

## تحليل الأخطاء التي يرتكبها بعض طلاب الجامعات الليبية في استخدام أداة النكرة

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### ملخص البحث:

الهدف الأساسي من هذه الدراسة هو تحليل و تحديد الأخطاء التي يرتكبها بعض طلاب الجامعات الليبية في استخدام أداة النكرة . المشاركون في الدراسة هم 20 طالباً من طلاب السنة الثانية بقسم اللغة الانجليزية بكلية الآداب جامعة الزاوية . الأداة المستخدمة في هذه الدراسة هي كتابة مقالات باللغة الانجليزية عن طريقها يتم تحديد جميع الأخطاء، و تصنيفها إلى تصنيفات مختلفة. أظهرت النتائج تدخلاً في اللغة الأم باعتبارها العامل الأساسي الذي شفع المشاركين إلى ارتكاب أخطاء في استخدام أداة النكرة. حذف أداة النكرة “ the ” قبل الأسماء هو أكثر الأخطاء تكراراً . كشفت نتائج هذه الدراسة أن الحاجة لتطوير تقنيات و موائد التدريس للحد من الأخطاء الشائعة في استخدام أداة النكرة.

## An Analysis Of Article Errors In Libyan University Students' Writing

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### Abstract:

*The principle aim of this study is to analyze and determine the errors committed by some Libyan university students in article usage. The participants in the study are 20 students of second year students in the English department at Faculty of Art, University of Zawia. The instrument used for this study was participants' written essays in English language. All of the errors in these essays were identified and classified into different categorization. The results exhibited mother tongue interference as the main factor that caused the participants to commit article usage errors. The highest frequency of article errors was the omission of "the" before nouns made particular in context. The finding of this study revealed that the need for the development of teaching techniques and materials to reduce common errors of article usage.*

### Introduction

In recent years there has been much attention paid to how EFL and ESL learners actually write and what problems they usually face in their writing. One of the most issues being discussed is constructed Articles. The articles "a" "an" and "the" are difficult of many non-native speakers of English to learn to use properly. Some of the rules that govern articles usage are very subtle ; only years of experience with the language will enable you to understand and apply these rules.

For decades, linguists have been trying to determine what exactly account for the article errors made by L2 learners. Even advanced learners who demonstrate a high level of proficiency in spoken and written English are still not perfect in article use (Kim & Lakshmana, 2007).

CAH pointed out that learning process should focus on areas of linguistic differences between L1 and L 2. Such linguistic contrasts will cause difficulties for L2 learners, which may result in discourse errors due to L1 interference ( interlingual errors). Brown stated that “ The principle barrier to Second Language Acquisition is the interference of the first language system with the language system” (1980, p. 148).

In problematic areas where L1 system seems to mainly differ from L2 system. These fundamental differences bring Arabic speakers encounter a big deal of problems and commit a wide range of errors in their written or spoken discourse of English. Arabic speakers often experience difficulty using English articles. The fact that “ there is no indefinite article in Arabic, and definite article has a range of use different from English”

( Swan and Smith, 2001, p. 205) causes confusion to Arabic speaking learners of English. Moreover, Arabic definite article is a bound morpheme , which means it cannot stand by itself. On the contrary, the definite article/ the/ in the English Article System is a free morpheme, which means it can stand by itself as the determiner of a noun phrase (NP) structure (the + noun).

Kharma and Hajjaj ( 1989) indicated that Arabic predominantly varies from English as it has only one definite article /al/ in the surface structure of the Arabic Article System (AAS). And also, Arabic does not have indefinite article in the surface structure of the Article System. A learners’ first language ( L1) may have some effect on the acquisition of a second language. Kim (2006) indicated that Korean noun phrases appear in a “ bare form” without articles, whereas English noun phrases can have an article. Therefore, when Korean learners write in English, they may make errors by not using articles in front of noun phrases.

In brief, with regards to some studies as illustrated, The rules for using articles in English are quite complex, so for students whose first language is not English, when to use an article, and which article to use can cause problems.

## Literature Review:

This section explores three topics and discusses how EFL/ ESL students may make article errors. The main purpose of this section is to give readers greater insight into articles and how errors in article usage might be made. The three topics include error analysis, article usage and problems with article usage.

## Error Analysis

Error analysis is one of the most influential theories of second language acquisition. It is concerned with the analysis of the errors committed by L2 learners by comparing the learners' acquired norms with the target language norms and explaining the identified errors ( James, 1988). For Crystal (1999, p. 108) Error Analysis in language teaching and learning is the study of the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a language.

Brown( 1980) defined error analysis as the process of observing, analyzing, and classifying the deviations from the rules of the second languages and then revealing the systems operated by learner. As stated by AbisSamara (2003), Error Analysis can be viewed as “ a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on error committed by learners” Brown (2000, p. 224) stated that there are two main sources of errors, namely, interlingual errors and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors (Interference) Errors are those errors that are traceable to first language interference. These errors are attributable to negative interlingual transfer. The term” interlingual was first introduced by Selinker ( 1972). He used this term to refer to the systematic knowledge of an L2 which is independent of both the learners' L1 and the target language(AbiSamara, 2003, P. 5).

According to Gass and Selinker (2001), a comparison can be made between the errors a learner makes and the learner's target language (TL) and this can lead to two types of error: interlingual and intralingual. Thus, we can group article errors as either interlingual or intralingual. Richards (1972) indicated four main types of intraingual errors, namely: (1) overgeneralization, (2) ignorance of rule restrictions, (3) incomplete application of rules, and (4) false concepts hypothesized. Later he identified six sources of errors: (1)

interference, (2) overgeneralization, (3) performance of errors, (4) markers of transitional competence, (5) strategies of communication and assimilation, and (6) teacher- induced errors. Stenson (1974) stated three main reasons for errors, namely, (1) incomplete acquisition of the target grammar, and (2) exigencies of the learning/teaching situation, and (3) errors due to normal problems of language performance.

Another study conducted by Vahdatinejad (2008) maintained that error analysis can be used to indicate what a learner still needs to be taught. It provides the necessary information about is lacking in the learner's competence. He also makes a distinction between errors and lapses ( simple mistakes). According to him, lapses are produced even by native speakers, and can be corrected by themselves.

Mytchell and Myles (as cited in Keshavarz, 2003) claimed that errors could reveal a developing system of the student's L2 language and this system is dynamic and open to change and resetting of parameters. This view is supported by Stark's (2001, p. 19) study, who also explained that teachers need to view students' errors positively and should not regard them as the learners' failure to grasp the rules and structures but rather should view the errors as process of learning. He adds that errors are essential condition of learning.

To sum up, error analysis is an invaluable source of information( Corder, 1981). It provides information on students' errors. When analyze errors that students have made, the researcher will identify the nature of the errors and it will become apparent what kind of remedial work is necessary for EFL/ESL students to avoid these errors.

### Article Usage

The English articles, the, indefinite a/an, and zero can often be troublesome for English language learners to master. According to Thomas (1989) English as a second language ( L2) learners from first languages (L1) that do not have the equivalent of an article system encounter more problems using articles. Warriner and Grapham (1977) defined an article as a demonstrative adjective

that precedes and modifies a noun. On the other hand, Leech and Svartvik (1975), Farmer et al. (1985), Klammer and Schulz (1992), Kolln (1994), and Watson (1995) define article as a subclass of determiners. Thus, some researchers refer to articles as adjective while others describe them as a kind of determiner.

In fact, the biggest problem seems to be whether we should or we should not use an article. For example, in “ This work will be part of our future success,” there may be the article “a” in front of the word “part,” but the word is almost always used without the article, so one may wonder if it is used as an uncountable noun. Despite English having two kinds of articles, the rule for their use are both subtle and complex. General explanations in grammar books are insufficient to explain difficult article usage. For example, we do not use an article with either a cultural place or with an abstract noun.

### Some basic rules for using article

The first thing learners need to decide whether the noun is countable or uncountable

**Countable nouns** in English are usually those that can take a plural form ( e.g. book, books, student, students, lesson, lessons).

**Uncountable nouns** in English usually do not have a plural form. They include names for languages, subjects( Arabic, English, economic and history), solids ( iron, coal), liquids ( water, oil) gases ( oxygen, hydrogen), powders ( sugar, flour). However, some nouns can be both countable or uncountable nouns, depending on the context or meaning.

**A or An** is called the **indefinite Article**, as it leaves indefinite the person or thing spoken of as: A teacher, a hospital, a boy , a girl- here a points out any teacher, any hospital or any boy or girl.

**The** is called the **Definite Article**, as it normally points out some particular person or thing as: She saw the teacher- where the points out some particular teacher.

The indefinite article is used before singular countable nouns e.g. A bag, An apple, A boy The definite article is used before singular

countable nouns, plural countable and uncountable nouns, e.g. The bag, the bags, the milk.

### **A or An**

The choice between a and an is determined by sound before a word beginning with a vowel sound an is used e.g. an apple, an engineer , an hour.

### **Rules for using the definite article ( the ):**

- 1- Use **'the'** when using words that specify a particular person or thing ( e.g. **The** same student, **the** principal reason).
- 2- Use **'the'** when a singular noun is meant to represent a whole class ( e.g. **The** goat is a useful animal).
- 3- Use **'the'** for reference to an item that is known by all speakers (e.g. **The** moon, **the** sun, **the** stars).
- 4- Use **'the'** with 'most' as superlative form ( e.g. Amal is **the** most beautiful in the class).
- 5- Use **'the'** with ordinal forms to show order or number ( e.g. He was the first man to arrive, The second chapter of the book is very interesting).
- 6- Use **'the'** for the second and subsequent reference to an item. The item could be explicitly referred to, or implied (e.g. A survey was administrated to .....**The** results showed that.....).

### **Rules for using the indefinite article ( a/ an ):**

- 1- The indefinite article ( **a, an** ) **cannot** be used with uncountable nouns or with plural nouns.
- 2- Use **a, an** when the writer first mention a singular countable noun.
- 3- Use **'an'** if the word immediately after the article begins with a, e, I, o or u, except where the 'u' is pronounced like a 'y' ( e.g. an orange, an egg, an interesting book, an apple, an umbrella, *But* a university.

### **Omission of the article:**

- 1- Articles are omitted in case of proper and abstract nouns (uncountable nouns) used in a general sense:  
E.g. Sugar is bad for your teeth.

Gold is a precious metal

Tripoli is the capital of Libya

- 2- Before plural countable nouns used in a general sense:

E.g. Children like sweets

Computers are used in many offices

- 3- Articles cannot be used before languages

E.g. He studies English

She speaks French

### Rules for using articles ( a/ an, the ,zero article) for classes of things:

- 1- The definite article '**the**' is used to refer to an entire class of things ( e.g. **The** mobile phone has revolutionized communications)
- 2- The indefinite article (**a/ an**) is used with a singular countable noun to refer to representative of the class of things ( e.g. **A** mobile phone is a prime example of how technology has shaped our lives)
- 3- Use **zero article** with plural countable and uncountable nouns to refer to a representative of the class of things( e.g. **Mobile phones** have revolutionized.....)

### Problems with Article Usage

From the two sections above, it is clear that English articles are difficult for EFL/ ESL learners, particularly for those whose native languages do not have articles ( Bataineh, 2005). Celce-Mercia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) indicated that article system is mostly troublesome to teachers of English as a second language or a foreign language. As a result, some English teachers prefer to spend more time tackling other aspects of grammar and areas perceived to be more communicatively important ( Chuang, 2005).

Master ( as cited in Bataineh, 2005) indicated that three reasons why L2 learners have difficulty to comprehend the small particles a, an, and the systems: “ (a) Articles are among the most frequent function words in English, making constant rule application difficult over an extended stretch of discourse; (b) function words are normally unstressed and consequently are very difficult for non-native speakers to discern, which affects the availability of input in the spoken mode;



and (c) the article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme, which constitutes a considerable burden for the learner who usually looks for a one- to –one correspondence between form and function, especially in the early stages of language learning” (p. 2).

In addition to the complex rules and exceptions of usage, Avery and Radisic (2007) and Bataineh (2005) stated that if an L2 learners’ native language has some type of determiner system, they probably encounter a problem of “ mismatch” between the two systems on definitions, and on functions of determiners such as definiteness, specificity, or concepts of countable nouns and uncountable nouns.

Huong (2005) stated that English articles have high frequency use in written works, their presence in a given discourse must be something meaningful. Hung points out that “ One function that the articles contribute to discourse is to create cohesion for stretches of languages” (p.5). He concluded that the function that articles have in discourses concerning cohesion reveals their potential role in maintaining successful communication.

Richards ( 1971, p. 187) categorized article errors as follows:

1. Omission of “ the”
  - (a) before unique nouns
  - (b) before nouns of nationality
  - (c) before nouns made particular in context
  - (d) before a noun modified by a participle
  - (e) before superlatives
  - (f) before a noun modified by an of – phrase
2. “ the used instead of Ø ( zero article)
  - (a) Before proper names
  - (b) Before abstract nouns
  - (c) Before nouns behaving like abstract nouns
  - (d) Before plural nouns
  - (e) Before “some”

3. “a” used instead of” the”

- (a) Before superlatives
- (b) Before unique nouns

4. “a” instead of Ø ( zero article)

- (a) Before a plural noun qualified by an adjective
- (b) Before uncountable nouns
- (c) Before an adjective

5. Omission of “a” before class nouns defined by an adjective

Finally, Huong (2005,p. 29) provided a summary of all the error types of English articles done by L2 learners from various parts of the world. The errors are as follows:

- Omission of a/ the /-s

Put book [ a/the book] on table.

He is in difficult [ a difficult] position.

He has three book [books].

- Wrong use of a/the / -s

It was the [a] very hard work.

He lives in the [-] Manchester.

He bought a big oranges[ orange].

- Confusion of a/the/-s

This is a [the] man I was telling you about.

To sum up, English article systems are difficult for non-native learners of English. As well as L2 speakers with a native determiners system who are liable to mismatch their usage of articles. Errors arise because there has not been enough effort by the learners, or not enough explanation or practice has been given by the teacher( Corder, 1981).

## Methodology

### Introduction

This section presents the research methodology used in this study and gives information about the population and the sample. It also describes the data collection instruments and procedures.

## Objectives

The main concern of this study is to explore the kinds of English article errors made by a group of Libyan EFL learners at university level in their written work. More specifically, the study seeks answers to the following questions: What are the types of article errors made by Libyan students? And How does mother tongue interference affect the use of articles by Libyan students? .

## The Study Sample

The study sample consisted of 20 university students enrolled in second year in English department at Faculty of Art, Zawia University 2018/ 2019. To select the participants of the present study, a simple random sampling method was used because it is regarded as one of the most reliable methods to obtain a representative sample. All of them were native speakers of Libya spoken Arabic. All the participants did not receive any English language instruction in English speaking countries nor had they been to any English speaking countries to have any kind of English exposure. They had completed secondary school and enrolled in English department at Faculty of Art, Zawia University.

## Instrument

The participants were asked to write a well-developed essay from 100 to 150 words within one hour during one of their English classes.

## Data Collection Procedure

All of the 20 participants were required to write on one of the following different topics:

**My home town or smoking and future plans.** They were asked to write approximately 100 to 150 words within a period of one hour. The participants did not know that their writings are going to be under investigation.

## Data Analysis

There were two types of data, obtained from the participants' essays. The researcher first analyzed the context of essays to locate articles errors. And the article errors were then analyzed based on the 19 article error categories ( Richards, 1971, and Chakorn, 2005). The

number of errors of each type were counted for frequency and calculated into the percentage.

## Results and discussion

In this section, the researcher presents and discusses the findings of the study in light of its objectives. First, classify article errors made by Libyan students; second, investigate how mother tongue interference causes learners to produce English article errors. The findings are shown in two tables. Table 1 shows the categories of article errors and their frequency. Table 2 identifies the three most frequent article errors.

**Table 1**  
Categories of Article Errors in Students' Essays

Categories	Frequency of Error	Percentage
1. Omission of "the" before unique nouns	20	5%
2. Omission of "the" before nouns defined by adjectives of nationality	1	0%
3. Omission of "the" before nouns made particular in context	115	28%
4. Omission of "the" before a noun modified by a participle	2	0%
5. Omission of "the" before superlatives	3	1%
6. Omission of "the" before a noun modified by An of-phrase	6	1%
7. Omission of "a" before nouns	23	6%
8. Omission of "a" before singular nouns defined by adjectives	42	10%
9. "the" used instead of Ø before proper names	5	1%
10. "the" used instead of Ø before abstract nouns	32	8%
11. "the" used instead of Ø before nouns behaving like abstract nouns	4	1%
12. "the" used instead of Ø before plural nouns	45	12%
13. "the" instead of "a"	35	8%
14. "a" used instead of "the" before unique nouns	2	1%
15. "a" instead of Ø before a plural noun	6	1%
16. "a" instead of Ø before uncountable nouns	23	6%

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17. "a" instead of Ø before adjectives	6	1%
18. 'a' instead of "the"	10	2%
19. Possessive determiners instead of "the"	23	6%

The above table shows two types of errors: omission( categories 1-8), and substitutions of articles ( categories 9-19). The findings stated that the omission of articles was the most frequent error. The students omitted "the" before nouns made particular in context most frequently; 115 errors were identified, 28% of all errors.

**Table 2**  
Top Three Most Frequent Article Errors

Categories	Frequency Of errors	percentage
1. Omission of "the" before nouns made Particular in context	115	28%
2. "the" used instead of Ø before plural nouns	45	12%
3. Omission of "a" before singular nouns Defined by adjectives	42	10%

Table 2 indicated that the article errors in the participants' essays were omissions of "the" before nouns made particular in context(28%), "the" used instead of Ø before plural nouns (12%), and omission of "a" before nouns defined by adjectives(10%).

**Table 3**

Ranks of Article Errors Caused by Mother Tongue Interference

Categories	Frequency Of errors	percentage
1. Omission of “the” before nouns made Particular in context	115	28%
2. “the” used instead of Ø before plural nouns	45	12%
3 . Omission of “a” before nouns	23	6%
4. Omission of “ the” before unique nouns	20	5%

The data from table 3 shows four types of article errors caused by mother tongue interference. The top three article errors types are omission of “the” before nouns made particular in context (28%), use of “the” instead of Ø (12%), and omission of “the” before unique nouns.

This study has revealed an account of the main errors made by a group of Libyan EFL learners at university level in their written work. Based on the discussion of the findings, it could be concluded that the omission of articles was the most frequent errors.

### Recommendations:

Given the results of this study, a number of recommendations for further research are suggested. First, it is recommended that further research be undertaken to investigate the errors made by graduate students majoring in English. Second, further investigation into interlingual and intralingual errors of writers of other language is strongly recommended.

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