are unavoidable in the process of learning a language, especially in learning how to write. Teachers now encourage students to write even though they commit lots of mistakes and errors. They make learners come out of their comfort zone and take risks that provides them with learning opportunities [21]. Besides, AbiSamra (2003) drew attention to the fact that errors also carry important and constructive statistics and information on language learners' learning strategies [2].

This paper is primarily concerned with explicating and examining the effect of L1 (Arabic) on the acquisition of English articles. But various other studies on English language teaching have demonstrated that individual learner differences are also vitally important in the acquisition of a

second language. The significance of individual differences in second language acquisition (SLA) has been extensively investigated in a number of studies on language teaching. The intention of this study is not to stereotype Saudi students. Questionnaires were used quantitatively in this research because they were considered a dependable instrument to provide data which could answer the research question [25]. The questionnaire was designed to depict levels of students' understanding of the use of English articles while translating an Arabic text into English. A careful significance was given to what the questionnaire intended to elicit, and so it was found more useful to use pre-existing standardized questionnaires based on proven scales to measure students' responses [14].

## 2. Research Questions

The study will answer the following question:

- 1) What are the difficulties facing Saudi students in acquiring English definite and indefinite articles?
- 2) What are the likely causes of these difficulties?

## 3. Literature Review

This section discusses the main component of the study including the literature of the study, and finally the literature overview. The theoretical literature review elaborates on theories relevant to the study. Based on the study the following theories give a better understanding of learning English as a second language.

Chomsky's core efforts to construct grammar in the earlier century were through the internal and external merge, along with guideline criteria that are crucial in the whole process [16]. Human intellectual and verbal creativity involves several mental capabilities that call for the existence of a mental concern. According to Chomsky, the mind operates in an extensive collection of inborn components, which as language, and each component operates automatically. Chomsky's theory debated that all language contains similar elements, such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives [23, 42]. According to the theory, language is a recursion, meaning that all languages contain repeating structures; this allows infinite expansion. Chomsky's theory agrees that second language learners transfer their mother tongue abilities to other foreign languages to some extent, which is one of the reasons why Arab learners make errors while omitting auxiliary verbs and articles in most cases in their use of the English language.

Krashen (1981) argued language acquisition does not necessarily need regular use of grammar guidelines, nor does it need a tedious drill [30]. Meaningful interaction in natural communication, the target language, is required for the acquisition. Speakers are much more concerned with their utterances than with the message they understand and convey. Low anxiety situations are required while supplying comprehensive input containing what learners want to hear that the best method of approach. Such methods in the

second language do not force early production [37]. Stephen Krashen briefly describes the popular and not widely rejected theory of second language acquisition, having great influence in all parts of second language teaching with research. With regard to error correction in English, Krashen is of the view that learners should be encouraged to talk, listen, and read a lot. Given enough exposure and the will to improve, their errors will take care of themselves [31].

Previous literature argues that errors concerning the usage of English definite article 'the' have been the most recurrent error committed by Arab second language learners of English. The finding gains credibility based on the circumstance that the definite article is more extensively used in Arabic than in English [7, 17, 27]. The internal structure of English language is such that the articles appear to be the most difficult features of English grammar for the second language learner, especially the Arab learner [22]. Zdorenko & Paradis (2008) observed that English articles can be counted as one of the most challenging components of learning English as a second language, even for advanced students who have thoroughly acquired all other aspects of the target language [43].

Richards (2002) averred that in the course of learning ESL, speaking and writing errors occur as linguistic fallacies, like in the lexis, grammar, or speech of the language, which are considered as language debility by a native speaker of the language [38]. A threadbare analysis of such errors, especially in the use of indefinite and definite articles, is a vital aspect of language learning, which helps in acquiring mastery of the language. Hewson (1972: 131) also emphasized the importance of using articles and he noted that "the definite and the indefinite article are among the ten most frequent words of English discourse" [24]. As a consequence, carrying out error analysis appears to be the most rewarding approach of identifying and correcting errors made by language learners. It will help learners in locating the causes of the errors and restricting their repeated occurrences. Most EFL students regarded using articles as a challenge for them. A good number of the studies about errors in the usage of English articles have classified them into general categories [8]. Fatima et al. (2021) stated that a methodical analysis and investigation of errors in the use of English articles assist language teachers in determining the areas of language that needed special attention and emphasis while teaching ESL [19].

In their findings leading language researchers on error corrections and repair moves have discussed in detail about the distinction between errors and mistakes.

### 3.1. Errors Versus Mistakes

According to Brown (2000), mistakes are caused by slips of the tongue when learners understand the grammatical rules but fail to apply them correctly [15]. Norrish (1987, p. 7) referred to errors as "systematic deviation that learners make while developing knowledge of the second language rule system" [34]. Norrish underlined that errors were more important than mistakes since they revealed the knowledge of

the learners and are essential for language acquisition. He continued by saying that while L2 learners make both errors and mistakes, native speakers only make mistakes.

From the explanations given above, it can be inferred that errors are thought of as inaccurate or inappropriate use of language patterns created by L2 speakers that deviate from the norm. On the other hand, mistakes are not produced due to a lack of linguistic knowledge, and once the learners are pointed to them, they will fix their mistakes with no need for further explanation.

### **3.2. Significance of Errors Done While Learning a Second Language**

Every student who learns a new or second language, learns it through trial and error without knowing if he/she will succeed. Just like toddlers do when they are learning how to walk, the same with new students in a language who learn and make it through rising and falling, which are, in our case, errors. Nevertheless, in terms of language learning, successful language acquisition is only possible when the process of learning incorporates a regular chain of committing errors and correcting them with corrective feedback leading to a flawless language learning [32]. Language experts have focused on the errors made by students learning a second language and how these errors can be eliminated without considering how these errors may be of significance to these students [1]. However, there are many different ways in which these errors may be of importance to these students. First, these errors help these students know their weak points and areas they should improve. The teachers and the instructors should use these discovered errors to help the students improve their weak points and help them know what they should do to improve in the learning process. Secondly, these errors help the researchers with evidence of how the language should be taught and how it is acquired. By studying these errors, the researcher helps students who may be willing to study the same language through the help of those errors. Through the errors, they learn the techniques and strategies that may be used in teaching the second language and how these errors can be avoided. Lastly, these errors show that the students can learn and are willing to progress well if well-guided to avoid these errors. Therefore, students need to know the importance of making mistakes and get help from their teachers and instructors on how they can avoid such mistakes rather than discouraging them based on the mistakes they make while learning or acquiring their second language [5].

According to Alrabai, (2018), the use of articles in the works of the majority of Saudi male students in schools is one of the most common and continual error [9]. It is evident from his study that in some cases, the errors made by male students are not the same as those made by female students when they are learning English as a second language. Raju and Joshith, (2018) have found that male students make more errors than the errors made by female students when they are learning a new language [37]. Generally, female students are better at learning a new language than male students. The

brain of females processes new language easily as compared to males. The structure of their brains is the same, but females' brains are divided into two different hemispheres; the right is for analytical and logical function, while the left is for the visual, non-linguistic processes and musical [37]. This separation of the brain helps females learn a new language easily without struggling compared to males. Males at 16 months have a 25 words vocabulary while females at 16 months have 95 words vocabulary. Additionally, females of any age have linguistic abilities that show greater activity in the brain section, which are implicated specifically in language encoding, which results in abstractly deciphering all the information [10]. It is also clear that females feel good and find it an adventure while learning a new language compared to males, who only want to stick to the language they know without having the curiosity to explore new languages.

In most cases, the target language, the second acquired language itself, is the source of errors experienced by the students striving to learn the second language. This may mean that students in Saudi Arabia make errors in the English language not from the fact that they already know Arabic as their first language. While these students are learning English as their second language, some linguistic differences are experienced between Arabic and English. If these linguistic differences are not dealt with them, and a way of reducing them is decided, then there will always be difficulties for these students to acquire the second language as these differences will cause more errors to occur [10].

According to Ashraf (2018), learning institutions should provide relevant learning materials for the acquisition of the English language to the students [12]. Those training in the second language should set the same system for the second language as that of the first language, which will help the students to learn and understand easily as they will notice that the system and the arrangement of things is just the same as the first language. If the language is presented well by the teachers and instructors, it will be simple for the students to learn without making simple errors [20].

According to Alzamil, (2019), there are different types of article errors that are made while learning a new language [11]. These article errors can be classified into different categories, which are much more specific to Saudi Arabian students and their learning context. These categories are; substitution, omission, and addition errors. Alzamil (2019) has found that when omission errors are the most frequent, addition errors are secondly ranked, and substitution errors are rarely made by Saudi students learning the language [11]. Additionally, as regards the indefinite and definite contexts, there is no greater variation between the article "the" and article "a," which has made many students acquiring a second language confused regarding its uses in some aspects while they are writing or speaking using the English language [10].

According to Dissanayake & Dissanayake, (2019), students make other errors while learning English as their second language, including errors based on writing and reading [18]. These errors are English expression use,

conjunctions use, and word order use on how words are arranged in sentences. These errors are made by students depending on how active and committed they are in the learning process, as some make errors and are not bothered and seem not to be interested in correcting these errors.

According to Nuruzzaman, Islam & Shuchi (2018), there are some factors that affect second language acquisition which lead to errors and mistakes by the students learning English as a second language [35]. Some of these aspects include environmental factors and personal features, both of which interfere with the learning process of the second language. They are mainly counted as the main sources of errors and mistakes made by the students acquiring the second language. The ecological factors, the environment and the surroundings that these students live in greatly affect their language learning [33]. Some students live in comfortable surroundings which makes them see that learning a second language is a waste of time and that there is no need to learn a language that is foreign to their country.

### 3.3. Errors Made in the Article System

#### *Definite articles*

These grammatical errors are mostly noticed when Saudi students are learning English as their second language. They occur when students learn that they have to use particular nouns with definite articles, which they have never come across in their Arabic language-speaking context. These errors make their sentences sound awkward when they are speaking and writing them down. In the case of definite articles, students have been found to make two types of errors: definite articles redundancy and definite articles deletion. In definite articles redundancy, students made errors when defining definite nouns and in definite articles deletion, most students made the mistake of deleting the definite Article from the sentences, producing full sentences without mentioning the articles.

#### *Indefinite articles errors*

In this category of errors, students in Saudi Arabia tend to replace definite articles with indefinite articles, especially at those points where they are supposed to use complex sentences followed by short sentences. With the knowledge of Arabic language at the back of their mind, Arab students find it hard to understand the usages of English articles as the Arabic language marks nouns as indefinite or definite through the absence or presence of the article [9]. Additionally, this type of error falls in the category of unique errors made by Saudi Arabian students learning English as a second language.

### 3.4. Error Classification

Based on Alhaisony (2012), the present study classifies errors into three broad categories: omission, addition, and substitution [7]. Omission mistakes are caused by the absence of specific structures, such as the omission of an item that should be present in a well-formed sentence.

Example:

\*She wants to buy new car.

The omission of the indefinite article "a" in the preceding example results in an improperly formed sentence.

"Addition errors" occur when an item appears in a sentence where it should not.

Example: \*The family is crucial in the life.

The preceding example shows how the insertion of the definite article "the" before the words "family and life" triggered the formation of an unusual English sentence.

After all, substitution errors happen when a certain article is used in place where its use gives erroneous information.

Example: \*I waited for a hour.

The above example shows that the indefinite article "an" was substituted with the indefinite article "a".

#### *Interlingual and intralingual errors*

Defining interlingual and intralingual errors, Kaweera (2013) detected that interlingual errors are thought to be one of the most important reasons in the development of various linguistic issues since they are produced by negative transference from the learner's first language [26]. Intralingual errors are caused by other variables apart from first language interference and are generally influenced by overgeneralization and the level of difficulty.

### 3.5. Arabic Language Influence on L2 Acquisition

Numerous studies have found indications of first language influence on L2 Arab English learners [3, 7, 13, 17, 40]. Crompton (2011) analyzed argumentative essays submitted by Arab freshmen and sophomores at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates [17]. Crompton research revealed that the most common error was the incorrect use of the definite article for nonspecific reference. Crompton argued that the majority of those errors were caused by L1 transfer, which is an interlingual error, rather than intralingual errors within L2. His study show that the definite article was frequently mishandled in, particularly when using generic non-count nouns such as:

"\* some of us consider money as the force which controls our lives."

Alhaisony (2012) studied 100 Saudi female undergraduate English majors [7]. The study looked at the many types of errors that students made when using English articles. She gathered data by having her students write on life-related descriptive subjects. The outcomes of the Sum of Squares Total (SST) analysis revealed that the participants made many omission errors and few substitution errors. In terms of omission error types, the omission of "a" is the most common, while the omission of "an" is the least common. Furthermore, her research shows that Arabic, in addition to instructional tactics used while teaching English errors, has a substantial effect in the occurrence of these errors.

### 3.6. The Article Systems in Arabic and English Languages

Arab students make many errors when they use English articles, especially when using article "the". The reason for such a problem is the different language systems in Arabic, which interferes with acquiring English.

### In English

There are three different articles in English, the definite article "the", the indefinite article "a" or "an", and the zero article "Ø". According to Alhaysony (2012), "the" is used with specific nouns [7]. "a" or "an" is used with non-specific nouns in the singular. "Ø" is used with non-specific nouns in the plural form, proper nouns, abstract nouns, mass nouns, and non-count nouns.

Nouns used in English are found in one of three forms:

Indefinite with (a /an): A cat is a cute animal.

Definite with (the): the cat is a cute animal.

Plural with (Ø): Cats are cute animals.

### In Arabic

According to Alhaysony (2012), in Arabic, the article system is entirely different from that of English. Arabic has two articles, the definite article "al", which is a prefix, and the "Ø" or indefinite article, which denotes the absence of the definite article [7]. The major difference between English and Arabic in regards of definite article usage is that Arabic uses the definite article in cases where English does not. Kharama & Hajjaj (1989) presented the following examples [28]:

1) There is only one form for both types of nouns (plural and singular):

Alqetato hayawanatoon latefa القطط حيوانات لطيفة

\*the cats are cute animals

Alqetto hayawanoon latef القطة حيوان لطيف

\*the cat is cute animal

2) There are only two forms of articles in Arabic [The (Al) and Ø].

kan Salim taliboon kasool. كان سالم طالب كسول

\*Salim was lazy student

Algammaro jameeloon القمر جميل

The moon is beautiful

3) In certain idiomatic expressions in Arabic, the definite article is used.

nahno na'amal fe alnahr wa nanamo fe allail نحن نعمل في النهار و ننام في الليل

\*We work in the day and sleep at the night.

4) When two nouns are joined by "and", "Al" is repeated even when these nouns represent one unit such as

al-zawju wa al-zawjatu الزوج والزوجة

\*the husband and the wife

5) In Arabic the abstract noun takes the definite article.

altarikh laisa ailm التاريخ ليس علم

\*The History is not science

alnass yakrahoon almawt الناس يكرهون الموت

\*The people hate the Death

6) Also article "Al" comes before proper nouns

alsaudiah baladi السعودية بلدي

\* The Saudi Arabia is my country

## 4. Methodology

According to Patel & Patel (2019) methodology is a step-by-step approach, a theoretical analysis of the methods used in the study [36]. The methodology comprises the theoretical

analysis of the body of methods and principles associated with the field of study [36].

### 4.1. Research Design

In this study, a qualitative research design was applied in answering the research questions. According to Kothari (2004), qualitative design is majorly known for a qualitative phenomenon for example when one is interested in studying the causes of human behavior [29]. This form of research is significant because it uses questionnaires and interviews to uncover underlying motives and attitudes [39].

### 4.2. Data

The Primary data used in this study data collected through the translation of simple Arabic sentences into English. The data was gathered by evaluating and categorizing errors discovered in the use of the articles; and by determining the frequency of such errors and their likely causes.

### 4.3. Participants

The participants in this study were thirty students enrolled in the ESL program at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The participants were from the upper three levels, which means that all participants have acceptable levels of English.

### 4.4. Material

Each participant was provided with a pencil and a sheet of paper and Arabic sentences to translate.

### 4.5. Task

The participants were asked to translate 28 short sentences from Arabic to English in 30 minutes.

### 4.6. Data Analysis

The errors are classified according to omission, addition, and substitution in which the frequency of the types of error and the percentage of the total are recorded.

## 5. Results and Discussions

The results and findings of the study including the frequency of the errors are discussed as shown below.

### 5.1. Results

Table 1. Frequency of errors.

|              | The | a  | An | Total | The%  | a%    | an%   |
|--------------|-----|----|----|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| omission     | 19  | 42 | 15 | 76    | 25    | 55.26 | 19.73 |
| addition     | 82  | 6  | 0  | 88    | 93.18 | 6.81  | 0     |
| substitution | 0   | 2  | 2  | 4     | 0     | 50    | 50    |
| Error total  | 101 | 50 | 17 | 168   |       |       |       |

Table 1 above, presents the frequency of errors made by Saudi ESL students. It was discovered that there were 168 errors in total. On the face of it, the table appears to demonstrate noticeably that the addition errors occupy the

highest frequency with a percentage of 52.3%. 48.8% of the addition errors took place when using the article "the". The results showed that students frequently used the definite article "the" in sentences in which it was not at all necessary (Table 2). This result is likely related to the earlier mentioned fact that

Arabic uses the definite article more frequently. Saudi learners' extensive use of English definite article invariably interferes with their knowledge of Arabic language and that can be a viable explanation for their misuse of definite article.

*Table 2. The frequency of using the definite article "The" (Data sample).*

| Original data                        | Correction                      |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| The people eat to stay alive         | People eat to live              |
| People hate the death                | People hate death               |
| The husband and the wife have a baby | The husband and wife had a baby |

Definite and indefinite articles were left out in some translated sentences. Their use is inevitably required in standard English sentences in compliance with the grammar rules of the target language. Additionally, the findings also showed that students overlook the indefinite article "a" more frequently than the other articles "an" or

"the," as the students made 42 errors (Table 3). This result could be explained by the fact that Arabic does not have an indefinite article; it is assumed that the absence of the English indefinite article "a" is a result to Arabic interference (an interlingual error).

*Table 3. The omission of the English indefinite article (Data sample).*

| Original data                 | Correction                         |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Salm is lizy student          | Salem is a lazy student            |
| Ahmed have old car            | Ahmed has an old car               |
| The Cairo is capital of Egypt | Cairo is the capital city of Egypt |

Substitution errors account for only 2.38% of errors found. As a result, students made this type of error the least frequently. However, the data showed that the indefinite article "a" was replaced with the indefinite

article "an". Also, students substituted the indefinite article "a" for the definite article "the" (Table 4). This may well be attributed to the target language rather than the source (an intralingual error).

*Table 4. Substitution errors (Data sample).*

| Original data            | Correction             |
|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Ahmed sat under the tree | Ahmed sat under a tree |
| Ahmed own a old car      | Ahmed owns an old car  |

## 5.2. The Possible Sources of Article Errors

Students' errors were classified based on their potential sources into interlingual and intralingual.

*Table 5. Frequency of errors based on their potential sources of errors.*

| Error source | The | a  | an | total | Percentage% |
|--------------|-----|----|----|-------|-------------|
| Interlingual | 84  | 47 | 15 | 146   | 86.9        |
| Intralingual | 17  | 3  | 2  | 22    | 13.1        |

As shown in Table 2, most of the errors were drawn to L1 interference (interlingual errors). Meaning that the interlingual errors are more frequent (86.9%) than the intralingual errors (13.1%). This suggests that the article system of the L1 (Arabic) is transferred negatively into the target language.

The data indicates that the most frequent type of interlingual error committed by the students is the addition (misuse) of the definite article "the" (84 times). This is associated with the fact that the definite article "the (*Al*)" is more widely used in Arabic, and it is transferred negatively into the target language (Table 6).

*Table 6. The addition (misuse) of the definite article the (Data sample).*

| Original data                             | Correction                            |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| The happiness is not about money          | Happiness is not about money          |
| The wife and the husband are eating lunch | The wife and husband are eating lunch |
| Hend drink the milk every morning         | Hend drinks milk every morning        |

The omission errors of the indefinite article "a" occupy the second place among interlingual errors, accounting for 48 of

the total interlingual errors. According to Table 5, the majority of errors involving the omission of the indefinite

articles "a" or "an" are caused by L1 interference (Table 7). This is because the Arabic language has only zero (Ø) as an indefinite article.

**Table 7.** The omission of the indefinite articles Ø or 'an' (Data sample).

| Original data             | Correction                       |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Almotanabe is Arabic poet | Al-Montanabee is an Arabian poet |
| Faisal is good employee   | Faisal is a good employee        |
| I eat red apple           | I eat a red apple                |

As for intralingual errors, they were few in comparison to interlingual errors. The findings of this study show that students sometimes make errors in cases where no article is required (the zero article), substituting the indefinite article "an" with "a", or substituting the indefinite article "a" with the definite article "the" (Table 8).

**Table 8.** Substitution errors (Data sample).

| Original data               | Correction                |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| He sits under the tree      | Ahmed sits under a tree   |
| Cats are a domestic animals | Cats are domestic animals |
| Ahmed own a old car         | Ahmed owns an old cars    |

## 6. Conclusion

This paper examined and explored the error types related to the article system as used by Saudi ESL students at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. It also endeavors to reveal the causes of these errors. It has been demonstrated that a large majority of students committed frequent errors in their use of English articles. In view of the error types, the present study shows that errors in omitting indefinite articles "a/an" were the most frequent among omission errors. Moreover, the addition of the definite article "the" is the most commonly misused error. Since the definite article is used more frequently in Arabic than in English, the result was not surprising. Alternatively, the addition errors of the indefinite article "an" were the least frequent committed by the participants. Substitution errors were the least recurrent. These findings might be related to the variances between Arabic and English article systems. Thus, teachers should focus on these differences and pay more attention to these differences, to lessen the number of errors initiated by learners' first languages.

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