CHAPTER VII

ANALYSIS OF ARTICLE ERRORS

7.0. Introduction

Errors in the use of Articles may be known as local errors which do not hinder communication. They are dismissed as ‘little words’ and they receive relatively ‘little’ attention. However, the use of articles poses a major problem to the ESL learners. In the written productions, they are used frequently. An incorrect or improper use of even though it may affect articles is not a mark of Standard English, communication negatively (e.g. a few, few). Further, L2 writers should take meticulous care of articles if they aim at giving professional touch to their written productions. One of the important functions of the articles is that they establish cohesion in an essay. The definite article ‘the’ generally does that function. For example, in the following sentence, ‘I saw a beautiful girl in the party, and the girl was blind’ the second noun ‘the girl’ refers to the first noun phrase ‘a beautiful girl’. The definite article ‘the’ connects identity of reference with something that is mentioned before. Thus, the function of ‘the’ article in building cohesion implies their seminal role in maintaining meaningful communication. So, the ESL learners cannot afford to ignore the competent use of English articles. Moreover, researchers have generally agreed that the use of articles is an area of grammar that shows “considerable prominence in any error analysis” (Thu, 2005: 7).
COBUILD (Collins Birmingham University International Language Database) indicates that the definite article ‘the’ is the most common word in English and that ‘a’ is the fifth most common. Sinclair (7) observes that these two articles make up 8.5% of all text and any linguistic constraints in the use of articles will have an adverse bearing on the language productions of the learners.

7. 1. Difficulties in Learning Articles

The English article system is complex, problematic, and it poses challenges to the second language learners whose L₁s do not have articles. The Tamil language which is the L₁ of most of the subjects selected for the present investigation has no such article system. During a personal interview with the subjects, even some of the advanced learners have expressed their problems of mismanagement of the article system. It is observed from the corpus that misuse or nonuse of articles is one of the most frequent errors in the students’ writing. Studies have indicated that English articles are difficult to learn (Bataineh, 2005: 56). Teachers continue to ignore the systematic teaching of the article in favor of other areas of concern in grammar which they assume to be communicatively more important.

As mentioned earlier, the English article system is one of the most complex structural elements for ESL\EFL learners. Researchers have done extensive studies on this difficulty. Master (cited in Bataineh, 2005: 57) attributes this difficulty to three peculiar aspects about the English article system: 1) Articles are among the most frequent function words in English, rendering constant rule application difficult in the
course of writing; 2) Generally, function words are unstressed and so the non-native learners find it difficult to distinguish; 3) As the article system stacks multiple functions on to a single morpheme, it constitutes a significant burden for the ESL learners who normally look for ‘a one-to-one correspondence between form and function’. It is quite evident in the early stages of language learning.

If the primary objective of a language is communication, then the articles, which are important functional structures, are hardly essential communication devices. The very fact that they are mercilessly dropped in telegraphic messages, emails, and in formal academic reports strengthens the popular opinion that articles are not so indispensable for communication. Learners, usually, ignore such function words when processing language primarily for meaning. Bataineh (2005: 58) observes that articles do not obstruct understanding as they are generally unstressed and inaudible in oral communication. Since the present study is essentially focused on written communication, the errors in the use of articles have been analyzed separately.

7. 2. Model for Article Analysis

McEldowney (1977, cited in Thu, 2005: 92) observes a distinct similarity that characterizes article errors in the English of Europeans, Asians, South Americans and Arabs with diverse language backgrounds and concludes that the same types of error are noticed in the English of school children, college students, English teachers, scientists and others. According to McEldowney, these article errors may be
categorized as follows: 1) Omission of \textit{a/the} (under extension); 2) Wrong insertion of \textit{a/the}; 3) Confusion of \textit{a/the} (substitution).

Based on this classification, the following pattern has been evolved for the analysis of article errors: 1) Omission of Articles; 2) Redundant use of Articles; 3) Confusion of Articles.

In the present study it has been decided to the researcher has chosen to employ this category for investigating the errors in the use of articles, since such classification throws better insight into the specific environment where the L\textsubscript{2} learners face problems (Thu, 2005: 93).

During the I phase of test errors in the use of articles ‘Omission type’ of errors (a, an, the article omission) account for the highest frequency. ‘Omission type of errors’ refers to the absence of an article (zero articles). ‘Unnecessary insertion’ indicates the use of articles in certain contexts where they are not necessary. This type of error has the second highest frequency. Confusion type of errors refers to the situations in which the learners are confused about the use of articles in certain situations. The learners use ‘\textit{a}’ in the place of ‘\textit{the}’, or vice versa. Such type of errors accounts for the lowest frequency.
7. 2. 1. Omission of Articles

Omission type of errors or deletion of articles may be attributed to sources like native language transfer, simplification (Bataineh, 2005: 66). The L2 learners may be tempted to supply the equivalent native language structure due to their inadequate knowledge of the forms of the target language. The following examples illustrate that the use of articles is problematic area for the L2 learners:

1) *This day is ( ) memorable day in my life (a memorable day).*

2) *I was ( ) fearful girl (a fearful girl).*

3) *We are wakeup in early morning (early in the morning).*

The errors in the use of articles can also be attributed to the inherent complexity of the English use of articles. The learners struggle even with the basics of articles as they are not able to distinguish between proper nouns and common nouns. Nor are they able to make difference between countable nouns and uncountable nouns. Further, errors involving ‘omission’ indicates learners’ inadequate understanding of the article system. The first year undergraduate students tend to overgeneralize when using articles. Errors in the omission of articles or addition may also be attributed to the fact that the L1 not only lacks an article system, but also lacks any morphemic system of marking noun singular/plural distinction, non-count/count distinction.
7. 2. 1. 1. Omission of Definite Articles

A scrutiny of the errors in the use of articles reveals that the L2 learners tend to ignore the definite article ‘the’ and the indefinite articles a/an as cited in the following examples:

1) Last year in ___ month of Feb, we were celebrated a church festival.

2) In ___ evening we went to church.

3) Recently ___ students are gives good training.

4) I went as ___ scribe to the school.

The corpus provides the research with several examples to the error indicated.

The learners tend to omit the definite articles as mentioned here:

1) before certain adjectives used as nouns, e.g.

   i. Only the rich can avail the higher education but not economically ( ) weaker.

   ii. We are helped ( ) poor.

2) before the names of important festivals.

   i. ( ) Christmas is synonymous with love.

   ii. ( ) Ramzon was celebrated.
3) before collective class nouns and plural class nouns to highlight the idea of collectivity.

   i. Our pastor arranged a meeting for ( ) youth.

   ii. The arrangements are offered by ( ) management.

4) before important places like Railway station:

   i. My friends came to send off at ( ) railway station.

   ii. In ( ) airport, they checked all other formalities.

   iii. The final one day cricket match was held at ( ) Lord’s ground in England.

5) before the name of a country which includes several states like the USA:

   i. He became the President of ( ) United States of America.

A considerable number of the subjects have committed the error of deleting the indefinite article a(n) the use of which is obligatory with some of the singular countable nouns such as campus, language, and accident (Bataineh, 2005: 11). The fundamental differences between the two languages result in the production of ungrammatical structures. The fact that one of the principal causes for the learners’ deviation from the rules of the target language may be due to the fact that the Tamil language does not have a distinct marker for indefiniteness the way the English
language has. Moreover, some of the South Asian languages, such as Hindi, Punjabi or Gujarati also do not have an equivalent of the.

7. 2. 1. 2. Omission of Indefinite Articles

The subjects chosen for the present study have omitted the use of indefinite articles as are not aware of their role.

1) before singular count nouns

   i.  *This day is ( ) memorable day in my life (a).*

   ii.  *It was ( ) different experience (a).*

   iii.  *( ) college student must have ( ) mobile and ( ) girl friend(a, a, a).*

   iv.  *I am sorry for not writing ( ) letter to you (a).*

2) before singular nouns preceded by an adverb or adjective

   i.  *He is the first Indian batsman who played ten Sixes in ( ) one day match (a).*

   ii.  *South Africa lossed several wickets for ( ) few runs (a).*

   iii.  *I was ( ) fearful girl (a).*

Such instances of L2 learners omitting articles in the free compositions seem to result from the learners’ unfamiliarity with the use of articles in their mother tongue.
The analysis of article errors reveals another finding that the L2 learners are quite aware of the rules of the article system, particularly the rules of definite articles. For example, even the freshers have employed the right choice of ‘definite article; as the following example illustrates:

*Only the rich can avail the higher education but not economically weaker.*

In the second part of the sentence, the learner has not applied the rule of article to the adjective ‘weaker’ which is used as a noun. This implies that the learners are not able to employ the rules of English articles consistently not because “they are unaware of the rules but have not had sufficient practice in their use” (Kamala, 1992: 143). According to Kamala, the omission of articles may be attributed to three factors: 1) Inadequate understanding of the Article rules; 2) Insufficient practice; 3) Direct influence of the mother tongue in which the article system does not exist.

Students’ insufficient understanding of article is one of the principle causes of article errors. Further, the way that students learnt the articles at school and the oversimplification of grammar books may be cited as other factors causing erroneous articles. There are instances where the L2 learners use the correct articles at the sentence level, while they commit errors in using articles in free composition. Probably, their lack of experience in using articles in the essays compounds their confusion.
7.2.2. Redundant Use of Articles

The error corpus has a lot of examples of the definite article being used redundantly. A few instances from the written productions may be cited as examples. The definite article ‘the’ is inserted redundantly as shown in the following categories.

1) before common nouns which are not specifying:

   i. *Then I go to the college.*

   ii. *We advised the people not to kill the female.*

   iii. *After many failures he met the success in his life.*

   iv. *Of you will keep the hard work you will win.*

   v. *Once upon the time the child was born in poor family.*

   vi. *He reaches the victory.*

2) before adjectives which do not refer to abstract qualities:

   i. *My parents force me to get up to brush and bath to take the morning breakfast.*

3) before proper nouns, particularly names place, months, historical persons, and star players:

   i. *We are celebrating the Jesus birthday.*

   ii. *At last the Kaif and Zaheer wanted to score 3 runs.*

   iii. *Next morning bus reaches the Kanyakumari.*
iv.  We reaches the Muttam.

v.  In Tamilnadu, before the two months.

4) The indefinite article was used redundantly in the following contexts:

a. before plural nouns:

i.  If a children will watch they become a bad guy.

ii. They sing a many more songs.

iii. The other batsman gone with a single digits.

iv. They make a runs with the spare of two balls.

v.  His life is going like a smooth wheels.

b. before uncountable nouns:

i.  We ate a breakfast.

ii. One day I got a punishment.

iii. Cinemaline is a amusement line.

iv. A lot of people spend a money in modern films.

v.  Failures always brings a better success.

c. before proper nouns:

i.  He wants to become a President.

d. before abstract noun:
i. We have wish all them elders to give them a respect.

ii. Her son had a enriched knowledge.

7. 2. 3. Confusion (interchange) of Articles

The L2 learners are tempted to apply the rules of articles where they are not applicable. Errors in confusion type express situations in which a is used instead of the, and ‘the’ is used instead of a/an. The present researcher has identified the following situations from the corpus:

1. Use of ‘a’ for ‘the’ where reference is to a specific thing or where the noun is uncountable or plural.
   
   i. They make a runs with the spare of balls in a last over.
   
   ii. It is a first defeat of cultural decline.
   
   iii. She was a greatest glamour actor in India.
   
   iv. He became a president of America.

2. Use of ‘a’ in the place of ‘an’

   i. I was shocked seeing a old woman.
   
   ii. Cinema is a entertainment for human life.
   
   iii. He met a accident.
   
   iv. There was a answer for all his failures.
   
   v. They asked them for a interview.
3. Confusion between ‘a’ ‘an’ and one

   i. *I think of one particular day.*

   ii. *One unforgettable incident is once when during the might hour.*

   iii. *A educational game was organized.*

   iv. *One bus when moving on the bridge.*

   v. *Two months ago, one tragedy occurred.*

   vi. *There was one bad incident happened.*

   vii. *Our students acted one drama.*

4. Confusion between definite article ‘the’ and that;

   i. *All the people traveling in that bus drowned.*

   ii. *In that morning that programme.*

   iii. *We were enjoying that programme.*

5. Substituting ‘the’ for ‘a’;

   i. *The Second test match also ends with the drawn*

   ii. *Once upon the time, the child was born.*

   iii. *He missed the rare chance of VP of America.*
7. 3. Factors Contributing the Wrong Use of Articles

Researchers suggest that the errors in the use of articles were made by the learners due to insufficient learning methods, such as overgeneralization and simplification of the English article system (Bataineh, 2005: 17). Kamala (1992: 148), who notices similar problems in the writings of Indian L\textsubscript{2} learners, observes that inadequate practice and inability to grasp the article system leads to false analogy and overapplication.

Michael Swan himself admits that “the correct use of the articles (a, an and the) is one of the most difficult points in English grammar” (Swan 1995: 54). He adds further that most of the Languages of Western European origin have article systems like English and if an L\textsubscript{2} learner speaks one of these languages (French, German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Icelandic, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Greek, Romanian…), he would understand a lot of the English article system. On the other hand, if the learners do not already have a sound knowledge of one of these languages, they may have more difficulty with the correct use of articles (Swan 1995: 55).

Further, the fact that Swan devotes about sixteen pages to the discussion on articles explains the complexity of the English article system. As there is a lot of ‘rules’ for using articles have exceptions, even the advanced learners encounter difficulty with the correct use of them. Hence even the advanced learners encounter
difficulty with the correct use of articles. Researchers are quite aware of the complexity of the article system and the challenges involved in learning: “…researchers consider the article system to be unlearnable and therefore unteachable, because it can only be acquired through natural exposure to the language” (Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982; Master, 1994: 229). The emphasis here is not on the futility of teaching articles but on the utility of natural exposure to the target language.

7. 4. Diagnosis

One of the major implications of this study is that the Tamil learners are yet to outgrow their problems in the use of articles. They continue to occur frequently despite the learners’ exposure to reading and instruction. The article errors do not seem to decrease as proficiency increases. The English Article system is so complex that even the scholars have problems in reaching a consensus over the underlying notions designated by the different forms. The Tamil learners, whose L1 does not have a corresponding system to the English articles, find it difficult to recognize the underlying rules and conventions. Even the standard grammar books do not address the problems of L2 learners. Berry is critical of such books as they “are not yet well in the matter of teaching articles”. He identifies three problems in these books (cited in Thu, 2005: 138): 1) incorrect or misleading formulation; 2) unwarranted emphasis on certain usage types, and 3) lack of variety in formats.
7. 4. 1. Recommendation

He does not stop with raising his objections, but he also recommends seven guidelines in designing materials for teaching the articles, which may be condensed into three main points: 1) use of principal descriptive account; 2) make exercises/activities in terms of production, comprehension and perception; 3) apply some principles of presentation methodology (e.g. simplicity, appropriateness). Berry has followed the model proposed by Quirk et al. (1985). The taxonomy of the use of articles devised on the basis of the guidelines proposed by Quirk and Langacker Chart {Refer to Chart 3} may assist the learners. Master’s (1996) introduction of binary system for teaching articles is a significant move. He has observed significant improvement in the performance of the students. But he is not sure whether the improvement is due to “the focusing of students’ attention on the need for articles in English rather than from any explicit method for choosing the article correctly” (Master, 1996: 465).
# Chart 3

Taxonomy of the use of English Articles based on insights by Quirk & Langacker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noun forms</th>
<th>Article form</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proper Names</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons, Time</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Smith, Easter, France</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Single proper Nouns</td>
<td>(by) Bus/Radio; at sunrise, (in) winter; Lunch; Influenza; Tennis; (be) Captain (of a team)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pseudonames</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions:</td>
<td>Single noun with (out) modification</td>
<td>The British Museum; The Huong river; The Titanic; The observer; The Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo-names (as a type)</td>
<td>THE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport; Day time; Seasons meals; Illnesses, Sports, Role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Geographical names; Public Institutions; Ships/Planes; Newspapers</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalities; Islands; Adjectives as NS</td>
<td>Plural proper nouns</td>
<td>The Philippines; the Finns; The old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A type as</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of a type hierarchy</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>The lion; the Computer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instance Type</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Noun Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unique Instance</strong></td>
<td>Global/Local</td>
<td>noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direct awareness</td>
<td>Common noun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indirect awareness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physical context</td>
<td>Nominal content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Based awareness</td>
<td>Immediate situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-unique instance</strong></td>
<td>Actual instance(s)</td>
<td>Singular N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mass N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Plural N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arbitrary instance</strong></td>
<td>An arbitrary member (predicate nominal; generic a)</td>
<td>Singular N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An arbitrary set of sets</td>
<td>Plural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Indefinite Reference</strong></td>
<td>Mass</td>
<td>Maximal set</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5: Error Frequencies of Article Errors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article Errors</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>1.8843</td>
<td>1.29222</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
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<td>.00</td>
<td>7.00</td>
<td>2.0083</td>
<td>1.11427</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>1.8512</td>
<td>0.84322</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 4</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>8.00</td>
<td>1.7438</td>
<td>0.92672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (list wise)</td>
<td>121</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.7438</td>
<td>0.92672</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.5. Conclusion

Table 5 reveals that the learners have not shown any improvement in their use of articles. Master contends that ignoring the article is irresponsible and L2 teachers should provide their learners with better means of using the articles appropriately, especially when it comes to academic writing that is to be graded in part for grammatical accuracy” (Master, 2002: 335). All these proposals may be enlightening; yet, they lack empirical evidence. Researchers should come out with proposals based on empirical evidence. ESL textbooks generally devote only a few pages to a discussion on the English articles. The authors are content with just giving a few general rules for article usage and a few examples. Moreover, even the few pages
repeat specific rules usually given in all the ESL texts. They have not offered strategy based explanations. Research should focus on why L₂ learners prefer one strategy over others.

For example, Maclin (1987: 59) explains that *the* is used with a noun that shows “reference forward to an identification soon to be made, often by modifiers following the noun”, citing instances such as *The dog that has been barking all day has finally stopped barking*. If L₂ learners follow this instruction, they would use ‘the’ article whenever they come across similar forms. This will explain why L₂ writings have more examples of ‘overused the’. Text books should give extensive examples on comparisons of article use between L₁ learners and L₂ learners.