

The Challenges that Face University Students in Using Definite and Indefinite Articles in English Language

(A Case study of Kosti Locality, White Nile State)

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the challenges that face university students in using English definite and indefinite articles at White Nile University in Kosti locality. After reviewing the literature of the research and the previous studies, the researchers designed a questionnaire to suit the subject of the study and its objectives, in order to collect data a sample includes 15 students has been chosen randomly. The data was analyzed by using (SPSS). After the analysis of the data, the researchers found out the following results: some teachers do not follow efficient approaches in teaching students to increase their abilities to distinguish between definite and indefinite articles, insufficient use of grammar leads students not to understand English articles easily, lack of Knowledge in English language made students unable to use English articles. Based on the Findings the researchers recommended the following: Students' attention should be drawn to the significance of the articles usage. Articles should become a course subject to students of English Language, and teachers should help students in the area of articles and its role in English Language.

المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة لتقصي التحديات التي تواجه طلاب الجامعات في استخدام أدوات النكره والمعرفة في اللغة الانجليزية في جامعة النيل الأبيض في محلية كوستي. بعد الاطلاع علي أدبيات البحث و الدراسات السابقة، قام الباحثان بتصميم استبانته تناسب موضوع الدراسة وأهدافها، وذلك لجمع البيانات من أفراد العينة. تم إختيار خمسة عشر طالباً من طلاب الفصول الدراسية الثاني والرابع والسادس بطريقة عشوائية ليمثلون عينة الدراسة. تم تحليل الاستبانة باستخدام برنامج الحزم الاحصائية للعلوم الاجتماعية. و بعد تحليل البيانات توصل الباحثان إلى النتائج الآتية: بعض الاساتذه لا يتابعون الطرائق الفعالة في تدريس أدوات النكرة والمعرفة في اللغة الانجليزية مما يضعف مقدرتهم على التمييز بين ادوات النكره والمعرفة في اللغة الانجليزية، عدم المعرفة الكافية باستخدام قواعد اللغة يؤدي إلى صعوبة استيعاب الطلاب لأدوات النكره والمعرفة في اللغة الانجليزية، عدم إجادة قواعد اللغة الانجليزية يقود الطلاب الي صعوبة استخدام ادوات النكره والمعرفة. بناءً على النتائج يوصي الباحثان بالآتي: ضرورة أن يهتم الطلاب بإستخدام أدوات النكره و المعرفة، أن تتضمن المقررات الجامعية أدوات النكره والمعرفة، علي الأساتذه مساعدة الطلاب في استيعاب أدوات النكره والمعرفة ودورها في كتابة اللغة الانجليزية أو التحدث بها بطريقة صحيحية ومضبوطة.

Introduction

Articles is an area of grammar within the field of concept categories namely the definite articles, indefinite articles and the zero articles. These examine the concept covered by definiteness and non-definiteness in either generic or specific references. The usage of articles is inherently difficult for second language learners to learn, no matter what the background of the learner is. Although the researchers have been teaching English language for more than twenty-five years, they still observe that some university students face challenges when they use the grammatical phrase "definite and indefinite articles" University students often simplify the use of such Articles and they do not give them the care they worth.

Statement of the Problem

This study aims to investigate the challenges that face university students in using definite and indefinite Articles. The researchers observe that some university students find difficulties in using English Articles, this observation has stood as the starting point of this study in order to find solution to such a problem.

Objectives of the study

1. To investigate challenges that face university students in using English Articles.
2. To identify the main reasons behind difficulties in using Articles.
3. To find out a good teaching definite and indefinite articles lesson plan.

Questions of the study

1. Why some students often find it hard to use English articles?
2. To what extent does efficient learning of English Articles help students to develop their levels in this grammatical area?
3. What are the teaching and learning strategies that are required to be applied to address the challenges?

Hypotheses of the study

1. The lack of knowledge about the differences between Arabic and English language results in bad use of definite and indefinite articles
2. Specific and helpful teaching and learning strategies develop university students' levels in English language.
3. Efficient teaching and learning strategies increase students' standard of English Articles.

Significance of the study

The Significance of this study is that it is expected to help both teachers and learners of English Language to get appropriate way of using English articles. In addition to that, teachers will find an opportunity to master teaching lesson plan that concerns definite and indefinite English articles.

Methodology of the study

The researchers use the analytical descriptive approach as a methodology of this study. A questionnaire is adopted as a tool for collecting data and use (SPSS) Programme to statistically analyze the collected data.

Limits of the study

This study aims to investigate the challenges that face university students in using definite and indefinite Articles. The study is limited to the students at White Nile University, White Nile State, Kosti Locality, 2024.

Literature Review and previous studies.

In the literature review, the researchers are going to write about the definitions, types, use, and other titles related to the area of the study. Moreover, some previous studies will be presented to enrich the study.

Definitions and Concepts

An article is a name given to a word that is used to identify the noun or noun phrase that comes after it. There are two kinds of articles: definite and indefinite articles. Definite articles refer to a specific noun using 'the', while indefinite articles are used when a noun is not specific.

Definite Articles: 'The' is called the definite article, and it refers to specific nouns. The definite article can be used with singular, plural or uncountable nouns. For example: 'The man's hat is blue.' 'Please pass me the red cup.'

In both of these examples, the nouns are both specific: there is no uncertainty about whom or what they are.

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Seaton A. & Mew Y.H.(2007: 74) pointed out that" the word (the) is called the definite article. Use (the) before a noun when you are talking about a certain person or thing. You also use the before a noun when there is only one. For example: the sun, the moon, the sky, and the front door of my house."

Indefinite Articles

Seaton A. & Mew Y.H.(2007: 71) pointed out that "The words (a), (an) and (the) belong to this group of words called determiners. The words (a) and (an) are called indefinite articles. You can use them with singular nouns to talk about any single person or thing"

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If the definite article refers to a specific noun, then the indefinite article is used when a noun is non-specific or more general. The indefinite article takes two forms: The word 'an' when it precedes a word that begins with a vowel sound. The word 'a' when it precedes a word that begins with a consonant sound.

In both cases, they indicate that a noun refers to a general idea rather than a specific thing. Here are a few examples: 'Please pass me a knife.' 'Can

you buy me an apple from the shop?' In both of these examples, neither the knife nor the apple is specific. It could be any kind of either item.

Using articles to refer to classes of objects

Nouns can refer to an entire group of similar objects, sometimes called a class. There are three ways to refer to a class: using (1) the definite singular, (2) the indefinite singular, or (3) the indefinite plural. Here is an example of each:

1. The lion is a majestic animal.
2. A lion is a majestic animal.
3. Lions are majestic animals.

All three sentences convey the same meaning with slightly different emphasis. The first sentence takes one lion as a representative of all lions and then makes its assertion about that representative. The second sentence in effect states, take any lion you like from the class of all lions, and what you say about it will be true of all other lions. The third sentence directly makes its assertion about all lions. This third usage is probably the most common. Choose whichever usage sounds best in your sentence or text.

Using Definite Article

Many clauses and phrases make the noun known to the listener by telling the listener which person or thing we are talking about. Here is an example sentence: Can you give me the book on the table? We use (the) in this sentence because the phrase "on the table" tells the listener which book we are referring to. We are not talking about other books, we are talking about a specific book that the listener can see or already knows about. Learning to recognize such identifying clauses and phrases will help you use (the) correctly. This is especially important in situations where nationalities or ethnic groups and their languages might be confused. In such situations, (the) is used to specify that we are talking about the nationality or ethnic group rather than the language.

Using Indefinite Articles

We use (a) before words such as "European" or "university" which sound like [] they start with a consonant even if the first letter is a vowel. Also, we use (a) before letters and numbers which sound like a consonant, such as "U", "J", "1" or it is the sound not the spelling which is important. We use (an) before words such as "hour" which sound like a vowel even if the first letter is a consonant. Also use (an) before letters and numbers that sound like a vowel, such as "F" or "8".

Some words such as "herb" or "hospital" are more complicated because they are pronounced differently in different English accents. In most American accents, the "h" in "herb" is silent, so Americans usually say "an herb". In many British accents, the "h" in "herb" is pronounced; so many British say "a herb". In some British accents, the "h" in hospital is silent, so some British say "an hospital" instead of "a hospital".

We use (a) and (an) when we talk about a thing which is new, unknown, or introduced to a listener for the first time (first mention). Also, use (a) and (an) when you ask about the existence of something as e.g. I have a car, here the car is introduced for the first time. Tom is a teacher. This is a new information to the listener. Similarly, we use (an) to introduce what type of thing we talk about e.g. that is an excellent book.

Do you live in a big house? Asking about the kind of house. You cannot use (a) and (an) with plural nouns because (a) and (an) means "one" or "a single". I saw a bear in Jasper National Park, not Correct. I saw bears in Jasper National Park, Correct, as well as, an indefinite article (a/an) is needed in front of professions (i.e. a doctor, a lawyer, an architect).

Finally, the indefinite article can also be used instead of per when giving the rate or pace of something (i.e. 10 miles per hour = 10 miles an hour).

EFL learners and the use of articles

Learning how to use the articles proves a bit difficult for EFL learners, and subsequently, their misuse has been the object of a number of studies. Hakuta (1976) found that Japanese students learn the use of the definite

article *the* easily. He noticed that Japanese confused between specific and unspecific contexts. In his study of analyzing the articles' acquisition order for Laotian speakers of Hmong, Huebner (1979) found that the speakers used the definite article and overgeneralized it. On the other hand, Parrish (1987) pointed out that the zero article is used first before *the*, then it is followed by the indefinite articles. Thomas (1989) confirmed that the zero article is overgeneralized and that was concluded when he divided two groups of participants, the first one is speakers of languages with articles whereas the second group are speakers with languages with no articles, the results revealed showed that the second group repeated the zero article mostly in their talking). Master (1987, as cited in Master, 1997) concluded the same finding that is mentioned above, the zero articles is acquired first. It is necessary to find out whether the same case occurs with Arabic speakers, since the researcher is an Arabic student, so that the following section discusses some difference between the English and the Arabic articles.

The difference between English articles and Arabic articles

The researchers have been throwing light on a brief contrastive analysis of the definiteness and indefiniteness in English and Arabic. The indefiniteness in Arabic means using the zero article. Arabic is a Semitic language spoken in many parts of the world like in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Arabian Peninsula. Formally, the Arabic language is characterized with the definite and non-articles, the definite one is used with both specific and non-specific references.

Definiteness in Arabic

Arab grammarians agreed that the form of a definite article in Arabic Language is: (ال) that is pronounced (āl). According to Awad (2011), the definite article is a bound affixed morpheme /al/ that is considered as a prefix usually used with nouns. As in the example below:

(البيت) (āl-byt) (the house).

The use of the definite article (*al*) is comparable to that of the definite article (*the*) with some limitations because (*al*) in the Arabic language is not considered as a free morpheme.

Indefiniteness in Arabic

Unlike the indefinite article in English, there is no equivalence of indefinite articles in the Arabic language; in fact, it has only a definite article and zero article.

(Awad, 2011:38) stated that indefiniteness in Classical Arabic is known by an accent to show if the NP is indefinite and this specific accent is called 'tanwīn' in Arabic or *nunation* in English. A possible explanation for this might be that there are three types of nunation: /in/, /un/ and /en/. These are suffixed to nouns and are pronounced at the end of words, the use of nunation relies on the grammatical function of the noun in a sentence.

Examples:

Shakhs-un rāy3-un

a wonderful person شخصٌ رائعٌ

The omission of the articles

The omission of the articles (\emptyset) means that no article is to be used with nouns. There is no need to use articles in the following situations: With the name of games or sports (i.e. Free Fire, handball, etc, with meals (i.e. breakfast, lunch, and dinner), except on formal occasions, with names of hospitals, schools, universities.

Previous Studies

The first study was conducted by Khalil Ahmed and Abdul Qadir (2019). It was entitled as 'Difficulties in the Acquisition and Use of English Articles among Adult Pashto Learners'. It is a research paper published in University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir. The mainly concern of this study is to investigate the acquisition of the English articles which was considered to be one of the most difficult areas for the second language learners particularly when there are no articles in the first language of the learners. The purpose of

this study is to investigate the difficulties in acquisition and use of the English articles. The study aims at identifying the errors the EFL learners make in using the English articles. Two theoretical approaches regarding noun classification for articles choice were adopted in this study. The data was collected in the form of a gap-fill task from 75 adult Pashto learners of English. The results showed that students used the definite article ‘the’ and the indefinite article ‘a / an’ more often than the zero article Ø. In noun types, a few subjects made errors in using articles before count nouns. In the noun phrase environments, the lowest error rate was in referential indefinite while the highest error rate was in generics. The reasons for difficulties in acquiring and using the English articles were found to be mainly the identification of noun types, NPs environments, and language transfer.

The second previous study was conducted by Syra Muttlak Nasser, August (2022). It was entitled as ' Difficulties in using Articles among EFL university students an experimental study. The researcher pointed out that “ Articles are very common morpheme and their usage is difficult for EFL Students and it usually causes even the most advanced non-native speakers of English (NNS) to commit mistakes. The final two tests showed that Articles (definite , indefinite, zero Articles) are quite problematic for ESL learners. Besides, students deem article system quite tricky to use in their writing. It is observed that errors are because of the interference of L1 in L2.

The third previous study was conducted by Ahmed AL Jeibani (2022). It was entitled as ' Investigation into undergraduates’ Errors in the use of the indefinite article at Omar AL Mukhtar University'. The purpose of this study was to examine the use of English Articles as well as the errors made by the students at Omar AL Mukhtar University. The research objectives are: to identify the types and sources of errors made by Libyan EFL undergraduates at Omar AL Mukhtar University in the use of indefinite article when they write a composition. This Study suggest that there is a significant and negative impact of the use of English Articles. Since the majority of students agreed that the English Articles are important, and teachers should look at

the importance of English Language as well as how students improve proficiency in English Articles towards mastering the use of English Language.

Methodology

The descriptive analytical approach is used in this study; the total population of this study is a number of about one hundred and fifty English language learners represents White Nile university students, Faculty of Arts. The researchers designed a questionnaire as a mean of data collecting. The population of this study is about 50 students from White Nile University, Faculty of Arts. A sample of 15 students who are now studying English language at White Nile University –Faculty of Arts English department were randomly chosen.

The validity

Prior to the final formulation and publication of the questionnaire, the researchers tested the validity of the questionnaire to ensure that the questions were formulated in a clear manner to confirm comprehensiveness and integrity of the questionnaire, away from any ambiguity. It was handed to three professors who are specialized in applied linguistics. These referees reviewed the questionnaire and presented their observations and recommendations, which were taken into account by the researchers in preparing the questionnaire in its final form.

Stability Test

For testing the internal consistency of the research variables, and for the questionnaire in general, the researchers used the Alpha Cronbach coefficient, which theoretically values between (0 to 1) .The results of the stability test for the hypotheses are greater than 60%. These values mean that there is a high degree of internal stability for all axes the first hypothesis (89%), the second hypothesis (95%). The third hypothesis (73%) The overall stability of the hypotheses (70%) is explained by the fact that the level of stability is high for all hypotheses and that the parameters used by the

researchers to measure hypotheses have the internal stability of their terms. This enables the researchers to rely on these answers in achieving the research objectives.

Data analysis and Discussion

After reviewing the literature of this study and the previous studies, the researchers designed a questionnaire to suit the subject of the study and its objectives, in order to collect data from the sample members. The researchers considered that the questionnaire is comprehensive to measure the challenges that face university students in using definite and indefinite articles.

The Hypothesis Analysis

Hypothesis (1): The difference between Arabic and English language results in bad use of definite and indefinite articles

Degree of approval	Frequencies	Percent
Strongly agree	10	%67
Agree	4	%27
Neutral	1	%6
Disagree	-	-
Strongly disagree	-	-
Total	15	%100

The researchers noticed from table (1) above that (67%) of the sample members strongly agree that the difference between Arabic and English language results in bad use of definite and indefinite articles and (27%) of the sample agree, whereas (6%) are neutral. This obviously indicates that the lack of knowledge of the differences between Arabic and English language results in bad use of definite and indefinite articles, as well, this statistical analysis proved hypothesis number one.

Hypothesis(2): There are many teaching and learning strategies need to be applied.

Degree of approval	Frequencies	Percent
Strongly agree	5	33%
Agree	8	53%
Neutral	2	14%
Disagree	-	-
Strongly disagree	-	-
Total	15	%100

Table (2) above has shown that (33%) of the sample members strongly agree that there are many teaching and learning strategies need to be applied and (53%) of the sample agree, whereas (14%) are neutral. This obviously shows that there are many teaching and learning strategies need to be applied, also this statistical analysis proved hypothesis number two.

Hypothesis (3): some students find it hard to use English Articles

Degree of approval	Frequencies	Percent
Strongly agree	6	40%
Agree	5	34%
Neutral	1	6%
Disagree	3	20%
Strongly disagree	-	-
Total	15	%100

Table (3) above stated that (40%) of the sample members strongly agree that there are some students find it hard to use English Articles and (34%) of the sample agree, whereas (6%) are neutral and (20%) disagree. This obviously shows that a majority of (74%) of the sample agree that some students find it hard to use English Articles even if the neutral group is exclude. This statistical analysis proved hypothesis number three.

Conclusion

This study intended to find out the difficulties that faced university students in the use of English Articles. It is clear that the researchers investigate the problem of this study in order to achieve the objectives, to test the hypotheses, and to find out results that lead to recommendations that, in turn are expected to participate in the process of overcoming such problems.

Findings of the study

After the analysis of data, the researchers found out the followings:

1. Insufficient use of grammar leads students not to understand English articles easily.
2. Some teachers do not motivate students to distinguish between definite and indefinite articles.
3. Lack knowledge of English Language made students unable to use English Articles
4. Understanding of definite and indefinite articles help students use Articles correctly.

Recommendations

Based on the results, the researchers recommend the followings:

- 1- Students should care about the importance of the Articles usage.
- 2- Articles should become a comprehensive course subject in universities.
- 3- Teachers should adapt modern teaching methods to help students in the area of definite and indefinite Articles in English Language.

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