

Acquisition of English Definite Article ‘The’ By Arab EFL Learners

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Abstract

The English has the definite article “the”, indefinite article “a/n” and a zero article “Ø”. This paper examines the acquisition of the English definite article ‘the’ by L1 Arabic speakers. The Arabic language makes use of a definite article *al* which corresponds to the English definite article superficially. However, the Arabic language has different ways of encoding both the notions of definiteness and indefiniteness. Using Huebner’s (1983) classification system, this paper aims to investigate the extent to which L1 Arabic speakers of L2 English of varying proficiency levels have acquired the definite article *the*. One hundred and fifty L1 Arabic respondents, drawn from three proficiency levels (advanced, upper-intermediate, and lower intermediate) were selected for the study. The respondents attempted a set of study tasks, a fill-in-article test task and a forced-choice elicitation task respectively. The data was analysed quantitatively. The results of the study showed that L1 Arabic respondents generally are non native-like in using the English definite article. Respondents showed low levels of accuracy with regard to the use of the definite article *the*. The findings also show that L1 transfer was involved in the acquisition of the English articles. In addition, the different assignments of the articles in both languages seemed to have contributed to the difficulty of the definite article use in English evident in the study. The study highlights the importance of investigating the acquisition of English definite article by L2 learners and provides some pedagogical perspectives for the L2 English instructors and highlights the importance of the context in which articles are used.

Keywords: second language acquisition (SLA), the English definite article *the*, L1 Arabic speakers

INTRODUCTION

The article system is a grammatical or functional category available in some languages. The English language has the articles *a/n* (the indefinite article) *the* (the definite article) and the zero \emptyset article. These English articles as grammatical words are most commonly

used in the English language and yet their use is in fact surprisingly complex and difficult, for both native and non-native speakers of the English language. The difficulty of article use in English arises for speakers of L1 languages that lack the use of articles or article-like morphemes (see e.g. Ekiert, 2004, p. 1). In addition, the English article system is especially affected by context (Ekiert, 2004).

The English language is described as [+ART] which means that among one of the properties it possesses is an article system which includes the definite article *the*, the indefinite article *a/n* and the zero article \emptyset . The Arabic language only shares the availability of the definite article with the English language. The Arabic language is also described as [+ART] because it uses the definite article *al* (see e.g. Schulz, 2004; Bataineh, 2005; Sarko, 2008).

As an L1 Arabic speaker and an EFL instructor, the present researcher has observed that most of his L1 Arabic students, including the high proficiency learners of L2 English, tend to have difficulty with the English articles. As a result, the present researcher has tested some students of different proficiency levels in different fields and expanded the observed phenomenon to investigate the use of articles by L1 Arabic speakers. In addition, it is hoped that the findings from this study will fill the gap in the literature and contribute to the knowledge in the field of SLA particularly in the Arab-speaking world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several studies on L2 acquisition of the English article system have been conducted over recent decades and those that are of specific interest to the focus of this research study are discussed in more detail below.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, p. 273) claim that the problem facing L2 learners in performing accurately when they use the English article system is due in part to whether or not there is correspondence between the lexical classification of the native and target languages regarding countable and uncountable nouns. For example, while *furniture* and *equipment* are uncountable in both Arabic and English, *chalk* and *information* are countable in Arabic but uncountable in English. This mismatch may add to the complexity of the task, because learners need to learn both of the article systems and other noun distinctions. Thus, it seems that the acquisition of the English article system by non-native speakers is a complex and problematic process. Studies (e.g. Bataineh, 2005; Wong & Chan, 2010) in the acquisition of the English article system by L2 speakers have reported that some of the difficulties faced by learners can be attributed to the fact that the English article system does not consist of one-to-one form and meaning relationships.

In the Arabic context, Bataineh (2005) conducted a study on the errors in the use of the English articles by Jordanian undergraduates (L1 Arabic) learning English as a foreign language (EFL). Her aim was to identify the kinds of errors respondents make in the use of the indefinite article *a/n*. She identified nine errors and compared them across three

levels. Subjects were given some topics (e.g. why do you study English?) and they were required to choose one topic and write about it. Bataineh (2005) counted the errors in the use of the indefinite article, then classified and analysed them. She stated that the analysis revealed that with the exception of one error, all errors are independent of the learners' first language. The deletion of the indefinite article is the only error that could be attributed to the influence of the Arabic language. Developmental factors and the use and learning strategies were found to be behind the majority of the learners' errors. Further, Bataineh states that articles are important functional structures and that they are used as communication devices. Thus, unlike content words, function words such as these are generally overlooked by learners when processing language primarily for meaning.

Crompton (2011) conducted a study on advanced L1 Arabic learners of English, in order to identify and classify the types of errors and to determine the role of transfer in the students' writings. The study analysed a large corpus of argumentative essays written by first and second year Arab students (aged 18-20) at the American University of Sharjah. The findings revealed that the most common error involved in his study was the misuse of the definite article for generic reference. Crompton stated that such an error is caused mainly by L1 transfer (an interlingual error), rather than an intralingual developmental error (within L2). His findings showed that the misuse of the definite article occurred most frequently in \emptyset contexts, especially in the use with (generic non count nouns) such as * *some of us consider the money as the force which controls our lives*. According to Crompton such an error could be generally due to L1 influence because the use of such a sentence would be impossible in Arabic without the use of the definite article. In line with Crompton, the study of Ridha (2012) examined English writing samples of 80 L2 Arab learners of English. The results showed that most of the students' errors were due to L1 transfer. Ridha stated that errors such as the omission or addition of the articles is used in a way that proves the direct transfer of L1 rules to L2 specifically in the cases where names of countries or cities were mentioned.

Al-haysony (2012) conducted a case study on 100 Saudi female undergraduates who studied English as a major. The study was on the types of errors made by the students when using the English articles and was based on the surface structure taxonomies (SST) that are used in classifying the errors. She collected data by asking her students to write life-related descriptive topics. Based on (SST) analysis, the results showed that the subjects make many omission errors and few substitutions errors, in terms of omission error type, the omission of 'a' is the most frequent error type, while the omission of 'an' is the least frequent one. The study concludes that the native language interference that is Arabic plays a significant role in the occurrence of these errors in addition to the strategies of instruction when teaching the English errors.

In addition, Mourssi's study (2014) was conducted on 74 Arab Learners of English. It investigated the cross linguistic influence of L1 in learning L2 linguistic items including the English article system and written texts produced by students from an Omani High School were analysed. The subjects were divided into two groups ranged from pre-

intermediate to intermediate. The results showed that the subjects had problems with the use of articles in English and attributed that to their L1 which has different rules of article use than that of English. Mourssi believed that learners apply some rules from L1 on their performance in L2. According to him, the evidence that the majority of errors produced by learners in his study were caused by the native language is that there are a lot of errors the article system, which are and hence, a translation in Arabic would be correct. Moreover, to ensure that the L1 has a strong role in acquiring L2, he argued that even in the students' writings, they preferred to translate their thought in English having in mind that it might be an accepted form and can be a target-like form.

In line with Mourssi, Sawalmeh (2013, p. 14) stated that most of the students' errors can be due to L1 transfer. The overt influences of Arabic on the students' writing of English indicate that language teachers need to take careful stock of the transfer and interference of the students' mother tongue in their spoken or written production. Therefore, one way to highlight the influences of the mother tongues on the students' learning of English is to collect these errors and ask the students to analyze them and if they could to correct them. Generally, the results indicated that the similarities between the article systems in Arabic and English do aid the acquisition of L2 articles and that the differences may impede acquisition, as they prevent the learner from noticing relevant properties of L2 input.

Another study was undertaken by Tahaine (2010). The findings of his study supported previous research studies which confirmed that the majority of errors made by the EFL Arab learners are because of the impact of the learners' first language, which was found to play an outstanding role. The results of his study showed that 58% were interlingual errors and 42% were intralingual errors.

It is worth mentioning that although the above studies attributed learners' errors mainly to L1 influence, they pointed out that there might be other factors, such as wrong learning strategies and inadequate teaching methods, which may account for students' acquisition problems with the English articles. For instance, Al-haysony (2012, p. 55) stated that further, results showed that Arabic interference was not the only source of errors, but that English was a source of many errors as well. Findings showed that 57% of the errors were interlingual ones, indicating the influence of the native language. Thus, interlingual errors are the most commonly occurring types. On the other hand, intralingual errors represented 42.56% of article errors. This result also indicates that L1 interference strongly influences the process of second language acquisition of the articles, having a negative effect on the learning. Al-haysony (2012, p. 64) attributed the difficulty in acquiring the English article system to both Arabic and English and considered them sources of errors for Arab learners of English.

Likewise, Al-maloul (2014) claimed that interference from the mother tongue is not the only source of errors adult L2 learners make. Several errors made by L2 learners can be explained due to interference from the target language. In addition to these two major sources of errors, other factors such as teaching and testing techniques should also be evaluated as the causes of errors in L2 learning. Generally, it can be noticed that the

above mentioned studies were in favour of CAH. They stated that the similarities between English and Arabic article systems may facilitate acquiring the rules and differences between the two languages may confuse the learners and cause errors.

Based on the aim and objectives of the study, the following research questions are formulated for the study:

1. What is the accuracy order of the L1 Arabic respondents' in relation to their proficiency levels?
2. To what extent have L1 Arabic speakers of various proficiency levels have acquired the appropriate use of the definite article *the* in English?

METHOD

Participants

The main group of respondents was L1 Arabic speakers of two different education levels (undergraduate and postgraduate) and they were from different universities. Respondents were one hundred and ninety (190) L1 Arabic speakers. All of them shared similar knowledge of the standard Arabic language although they also spoke different regional varieties and dialects of the Arabic language. No respondents were enrolled on any English language programme. However, the English language is the medium of instruction for all of the respondents and they also used the English language in other domains, for example, in their social interaction.

Instrument

The first instrument of the study is elicited information on respondents' personal details, such as age, country of origin, education level, and programme of study, area of study, English proficiency, and institute. The study used two instruments for deciding the respondents' proficiency level. They were the Oxford Grammar Placement Test (OPT) (Allan 1992) and a Vocabulary Test (VT) designed by Laufer and Nation (1999). The proficiency test which includes the OPT and the VT was used to allocate respondents to the appropriate group according to their levels of proficiency in the English language. The main task of the study is adapted from Ekiert, (2004) and this was supported by the forced-choice elicitation task adapted from Ko, Wexler, and Ionin, (2004).

Procedure

To facilitate the data collection process, the researcher requested for an official letter from the *Faculty of Modern Language and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia* in order to obtain permission to collect data from students based in different faculties, in UPM and also the other selected universities. Respondents were gathered in classes and sometimes in laboratories. The researcher administered the instruments on all occasions. Respondents were given an adequate time in which to complete the different tasks. However, most of them took about 45 minutes to complete the task.

The proficiency test that includes the OPT and the VT tasks, was administered first for the purpose of selecting the target respondents. Respondents were placed into three different groups of proficiency on the basis of their combined scores in the OPT and VT.

The second step was the distribution of the study tasks to the eligible respondents. The fill-in-article test adapted from (Ekiert, 2004) and the forced-choice elicitation task adapted from Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004) were used as the study tasks. The researcher collected the responses from respondents immediately after they had completed them and used the data for the purpose of the study.

Data Analysis

The data collected via the study tasks were analysed and the results were used to address the research questions. Frequency counts and percentages were calculated and the results were presented in tables and charts to facilitate general and specific reading. The SOC (Supplied in Obligatory Contexts) measure devised by Brown (1973, in Lu, 2001), TLU (Target Like Use) measure devised by Pica (1983), and UOC (Used in Obligatory Context) is used to measure the use of article "the" and it was devised by Master (1987) as a complementary measure to observe the learner's overuse or underuse of an article. All of the three measures were used in this study to obtain general and specific findings from the fill-in-article test. The analysis of the data was done with regard to the five semantic uses of English articles and the three groups of different proficiency levels. The data were also summed up to shed light on the use of English articles by the L1 Arabic speakers by means of SOC, TLU and UOC.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are discussed in order to answer the two research questions. The first research question addressed, (What is the accuracy order of the L1 Arabic respondents' in relation to their proficiency levels?) In order to answer this question, the results obtained via the OPT and the VT, were used to select the target respondents. Both sets of marks were added up together and a total percentage score was calculated. Altogether 190 respondents sat for the proficiency test and respondents who scored 80% and above were placed in the advanced level group, respondents who scored from 70 to 79% were placed in the upper-intermediate group and respondents who scored from 65 to 69% were placed in the lower-intermediate group. Respondents who scored less than 65% were considered not to have qualified for the study sample and they were not considered for this study (they were 40 respondents).

Respondents were grouped into three different levels of proficiency (advanced, upper-intermediate and lower-intermediate) with the same numbers; fifty (50) respondents in each level. Table 1 presents information on the proficiency levels of L1 Arabic speakers. The mean scores of the respondents for the *Oxford Placement Test* (OPT) and *Vocabulary Test* (VT) are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of L1 Arabic Speakers and their Proficiency Levels

Group	Mean Score (%)	Distribution	Frequency
Advanced	88.95	80-100	50
Upper-intermediate	74.30	70-79	50
Lower-intermediate	67.15	65-69	50
		Total	150

Therefore, not all the respondents who sat for the proficiency test (OPT and VT) qualified for the study task. Respondents who were allocated to the three groups of proficiency levels proceeded to take the study task (a fill-in-article test) and the supportive task (a forced-choice elicitation).

The second research question (To what extent have L1 Arabic speakers of various proficiency levels acquired the appropriate use of the definite article *the*?) was formulated to discuss the use of the English definite article *the*. The results showed that L1 Arabic respondents were less accurate in using the definite article *the* in referential definite Type 2 [+SR, +HK] context and it is found the third most difficult for the three L1 Arabic groups. Table 2 displays Tukey's Post Hoc Test for Type 2.

Table 2. Tukey's Post Hoc Test for Type 2 [+SR +HK] Items by L1 Arabic

Type 2	Groups Comparison	Mean Differences (1- J)	Std. error	Sig.
	Advanced vs. Upper-intermediate	6.40000	3.51423	.166
	Advanced vs. Lower-intermediate	21.80000	3.51423	.000*
	Upper-intermediate vs. Lower-intermediate	15.40000	3.51423	.000*

* The mean difference is significant at $p \leq 0.05$ level

In addition, the results indicated that L1 Arabic respondents were less accurate in using the definite article *the* in referential definite Type 5 [idioms and other conventional uses]. Type 5 items [idioms and other conventional uses] is the fourth most difficult for advanced and upper-intermediate L1 Arabic groups and it is the most difficult for the lower-intermediate group in their acquisition of the English articles. Table 3 presents L1 Arabic responses to Type 5 items.

Table 3. L1 Arabic Responses to Type 5 Items

Group	Correct Responses (%)	Incorrect Responses (%)
Advanced	59.86%	40.14%
Upper-intermediate	47.60%	52.40%
Lower-intermediate	29.20%	70.80%

L1 Arabic respondents were found to face difficulties in the use of the definite article *the*, that they failed to obtain 50% of correct responses (SOC) for the items with the definite article *the* in the main study task. They only registered 49.11% in the SOC which indicated that they had some difficulty with the use of the definite article in the main study task. Even the advanced group of L1 Arabic respondents were found to be less

accurate in using the definite article *the*. Even the advanced respondents were found to be less accurate in using the definite article.

The TLU for L1 Arabic respondents was 37.17% which also reflected less accuracy level in their use of the definite article as indicated by the percentage they had registered. The TLU result directs the focus to the total use of an item compared to the actual correct use. The UOC for the L1 Arabic respondents was 83.66% with regard to the definite article, *the*, which indicated that they underused the definite article "*the*". The result shows further evidence of the inaccuracy found in the responses of the L1 Arabic respondents. Among other reasons, fossilization, and late exposure to the English language, may be behind the inaccuracy registered by respondents. Table 4 displays the use of definite article *the* by L1 Arabic respondents.

Table 4. Use of the Definite Article *the* by L1 Arabic Respondents

Group	SOC	TLU	UOC
Advanced	62.09%	49.70%	84.54%
Upper-intermediate	49.36%	38.18%	78.63%
Lower- intermediate	35.90%	23.63%	87.81%
Average	49.11%	37.17%	83.66%

The elicited choice task also indicated that the L1 Arabic respondents were found to be less accurate in using the definite article *the*. They registered 45.20%, a lower figure when compared to the result obtained from the main study task. Thus this result lends support to the results obtained from the fill-in-article test.

Although both English and Arabic lexicalise definiteness (see e.g. Sarko, 2008), that is there is the availability of the overt morphemes of *the* and *al* respectively, the two languages differ in the way articles are assigned. This difference seemed to have resulted in the difficulty faced by the L1 Arabic learners in their acquisition of the English definite article "*the*".

CONCLUSION

This study is an applied linguistic one, thus the findings can have pedagogical implications for the ESL classroom. The findings of this study can direct L2 English learners to the importance of the use of English article system. L2 English learners have to bear in mind that an adequate use of the English article is essential to determine their proficiency in the English language in general, particularly since these morphemes occur very frequently in the language and they may not have equivalents in the learners' first languages. This is a descriptive study that aims to verify the acquisition of the English article "*the*" by L1 Arabic speakers and it recommended that further studies could focus on the acquisition of English article system by native speakers of the English language compared to child L2 English learner group(s). It is also recommended that data could be obtained through other techniques, for example, longitudinal studies.

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