AN INVESTIGATION OF THE USE OF DEFINITE OR INDEFINITE ARTICLES IN ENGLISH BY MALE AND FEMALE EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study aimed to compare English article use by male and female EFL learners. The participants of the study were composed of 32 EFL learners (16 male and 16 female EFL learners). The age of the learners was between 14-16 years old. The participants of the study were chosen randomly. The school also was chosen via convenience sampling method because it was quite close to the work place of the researcher. The tests (pre-test and post-test) were administered to both groups (male and female EFL learners) in two public schools (Al Mafraq the first Basic School for Boys and Al Fdain School for girls) in Al Mafraq/Jordan. The results of the study indicated that the female EFL learners performed better than the male EFL learners in English article use although the pretest of both groups (male and female EFL learners) has the same result in English article use (a, an, the, and no article).

Keywords: English articles; EFL learners; use of articles; Jordanian students

1. Introduction

A plethora of research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in the period between the 60s and the 70s was based on the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH). According to CAH, the learning process should focus on areas of linguistic differences between L1 and L2. Such

linguistic contrasts, if not properly dealt with through instruction, will cause difficulties for L2 learners, which may result in discourse errors presumably due to L1 interference (interlingual errors). According to Fries (1945) and Lado (1957), learning should cater for acquiring those L2 items which are different from L1. Brown perceives L1 interference as a major stumbling block. He states that "The principal barrier to Second Language Acquisition is the interference of the first language system with the second language system" (1980, p.148).

The English article system is claimed to be one of the most difficult structural elements for second-language (L2) learners of English due to its high complexity and its frequency of use. L2 learners have consistent difficulty in its acquisition and sometimes never reach native-like levels of proficiency. Master (2002: pp. 331–332) claims that this difficulty stems from three principle facts about the article system: (i) articles (a, an, the and Ø – the null article-) are among the most frequently occurring function words in English (Sinclair, 1991) and this makes rule application difficult in extended discourse; (ii) function words are normally unstressed and, thus, difficult to be discerned by learners of the language, and (iii) the article system stacks multiple functions (countability, number and definiteness – cf. Master 1997: p. 220) onto a single morpheme, which results in a considerable burden for the learner.

2. Literature review

2.1. Definite article "the"

The English definite article the is the most frequent word in English. The sheer frequency of its occurrence is well over 7% of all words (Leech et al. 2001). Hawkins (1991) summarizes the overall function of the definite article as: 150 María Belén Díez-Bedmar and Szilvia Papp The conventionally implicates that there is some subset of entities, {P}, in the universe of discourse which is usually manifest to S[peaker] & H[earer] on-line and within which definite referents exist and are unique. (Hawkins 1991: 414)

The "subset of entities in the universe of discourse" that Hawkins' definition refers to is pragmatically delimited by the context of utterance, i.e. the mutual knowledge or shared beliefs between participants (see Hawkins 1991: 408): the immediate situation set (elements of the physical context) and the larger situation of utterance (based on participants' general background knowledge relative to the physical location of the speakers); the previous discourse set; x general knowledge sets; and a line of associative sets stemming from these.

Hawkins' notion of "mutual on-line manifestation" means that the reference of the NP introduced by the is clear to the hearer as well as the speaker, and it is familiar and/or identifiable by both. In other words, the use of the definite article directs the hearer to the referent of the NP by signaling that s/he is in a position to identify it. It invites the hearer to exploit clues in the linguistic and extra linguistic context to establish the identity of the

referent, which they can see or have heard about or whose existence they can infer from something else they have heard, i.e. possible or probable rather than known existence (cf. Trenkiü 2002a). Another important notion in Hawkins' definition is that of "uniqueness": the definite article may signal that there is just one entity satisfying the description used, relative to a particular context. However, it has been pointed out that definiteness with plurals and mass nouns involves not uniqueness but inclusiveness or even identifiability (Lyons 1999: 278).

2.2. Indefinite article" a/an"

According to Brown (1986: 96, cited in Trenkiü 2002a), a speaker uses the indefinite article when he "believes that his hearer doesn't share or wonders whether his hearer shares his information".4 Trenkiü (2002b) points out that if we take the "sharing of information" as having a mutually manifest set (i.e. a {P}-set in Hawkins' definition), in which the referent would exist and be unique, then we can paraphrase the definition as follows: the speaker uses an indefinite article a/an/some "when he believes that his hearer does not have a P-set in which the referent would exist and be unique, or if the speaker wonders if his hearer would have a P-set in which the referent would exist and be unique" (Trenkiü 2002a: 65).

Downing & Locke (2002: 429-430) point out that with singular count nouns the article a can refer to both specific and non-specific entities, "the different interpretations being deduced from the different predications", as can be seen in their examples I've bought a new car compared with I need a new car.

2.3. Zero/null article "Ø" or bare NPs

Palmer (1939) distinguishes two types of null article preceding a noun head:5 1) the zero article for mass/non-count and plural nouns (such as milk and eggs); 2) the null article with bare count nouns and proper names (lunch, London).6 According to Chesterman (1991), an NP marked by the zero or null article is grammatically not delimited, actualised or distinguished, but is just an idea which potentially has scope over the whole class of entities represented by it.7 Downing & Locke (2002: 433) define generic nominal groups [NGs] in the following way: "Generic NGs refer to entities as representatives of their whole class, in abstract statements about their typical characteristics or habitual activities".

This paper examines one aspect of article acquisition, namely, the various article uses of the definite article in English. In addition to replicating the prior study, the current one seeks to (i) determine whether the difficulty hierarchy put forward by male and female can be validated with a different sample of participants whose L1, Arabic, has articles, and in a different setting (English as a foreign language, EFL) and (ii) overcome problems with the proficiency measures they used. Generally, it is accepted that the uses of the definite article

fall into two major categories: male and female. As a consequence, t**he purpose of the study was** to compare English article use between males and females in the publ**ic schools in Al Mafraq/Jordan. The** study attempted to answer the following two research questions:

1.Are there any significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the students' mean scores in the pretest of using English articles due to gender (males and females)?

3. Are there any significant differences at ($\alpha \leq 0.05$) between the students' mean scores in the post test of using English articles due to gender (males and females)?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total of 32 participants contributed to this research, 16 male and 16 female teenage EFL learners. The average age in both groups was 16. A language background survey was also conducted to ensure that participants were suitable informants. All participants were elementary students of public schools.

3.2. Instruments of the Study

The researcher designed a test in order to achieve the aim of the study, that is, to compare the use of English articles between males and females from public schools in Al Mafraq/Jordan.

3.3. Procedure

The study participants sat for a 30- minute written test administered by their instructors. The test consisted of 16 multiple-choice questions on the use of English articles, /a/, /an/, /the/, and /no article/.

3.4. Reliability and validity

One of the methods that can be used to find out test reliability is the test- retest technique to establish the reliability of the test. The test was given to a pilot group of 15 students who were not included in the participants of study; it was given within two-week period between the test and re-test. Scores were calculated after testing and retesting. The reliability coefficient of the test was calculated; it was found to be 0.88 which is statistically acceptable. Students' English article use was assessed by two different raters (teachers of the English language). The inter-rater reliability between them was 0.88, which is statistically acceptable for the study. The validity of the study instrument was determined by experts including experienced English language professors and instructors. However, they recommended editing some errors.

3.5. Analysis of the data

The statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) software was used to analyze data in order to answer and accomplish the questions and objectives of the study. Mean scores and standard deviation were conducted. T-test along with One-Way Annova were used.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Research Question 1: Are there any significant differences at (a ≤ 0.05) between the students' mean scores in the pretest of using English articles due to Gender (males and females)?

To find out whether there are statistical significant differences (α=0.05) between the means scores of English article pretest due to Gender, t-test analysis was conducted and the results are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1.t-test results of using English articles in the pretest of the mean scores of the pretest of using English articles according to Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
PRE	Male	16	9.31	4.270	-.325	30	.747
	Female	16	9.75	3.276			

The table shows there are no statistically significant differences at (α= 0.05) in means scores of English article use in the pretest according to Gender.

4.2. Research Question 2: Are there any significant differences at (a ≤ 0.05) between the students' mean scores in the post test of using English article due to Gender (males and females)?

To find out whether there are statistical significant differences (α=0.05) between the students' mean scores in the post test of using English articles due to Gender, t-test analysis was conducted and the results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. t-test results of the mean scores of the post-test of using English articles according to Gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
POST	Male	16	11.94	2.792	-2.180	30	.037
	Female	16	13.75	1.807			

The table shows there are statistically significant differences at (α= 0.05) in means scores of English article use posttest due to Gender in favor females.

5. Conclusions

The results of the study, aiming to compare of using English articles (a, an, the, no article) by male and female EFL leaners, have illustrated that female learners of English are more successful in the use of articles in English (a, an, the, and no article) comparing to the male learners in Jordan.

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