



Challenges Faced by South Asian Students in Using English Definite Article “the”

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Abstract

This study provides a detailed account of errors of definite article committed by South Asian students studying at Dalarna University Sweden in their writing. This research deliberates on how the students from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh omit or unnecessarily use the definite article ‘the’ in their writing due to interference of their mother tongue as languages such as Urdu, Hindi and Bangla do not have any article system in their structure. Data was collected from the class assignment of Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi students studying at graduate level. The results indicate that omission or unnecessary use of definite article ‘the’ in their writing is due to their mother tongue interference, analogy from their previous experience and lack of grasp on foreign language grammar at their early age.

Keywords:

Definite article, Omission, L1 (First Language), L2 (second language), MT (Mother Tongue), TL (target Language), ART (Article)

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Introduction

Many researchers, linguists and language instructors have focused on error analysis in the field of Second Language Research (SLR) Corder, 1967; James 1998; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Lee 2013. Richards (2002) is of the view that in the learning a foreign or second language, an error refers to the use of a linguistic item such as word, grammatical category or speech act in a way that is regarded by a native speaker of a language as incomplete or faulty. Research on error analysis is

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considered one of the best methods to explain the types of errors committed by second language learners and suggest a remedy to avoid occurrence of such errors again and again.

Unlike English, most of the Eastern languages do not have article system and the speakers of these languages commit errors in the use of definite article ‘the’ while writing English. According to Hewson (1972), English language uses article to identify noun whether it is specific or general, singular or plural. In English the definite and indefinite article are the top ten most frequently words. It appears before the noun it accompanies.

It is very important to master the correct use of definite and indefinite article in order to write and correct English. Shah (2011) is of the view that most of the Pakistani students who have article system in their mother tongue comment the following mistakes in the use of article:

- They do not use definite articles where it is required
- The use of definite articles where it is not required

Hawkins (1991) has written about the use of definite and indefinite articles and their use as conventional and conversational implicature. Chesterman (1991) conducted his research on how definiteness in encoded and decoded in Finnish and English languages. Rastell (1995) is of the view that now-a-days there is a tendency to use definite articles for their communicative purpose in indicating deficiency i.e. that the referent named by a given name is known one. He thinks that this tendency conflicts in cases in which definite article is redundant. Yoo (2009) has categorized the use of definite article into three groups such as generic, referential and non-referential.

1.1. Statement of Problem

The proper use of the English definite article “the” poses a big challenge to South Asian students, who have no article system in their native languages such as Hindi, Urdu and Bengali. These students, who are learning English as a second or foreign language, often have a constant difficulty in the use of English definite article “the” until very late stages of acquisition or even in most of the cases do not ever reach native like levels of performance in their writing. Most of the times, in their process of acquisition, these L2 learners of English have been noticed to omit “the”



in the definite contexts and sometimes they misuse it, i.e. they use it unnecessarily. This problem is because of the absence of this grammatical category in their native languages or their previous experience of English. The use of “the” is tailored according to the specific context and rules in English, which the South Asian L2 learners fail to grasp and understand, while the context writing, as they lack the definite article in their native languages (NLs).

1.2. Objective of the Research

The main objective of the study is to analyze the problem faced by South Asian students in using the definite article “the” in the learning of English as a second/ foreign language.

The sub-objectives are:

- To examine Mother Tongue (MT) interference in the use of definite article ‘the’.
- To explore the role of analogy from previous experience in the use of definite article ‘the’.
- To analyze misunderstanding of the grammar rules, which affect in the proper use of the English definite article “the”.

1.3. Research Questions

- How does Mother Tongue (MT) interfere in the use of definite article ‘the’?
- How do second language learners commit errors in the use of definite article ‘the’ due to analogy from previous experience?
- How does poor grammar-learning cause errors in the use of English definite article “the”?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. L1 Interference in the Learning of a New Category in the Target Language:

Differences between languages pose a big challenge to second language learners and these differences occur when there is a category present in language X (such as article system in English) and absent in language Y (such as absence of article system in South Asian languages). It is a known phenomenon that South Asian languages do not have articles, and while learning English,



the South Asian learners of English must make themselves familiar with the use of articles, which is a new grammatical category for them. Due to the lack of similar system in NL, students face difficulty in the TL in using English definite article. (Gass 2001: 77). As articles do not exist in [-ART] language (language having no article system), [-ART] learners are approximately one level behind [+ART] learners of English because they need to create the category that English is different in this regard from their NL. It means that [-ART] speakers need a greater amount of time to acquire the article system than the [+ART] speakers, but eventually they will acquire it. However, the error of the definite article “the” will persist into advanced inter-language for [-ART] speakers. (Master, 1997).

On early approximation among both the [+ART] and [-ART] speakers, the first language has a clear influence on early approximations to the TL, though this influence usually decreases as the L2 proficiency increases. The failure to use definite article “the” to mark an labelled referent could obviously be due to L1 transfer. (Master, 1997).

2.2. Analogy

Failure to observe restrictions in the definite article usage, as mentioned by Richards (1971: 209), may also drive from analogy, the learner rationalizing an unusual usage from his previous experience of English. The singular noun in English takes the definite article (The dog...), but plural form does not (Dogs...). Since the statements are exactly parallel, a logical substitute for second Language learner would be “the dogs...”, which is not the case. So they draw an analogy between the singular and plural and try to apply the rule of singular on plural which causes errors, inducing the errors of the definite article in their language use.

2.3. Poor Grammar Rule Learning

The South Asian English learners are also unable to identify the proper rules of grammar regarding the selection of the definite article “the”. It is common that the definite article choice is strongly influenced by a few rules that they learn from books or teachers, but they seem unable to follow them (Butler, 2002). The reason why they fail to learn the grammar rules related to the article ‘the’ is that their languages, the South Asian languages do not have any use of articles such



as the English definite article ‘the’, hence they fail to identify the occasions of their use in English, which they use as a foreign language.

3. Research Methodology and Data

Nine essays from three South Asian students, studying at Dalarna University Sweden in different levels (foundation, bachelors and masters) were analyzed for errors of article “the” in English language. Secondly, the students whose essays were collected were interviewed to find out possible reasons of the errors of English definite article they have committed in their essays. The findings reveal that South Asian students do not have control over the correct use of the English article “the” as this category is missing in all the South Asian languages. It was noticed that the omission of the definite article “the” persistently predominant even at the advance levels. The omission of the definite article is shown in examples as [], and the wrong usage is indicated as an underlined “the”.

4. Data Analysis

It became clear while analyzing the data that the omission of the definite article is more persistent than its correct or wrong usage. This tendency shows that the L2 learners of English, having no article system in their L1, face trouble due to certain reasons such as L1 interference (a new category in TL), analogy from the parallel statements and poor understanding of L2 grammar rules. All these reasons lead them to committing errors in the use of definite articles.

4.1. L1 Interference in the Learning of a New Category in the Target Language

It is clear from the data that although the students have a marked tendency to omit definite articles in their essays, sometimes they also overuse it. Both instances testify that their usage is not like English native speakers. A lack of consistency is observed in the use of definite article, which indicates that the South Asian L2 learners of English face a challenge in proper understanding of a new category which is missing in their mother tongue. For example:

1. *“As we know that the English is the mother tongue of [] British people and [] British government occupied many parts of [] world such as Australia, Africa and [] Indian*



Subcontinent”.

In this example, the definite article is omitted before the nouns “British people”, “British government”, “world” and “Indian Sub-Continent”. It has been used incorrectly with the noun “English”, where no article would have been appropriate. It has been used correctly with the noun phrase “mother tongue of”, which somehow shows awareness of the L2 learner about the new category. The English definite article “the” carries many functions, which poses challenges to the second language learners. These functions do not exist in their mother tongues because this category is missing in their mother tongue. Therefore, the L2 learners fail to determine its correct use in the Target Language.

2. *“The people of [] Subcontinent were not educated....so with [] passage of time, English became necessary for the people of [] of Subcontinent”.*

The L1 plays a crucial role in the process of second language acquisition for the South Asian students, and failure to use the definite article to mark the definiteness of a referent could be obviously due to L1 transfer as students are not used to the concept of marking definiteness. In the case of omission of the definite article, the L1 plays its part, as South Asian languages do not have the equivalent system of English articles, and this L1 influence normally decreases as the L2 proficiency increases. With the passage of time as they encounter the instances of the use of definite article more and more during their use of the target language, English, they understand the reasons and places of the use of target language. Although English is widely used and taught in the South Asia, still the L2 learner will not get the native- like proficiency in its use even at the advance levels.

3. *“The girl was not serious with him. I wrote a letter to my friend about that girl.... I gave this letter to one of our cousins....”*

The above example illustrates that the South Asian learners of English are receptive to the use of demonstratives “that” and “this” as marker of definiteness where a native English speaker normally uses a definite article. This tendency is because of the L1 transfer as in South Asian



languages definiteness on noun phrases is marked by demonstratives “*yeh*” and “*wo*” in place of articles.

4. *“In our country [] bride and bridegroom.....perform dance on [] marriage day.....has many customs and [] dowry is one of them. Through [] dowry..... [] dowry system creates many problems”.*

As South Asian languages do not have any functional equivalents of the English article system, English L2 learners of South Asia have difficulty in the use of English definite article. The data illustrates that the L2 learners have a marked tendency to not use the definite article “the” where native speakers of English normally use it. In the above example, the student refers to the definite things without the use of definite articles (bride and bridegroom, marriage day, dowry). Such errors are not only common among the learners but also among the educated lot since they are unable to develop a habit of using the definite article due to its absence in their mother tongues. In other words, they do not have the cognitive system in place in their mind due to which they skip or wrongly use the definite article in English, which they must use as a foreign language for one reason or the other. In the last sentence the student refers to the noun “dowry” which has been introduced earlier, but he does not use the definite article which should be there since he is talking about a known thing here, which has been mentioned earlier. This constant omission of the definite article shows that the learning of a new category is a big challenge for L2 learners in the TL.

4.2. Analogy

The other factor which misguides the L2 learners of English is their rationalizing of an unusual usage from their previous experience of English. The English definite article has multiple functions, so, L2 learners often look for correlation of its use with different parallel statements. For example:

5. (a). *“Like English, a morpheme in Bangla can also have different forms...”*

(b). *“Like [] English root ‘domesticates’, [] Bangla base ‘palt-’ does not...”*



The above examples illustrate the analogy as a misleading factor as far as the use of English definite article by the L2 learners is concerned. Both the statements (a) and (b) seem exactly parallel to each other, which results in the omission of “the” in the statement (b) by the second language learner of English. Here the L2 learner fails to understand that the definiteness of “English root” and “Bangla base” instead of English and Bangla as languages in general.

6. “.... *the dog jumped and tried to bite me ...since then I fear the dogs*”

As singular nouns in English take an article with them and plural usually do not. By using the definite article “the” with the singular noun “dog”, the L2 learner rationalizes its use with the plural noun ‘dogs’ as well.

4.3. Poor Grammar Rule Learning

The linkage of one form to one function is common in the second language acquisition. (Master, 2002). The English definite article carries many functions and to avoid errors in its use, one has to master all grammar rules regarding its proper usage. From the data gathered, it appears that the learners have memorized certain rules but failed to determine the correct use of “the”.

7. “.....*an evil power can attack [] United States of America, so we need to be ready for the counterattack*”.

In English, the definite article is not used before names of places and countries except with certain proper names and plural names of countries, such as the United States of America. The above example illustrates that the L2 learner of English is aware of the general rule, but is unable to understand exceptions, which he could only overcome by learning the grammar rules.

8. “.....*he is complaining against [] media because he believes that [] media put fear into American people such as African bees, [] black male is [] symbol of*”

It’s a common grammar rule in English that “the” is used before a noun which has become definite because of being mentioned a second time. The above example illustrates that the noun



“media” is identified as it was already the topic of conversation. The failure to use “the” to mark an identified referent is obviously the result of poor grammar understanding.

“The” is also used with adjective plus noun which represents a class of persons, such as “black male” in the example, but “the” is omitted here. Descriptive of- phrase makes the noun definite and takes definite article “the” but it has been omitted by the L2 learner in the above example. All these omissions show the poor demonstration of English grammar rules.

9- *“The film dramatizes [] most serious problems related to guns in America....If we look closely [] next episode.....”*

The use of “the” may be determined by logical and grammatical factors. The uniqueness of a referent may be recognized not by general knowledge of the world but be logically imposed by meaning. Nouns remodified by superlatives, such as “most serious” and ordinals will thus be made logically unique. The L2 learner in the above example fails to use the definite article “the” before nouns modified by the superlative “most” and ordinal “next”. This shows his weak understanding of English grammar rules.

5. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to analyze the reasons of errors in the use of English definite article “the” by south Asian students. The data collected from them, and their interviews illustrate three factors involved in the definite article errors in their writings. When the errors were presented to them, they were able to correct some errors in the examples (1-4), and according to them it was due to spontaneity and carelessness. They were also able to describe some grammatical principles involved in the use of definite articles that they have violated. This tendency of omission of article in spontaneity is obviously the result of L1 transfer, as a native speaker of English would never omit the definite article “the” where it is required, even in the rapid speech or writing. It is the learners of English as a foreign language who fail to recognize where they must use the definite article.



Another interesting finding was that in examples (5-6), they tried to argue on the omission or use of the definite article “the”, rationalizing their errors comparing them with other parallel statements. This tendency is due to drawing their analogy from previous experiences of English, which results in errors. While their attention was drawn to the errors in examples (7-9), they confessed that they are unable to understand properly where the grammatical rules work out. Most of the learners always wonder when they should use “the” and when they should not.

In sum, the South Asian L2 learners of English commit errors (mostly omission) in the use of the English definite article “the” due to their MT interference, analogy from their previous English experience, and poor learning of English grammar. If they focus on these areas, errors could be largely minimized if they could not get native proficiency in TL.

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