The analysis of errors in the use of articles by the Bengali learners of English

Md. Absar Uddin

Department of English Language & Literature
International Islamic University Chittagong (IIUC), Bangladesh

Abstract

The present study investigates the kinds of errors committed by the secondary school students of class ten of Hashimpur M.A.K.U High School in Chattogram of Bangladesh. The main goal of the study is to improve the knowledge of using articles correctly through analyzing the errors. Data were gathered from the written essays of 52 students (boys and girls) and the test to fill in the blanks they were asked to fill with appropriate articles. Seven types of errors were identified and counted in frequency. They are-1. errors of substitution of *an* for *a*, 2. errors of substitution of *a* for *an*, 3. errors of omission of the definite article, 4. errors of using indefinite article with unmarked plurals, 5. errors of using indefinite article with adjectives, 6. errors of using definite article with non-count nouns, and 7. errors of using indefinite article with non-count nouns. The study revealed that most of the errors committed by the students were rooted in strategies like simplification, overgeneralization, or a few that could be traced back to the influence of the native language, Bangla. The findings can potentially bring necessary changes in teaching strategies and materials.

Keywords   Error analysis, Bengali, Bangla, A, An, The, English language, Bangladesh

Paper type   Research paper

Introduction

Articles are the words that are used to express the definiteness of a reference. Almost all the languages of the world have the systems of using articles in sentences or utterances. Articles are the most often used words in the English language. The word "the" is the most frequently used word in English, whereas the word "a" is the fifth most often used word according to the cobuild frequency count (Sinclair, 1997). Brown (1973) made a study regarding the acquisition of fourteen morphemes and it is found that the articles "a" and "the" take the position nine and ten respectively. To Hewson (1972), "the definite and the indefinite article are among the ten most frequent words in English discourse." Errors in using the correct articles generally do not hamper communication. Though the accuracy required for academic writing is higher, the proper use of articles demonstrates comprehension of the language as well as

appropriateness of thought and expression. According to Master (1997), "imperfect control [of the use of articles] may... suggest imperfect knowledge." Though almost all languages have article systems, their position, function, and usage in sentences differ from language to language. For instance, only "the" is used before all forms of references in English to make a reference specific.

In contrast, in Bangla, to make a reference specific based on the nature of the references, a definite article should be used out of several definite articles such as *ta, ti, khana, khani, gulu, guli* etc. after the references. This is one example of many differences. There are also many other differences regarding many aspects. So, it is not an easy task to gain mastery over using relevant articles, especially for those whose first language's article system is different from the English language. Butler (2002) and Master (2002) state that the acquisition of the system of articles in English is significant for L2 learners since the articles are one of the most complicated structural components for L2 learners.

Literature review

Contrastive analysis (CA) (Nahampun, Saragi, & Saputra, 2022; Pasaribu, Tampubolon, Sidauruk, & Napitupulu, 2022; Sulaiman, Syahri, & Saputri, 2022) was used widely to predict error in the 1960s which came into being with the publication of Linguistics across Cultures (Roca & Pons, 1957) by Robert Lado. The behaviourist view of language acquisition is the basis of CA which claims that the differences between the first and second languages pose difficulties in acquiring the target language, and errors result from these difficulties. However, in the 1970s, CA began losing its appeal because it has been shown from empirical research that many errors predicted by CA do not occur at all (Dulay & Burt, 1974), CA cannot predict many errors which occur later (Hyltenstam, 1977) and many errors do not occur because of the crosslinguistic influence. So, Error Analysis (EA) replaced the classical CA theory being one of the most influential theories in second or foreign language learning. Pit Corder (1967) first proposed EA. The Error Analysis aims to analyse the errors committed by the learners to get a good idea about the language acquisition process. Corder in his article "The significance of Learner Errors" (1967: 17) by answering the question of whether L1 and L2 acquisition processes are the same or not, gives Error Analysis a new extent. Corder (1981) points out, "the assumption is that the learners' grammatical and appropriate utterances are evidence that he is at least in part using the categories and systems of the target language correctly and appropriately". Crystal (2015) mentions that "In language teaching and learning, error analysis is a technique for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the unacceptable forms produced by someone learning a foreign language, using

any of the principles and procedures provided by linguistics". According to Swasti (2014) error analysis is "an approach that contains compiling a corpus of learners' deviations from the target language to understand the second language acquisition". To Ellis and Barhkuizen, the analysis of error is "de facto of the errors that learners make in their speech and writing" (Meunier, 2006).

The improper use of articles has been the subject of numerous studies. For instance, Willcott (1978) conducted a research to identify the faults in writing made by Arab EFL students (Alanazi, 2017). The findings revealed that their usage of definiteness in syntax was one of their most common faults.

Radwan's (1988) investigation of the errors in the use of grammatical and lexical types showed that most of the errors occurred in the use of proper article. The other errors that occurred in the fields were the errors of relative – clause, number, and the word class. Ansarin conducted a study on the non-generic use of the article 'the' of Persian learners of English with various proficiency levels (Ansarin, 1383, 2003). The findings showed that the situational and structural use of 'the' remarkably varied according to their proficiency levels. Ekiert's (2004) investigation of the impacts of various learning situations (EFL and ESL) on the acquisition of articles found that the highest rate of excessive use of the definite article 'the' in intermediate-ability participants.

Error Analysis shows that not all errors occur because of the first language but because of some strategies such as over generalisation and simplification applied by the learners. Through analysing the errors committed by the learners, the language instructors can get an idea about the nature of the language. Thus, they can develop practical syllabuses and materials for learners and also for them. Corder (1975) remarks that the result of error analysis "can help teachers to adapt themselves to the learner's needs rather than impose upon him their (the teachers') preconceptions of how he ought to learn and when he ought to learn." Lightbown and Spada (2013) mention, "the errors reveal the patterns of learners' developing interlanguage systems - showing where they have overgeneralised an L1 rule to the L2". The term "interlanguage" was first used by Selinker (1972) to mean "a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target languages". So, error analysis is chosen to deal with the problem faced by the learners. As the error is systematic, it can provide enough information about the progress of second language learners. The information obtained from the errors committed by the learners would help formulate necessary remedial lessons and organise teaching items (Ellis, 2015).

The article system of English language is "one of the most difficult grammatical items for the non- native English speakers to learn" (Yamada &

Matsuura, 1982, p.50). So, there might be a high possibility of committing errors in the proper use of articles by the Bengali learners of English since English is a non- native language for the Bangali.

Method and procedure: The subjects of the study were all secondary school students of class ten of Hashimpur M.A.K.U High School under the national curriculum of Bangladesh. They were all aged from 15 to 16. They have all been learning English as a foreign language since when they were admitted to primary school and they all come from the same linguistic and social background and education system. A total of 52 students, 27 boys and 25 girls, participated in the study. In two phases, they were tested; 1) filling in the blanks with appropriate articles and 2) essay writing. The participants were provided with a handout with some passages and sentences in which there were some gaps. The students were asked to fill the gaps with the right articles (a, an or the). The students were asked to write an organized essay on one of the four provided topics in 1000 to 1200 words. The topics were:

Your Future Plan
Your School Campus
Your Favourite Poet and
Your Daily Life.

In order to obtain data, there was a one-hour sitting with the participants for two days. After the collection of data, the researcher counted the errors and classified them into seven groups. The frequency of each type of error and their percentages were recorded. A comparison was made between the errors committed by boys and girls.

The result and discussion

This section presents the errors made by the secondary school students of Hashimpur M.A.K.U High School, Chattogram, Bangladesh. The errors were examined and categorized into seven groups based on the nature of errors with an explanation of possible primary sources of errors.

Table I
Frequency of errors and their percentage mean

Types of errors	boys	girls	total	Percentage mean
Substitution of an for a	37	33	70	21.8%
Substitution of a for an	31	32	63	19.6%
Omission of definite article	28	30	58	18.1%
Using indefinite article with unmarked plurals	23	21	44	13.7%
Using indefinite article with adjectives	18	17	35	10.9%
Using definite article with non-count nouns	15	13	28	8.7%
Using indefinite article with non-count nouns	13	10	23	7.2%
Total	165	156	321	100%

Table I shows that of the 321 errors made by the participants, the errors of substituting *an* for *a* take the highest position, with a percentage mean of 21.8% (70 errors); these are followed by the errors of substituting *a* for *an*, with a percentage mean of 19.6% (63 errors), the errors of omitting the definite article, with a percentage mean of 18.1% (58 errors), and the errors of substituting an indefinite article for an unmarked plural, with a percentage mean of 13.7% (44 errors). The study shows that the errors of using indefinite articles with adjectives, the errors of using definite articles with non-count nouns and the errors of using indefinite articles with non-count nouns occur less frequently than the first four types with a percentage mean of 10.9%(35 errors), 8.7% (28 errors) and 7.2% (23 errors) respectively. Regarding gender, boys committed a total of 165 errors, whereas girls committed a total of 156 errors. This difference has no significance regarding gender variation.

1. Errors of substitution of *an* for *a*
This category of error occurred most frequently in the study. This error may be attributed to the source called overgeneralization. Here, learners may think that *an* always occurs before the references beginning with a vowel alphabet, and students are probably instructed to do so by the teachers. This idea might lead them to create sentences in which they make the wrong use of article *an* as shown in the examples below:

*I want to be **an** university teacher.*
*This is **an** unique profession*

2. Errors of substitution of *a* for *an*
This is also one of the most frequently occurred errors in the study. This error may also be attributed to the source of overgeneralization since students may think that *a* always is placed before the references starting with a consonant alphabet. For this reason, they might have produced the sentences seen in the examples below:

*This is **a** honourable profession*
*Before taking breakfast, I take exercise every morning for **a** hour or*
*I want to be **a** MBBS doctor etc.*

3. Errors of omission of the definite article
A good number of errors were committed by the students under this category. This type of error might take place because of the interference of the mother tongue and incomplete knowledge of the grammatical rules of the target language. It is a common tendency of the learners to use equivalent native language structures in the target language, and this

tendency led them to produce erroneous sentences regarding the use of appropriate articles, as shown in the following examples:

He has a good friendship with president of U.S.A.
He was born in a village near Sangu river.
Later, he became prime minister of Bangladesh.
Emperor Shajahan built Tajmahal to immortalize his love for his wife.

It is not grammatical in Bangla to use a definite article before any unique reference, but it is grammatical in English to use a definite article before the above mentioned situation.

4. Errors of using indefinite articles with unmarked plurals
Most of the students made fewer errors in the use of the indefinite article with marked plural, but they made many errors in the use of an indefinite article with unmarked plurals, as shown in the following examples:

*We know that **a** children will take the responsibility of a nation in future.*
*It is possible for **a** people to reach his goal if he works hard.*

Overuse of articles to avoid errors may be the source of this type of error.

5. Errors of using indefinite articles with adjectives
A good number of students used indefinite articles with adjectives. This error may be attributed to the root called overgeneralization. When adjectives are used in a noun phrase (with a singular noun), it is a rule in English to use an indefinite article with the phrase (e.g. **a** poor man, **a** generous man etc.). Students might extend this rule and use indefinite articles where it is not required, as shown in the examples below:

*He is **a** rich but he lives like **a** poor.*
*He is really **a** generous and **a** generous is always respected by all.*
*The campus of our school is **a** nice.*

6. Errors of using definite article with non-count nouns
Many students made errors in using articles with non-count nouns, as shown in the following sentences:

*In this world, most of the people run after **the** gold, money and wealth.*
*Only **the** money cannot bring happiness.*
*We can take **the** fresh air in the morning.*

Students might take some non-count nouns as unique reference; hence they use 'the' before those non-count nouns, such as *money* and *gold*. This assumption might lead them to use articles before non-count nouns.

7. Errors of using indefinite articles with non-count nouns
A few errors occurred under this category. This category of error may be attributed to the source of L1 interference. Some nouns such as *information*, *furniture* etc. in English are not countable, but in Bangla, they are countable. This interference might lead them to produce sentences like

*I got **an** information from the newspaper about it.*
*I bought **a** furniture for my home.*

Conclusion and recommendation
The findings of the study show that most of the errors committed by the learners result from many sources, such as overgeneralization, simplification, and the impact of their first language. Implications are derived from the findings of the study. Teaching strategies have a great role in reducing the degree of errors committed by the learners. Articles are frequently used items in sentences or utterances, so the importance of learning the appropriate usage of articles in English sentences cannot be neglected. Based on the findings, effective teaching strategies and techniques should be devised to help the learners to learn the use of articles in sentences. The language instructors should make the learners do drills and exercises repeatedly on the appropriate use of articles in sentences which are developed based on the nature of errors the students committed. A comparison should be made regarding the usage of articles between Bangla and English, focusing on the differences so that learners can be aware of the areas where they can make possible errors. Students should be taught how to use articles not only in the individual sentence level but also in different contexts, like conversations and essays and paragraphs. Students should be given immediate feedback by the instructors when they make an error in using relevant articles in conversation or writing. This may help the learners to reduce the errors regarding the proper use of articles in the correct position in sentences. Further studies in this area help to create further findings which will help bring further changes in teaching strategies.

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Corresponding author
Md. Absar Uddin can be contacted at: absaruddin09@gmail.com

Appendix

Part - A

Fill in the blank with the appropriate article, *a, an,* or *the*

(1) Emperor Shajahan built (a)----Tajmahal to immortalize his love for his wife. (b)----Taj Mahal is known as (c)---- symbol of love. The full name is Mumtaz Mahal was (d)--- name of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan's wife's name. He was (e)---- widely known and powerful emperor in his time. This amazing building was built in (f)----- 17th century. (g)--- architectural design and building structure are amazing.It still surprised the modern-day architects. This is (h)--- example of Islamic Architect in the century. A huge amount of travelers come here every year. It is one of i)--- seven wonders in the world. Lovers find their love fulfilled while they go there to see ()--- symbol of love.

(2) In this world, most of the people run after (a)--- gold, money and wealth. Only **(b)---** money cannot bring happiness. . It is (c)--- cliché, but it is (d)--- true also. (e)--- Money help you in buying things which help initially attracting people towards you, even (f)--- money can also buy lust. But (g)--- money is not able to buy (h)--- respect that is mutual and admiration which accompanies true love. (h)---Money also does not buy (i)--- experience that one have with someone who is special. (j)---Money is not able to purchase talent, good manners as well as etiquettes also.

(3) There's (a)--- famous proverb that says, "Early to bed and early to rise, makes (b)--- man healthy, wealthy and wise". It is true in all (c)--- respects because if we start waking up early, most of our diseases go away as we can take **(d)---** fresh air in the morning and the body feels more fresh and energetic. One should get up early to utilize (e)--- time in the right way and do things in (f)--- systematic order. (g)--- morning weather is very pleasant and good for yoga and exercising. (h)--- atmosphere in the morning has proved to be very effective for (i)---- young learners. There are many children who wake up early in the morning to study. It is indeed (j)---- great habit. Therefore, everyone should try to wake up early and stay healthy.

(4) A true friend is (a)…..asset. He stands by his (b)……..friend in time of danger. He is not (c)-------greedy man. He always wishes for (d)…….welfare of his friend. But it is (e)--------matter of (f)--------fact that (g)-------ideal friend is very rare today. (h)------selfish man cannot be (i)-------true friend. He thinks of his own (j)-------interest.

(5) Students are (a)------greatest force of (b)-----nation. (c)----ideal student is (d)----asset to any country. He has some qualities that can be followed. He gets up early in (e)----morning. He never wastes his time in vain. He always makes (f)—brilliant result in the examinations .He is a boy of (g)---good manners and character. He is truthful, honest, sincere and dutiful. He respects his parents, teachers and other superiors in (h)---polite way. He is helpful to his fellow students. He is never rude to anybody. He is (i)----student of high thinking and plain living. Infact, he is (j)---example for others to follow.

Part -B

Fill in the blank with the appropriate article, *a, an*, or *the*
1) I want _____ apple from that basket.
2) I bought ---furniture for my home.
3) He is --- one-legged man.
4) Miss Jinia speaks ---- Chinese.
5) I borrowed --- pencil from your pile of pencils and pens.
6) He was born in a village near--- Sangu river.
7) Akib likes to play ---volleyball.
8) I bought --- umbrella to go out in the rain.
9) My daughter is learning to play --- violin at her school.
10) Please give me --- cake that is on the counter.
11) He is --- rich but he lives like --- poor.
12) He is really---generous and --- generous is always respected by all.
13) I lived on ---CDA Avenue when I first came to Chittagong.
14) Albany is the capital of --- New York State.
15) ---apple a day keeps the doctor away.
16) ---ink in my pen is red.
17) This is ---X-ray machine.
18) Our neighbors have --- cat and ---dog.
19) He is---tallest man in the city.
20) I saw --- man before your house. Do you know---man?
21) I read --- Daily Purbokone regularly.
22) We should help ---- helpless.
23) Nazrul is called---rebel poet of Bangla.
24) We went to --- mosque to offer salah.
25) I got --- information from the newspaper about it.
26) We visited ---Boga lake last week.
27) Later, he became--- prime minister of Bangladesh.
28) He is ----first boy in the class.
29) ---man wearing black shirt is my brother.
30) He wrote ---eulogy for the Queen Mother