Errors in the Use of English Articles by L2 Learners from Punjab

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the strong tendency of learners of English as a second language (L2), living in Punjab (Pakistan) in the use of English articles and also investigates whether a difference is there in errors committed by the secondary and advance learners in the use of English articles. It also focuses on what kind of errors are committed by the learners on category basis. For that hypotheses adopted were (1) All the learners in Punjab (Pakistan) either at secondary or advance level have strong tendency of using English articles. (2) There is no significant difference in the errors committed by L2 secondary and advance learners in the use of English articles. For this purpose a questionnaire was distributed among randomly selected 35 respondents belonging to 2 groups as secondary ranged 14-18 years doing their Matric and advance 2nd language (L2) learners of English ranged 22-33 years, doing M.A, M.Phil. and Ph.D. For the first hypothesis 1 Sample t Test was applied. The result revealed that all the learners either at secondary or advance level have strong tendency of using English articles. For the 2nd hypothesis Independent Sample t Test was applied. The result revealed that there is a significant difference between the errors committed by the secondary and advance learners. Then for identifying the difference in errors committed by both the groups, category wise Independent Sample t Test was applied and the result showed that in generic, zero and anaphoric use of article there is a significant difference while as determiners in countable, non-countable noun phrases and as specific use there is no significant difference in both the groups.

Keywords: English Articles, Errors, L2 Learners, Punjab, Second language

This is a known fact that acquisition of article system and mastering this system seems to be the most difficult challenge for non-native speakers of English. This situation becomes worse when the mother tongue (L1) of the learners is article less language like Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Russian and second language (L2) learners at every level face the same problem when to use indefinite "a / an" , definite "the", or "no / zero" article before noun phrase (NP) as determiner (Choi; Thomas). Pakistani learners belonging to Urdu and Punjabi languages (article less languages) seem to face the same problems in the use of articles.

As in Pakistan, Urdu is the national language while English is an official language. Except these 2 languages there is a variety of languages and dialects. So most of the people here are bilingual if not multilingual. The systems of Urdu and Punjabi languages spoken here are different from English language as they are languages having SOV (subject, object, and verb) word order (Virk, Humayoun and Ranta) and these languages do not have these determiners in their parts of speech. While English has SVO (subject, verb, and object) word order and it has articles which are used as determiners in noun phrase (McCarthy). So when Pakistani learners learn English as second language or in some places foreign language, they face problem and commit errors especially in the use of articles.

Use of Articles

Many studies categorize articles i.e. words used to modify a noun ("What Are Articles in English Grammar"), on two features i.e. on specificity, definiteness (Ionin, Ko and Wexler) but for the convenience the researcher categorized them as

1. Generic vs. Specific Use

When article can be used to indicate that the individual noun is representing the whole class, it is called Generic use. While according to Ionin, Ko and Wexler who adopted Foder and Sag's definition of specificity, article is used specifically when the speaker refers to that specific individual about whom he has an image or concept.

2. As Determiners in Countable vs. Non Countable Noun

If the noun can be counted, an indefinite article either "a" or "an" is used.

3. Zero or No Article

Some common nouns do not take an article like the names of languages, nationalities, sports, subjects etc.

4. Anaphoric Reference

Indefinite article like "a/an" is used before noun when it is mentioned for the first time but at the anaphoric place or every time afterwards for the same noun definite article "the" is used.

Aim and Objectives

This paper will:

- investigate the tendency of the use of English article by L2 learners of Punjab (Pakistan) at secondary and advance level;

- examine the errors committed by English L2 secondary and advance learners in the use of articles;

- explore why do the learners of L2 not differentiate among definite, indefinite and zero use of article;

- aim at enhancing the learnability of L2 learners by removing their errors.

Hypotheses

1. All the Punjabi (Pakistani) L2 learners either at the secondary or advance level have strong tendency of using English articles.

2. There is no significant difference in the errors committed by Punjabi (Pakistani) L2 secondary and advance learners in the use of English articles.

Research Questions

1. Whether or not all the learners have strong tendency of using English articles in Punjabi (Pakistani) context.

2. Is there any significant difference in the errors committed by Punjabi (Pakistani) L2 secondary and advance learners in the use of English articles?

3. Is there any significant difference in the errors committed by the secondary and advance L2 learners on category basis?

Literature Review

A substantial amount of work is available on the second language acquisition of English articles (Ionin, Ko and Wexler; Ionin, Zubizarreta and Maldonado). Recently the issue in article use in English at adult level are dealing with the conditions on article omission (Robertson; Trenkic), the access to UG which is partial, not full and due to this partiality its problem in making connection between form and meaning (Ionin, Ko and Wexler; Gressang), the role of cognitive strategies (Trenkic) and the role of prosody again because of L1 influence on L2's prosodic rules which results in omission or avoidance of its use (Goad and White).

Ionin, Ko and Wexler classify language into two groups as article based languages

and article less languages and even in article based languages there is a distinction of article based either on definiteness or on specificity (Guella, Déprez, and Sleeman) and it is a common observation that the learners whose L1 is article based language they acquire English article system earlier as compared to those whose L1 is article less (Bergeron-Matoba) which is why those L2 learners who belong to article less language they fluctuate between definiteness and specificity in the use of English article (Ionin, Ko and Wexler) and their use of articles is different from the native speakers (Hawkin and Chan). Researchers give different explanations for this problem and they say that different factors are involved. For example the syntactic properties of noun phrase make it possible for the learners to select articles. As it is observed when the modifier of NP is superlative adjective or ordinal, definite article "the" is selected.

Similarly discourse factor also plays significant role for the selection of article and even it affects definiteness because article less languages have other " morphological reflexes" like pronouns, demonstratives etc. for the expression of this discoursal relation (Gressang).

Speaker's general knowledge and the use of other cognitive skills is another issue (Avery; Gressang). So for article pedagogy two approaches exist. One of them believes on form and the other believes on communicative approach. According to the first approach which stresses on form, the article usage never creates any problem in oral communication and when learners internalize these rules the focus on meaning appears to be a better pedagogic technique. While according to communicative approach article mistakes have no value or importance for communication (Maslamani).

As errors in the use of article show that they are the part of learning process (Coder), and intralingual errors (within language) are developmental errors and often stand for incomplete learning or over generalization of L2 rules (Rod).

Methodology

Quantitative methodology is used in this study

1.   Sample

Randomly selected total 35 respondents, 16 were the secondary whose age ranged from 14-18 years and who were doing Matric and F.A from different institutions that had Urdu or Punjabi as their L1 and 19 were the advance learners whose age ranged from 22-33 doing master, M.Phil. and Ph.D. from the University of Management and Technology belonged to either Urdu or Punjabi language participated in this research.

2.   Tool

A questionnaire was developed which was consisted of 20 statements with 30 blanks. So the questionnaire was distributed to the respondents and they were asked to fill in these blanks and in this way data was collected.

3.   Design of Questionnaire

As the objective of this study was to see the learners' tendency and difference of errors in the use of English articles between the secondary and advance Pakistani L2 learners so the questionnaire was divided into 5 categories like generic, as determiners in countable vs non-countable nouns, zero/ no, specific and anaphoric use of English articles. So out of 20 statements 8 belonged to the generic use, 4 to countable vs non countable category, 3 to zero article use, 2 to specific use and 2 statements belonged to the category of anaphoric reference (see Appendix). But these categories could not be made open to the learners.

Analysis of Data

The response of the secondary and advance L2 learners was taken and computed those statements on SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). For seeing their strong tendency one sample t test was applied on the mean score and for examining the difference in errors committed by them independent sample t test was performed by the researcher and to see the difference between secondary and advance L2 learners on category basis Independent sample t test on their mean score was conducted again.

Results

One Sample t Test for Strong Tendency (Hypothesis.1)

One sample t test on the learner's score to evaluate whether their mean was significantly different from 20, the accepted mean for the learner's response was conducted. The sample mean of 15.37 (SD = 4.22) was significantly different from 20, t = 6.485, p =.000. So the test was significant. The result supported the hypothesis no1. That all learners either at secondary or advance level have strong tendency of using English articles.

Table 1 (Hypothesis. 2)
Independent Sample t Test (for error difference between the two groups)

Variables	N	Degree of freedom	Mean Score	Standard deviation	T
secondary	16	33	12.19	2.26	-5.66*
advance	19	30.77	18.05	3.58	

p<0.05

Independent sample t test was conducted to evaluate is there a significant difference in the errors committed by the secondary and advance learners in the use of English articles or not. The test was found significant at alpha.05 while the leaners had t =-5.66,

p =.000 with the advance respondents had mean M = 18.05, SD =3.58 and the secondary had mean M=12.19, SD =2.26.

Independent Sample t Test on the Difference between the Secondary and Advance L2 Learners on the Category Basis

Table 2: In Generic Use

Variables	N	Degree of Freedom	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	t
Secondary	16	33	4.88	1.08	-5.84
Advance	19	25.75	8.73	2.45	

p<0.05

An independent sample t test was conducted to evaluate the difference between the two groups in the errors committed by them in the Generic use of English articles. It was found that the test was significant at alpha.05 while the learners had t =-5.84, p =.000 with the advance respondents had mean M = 8.75, SD = 2.45 and the secondary had mean M = 4.88, SD = 1.08.

Table 3: As Determiners in Countable vs Non-Countable Noun

Variables	N	Degree of Freedom	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	t
Secondary	16	33	2.43	1.21	-1.71
Advance	19	27.5	3.05	.911	

p>0.05

An independent sample t test was conducted to evaluate the difference between the two groups in the errors committed by them in the use of English articles as determiners in the noun phrase. The test was not found significant at alpha.05 while the learners had t = -1.71, p = .096 with the secondary had mean M = 2.43, SD = 1.21 and the advance learners had mean M = 3.05, SD = .911.

Table 4: Use of zero or no article

Variables	N	Degree of Freedom	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	T
secondary	16	33	.75	.77	-2.33*
Advance	19	31.86	1.53	1.12	

p<0.05

An independent sample t test was conducted to evaluate the difference between the two groups in the errors committed by them in the use of zero articles. It was found that the test was significant at alpha.05 while the learners had t =-2.55 p =.026 with the advance learners had mean M =1.53, SD =1.12 and the secondary had mean M =.75, SD =.77.

Table 5: Specificity

Variables	N	Degree of Freedom	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	t
secondary	16	33	.94	.85	.36
advance	19	28.7	.84	.68	

p>0.05

An independent sample t test was conducted to evaluate the difference between the two groups in the errors committed by them in the use of articles on specificity basis. It was found that the test was not significant at alpha.05 while the learners had t =.36, p =.717 with the secondary had mean M =.94, SD =.85 and the advance learners had mean M =.84, SD =.68.

Table 6: Anaphoric use

Variables	N	Degree of Freedom	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	t
secondary	16	33	3.1	.83	-.707*
advance	19	30.3	3.8	.73	

p< 0.05

An independent sample t test was conducted to evaluate the difference between the two groups in the errors committed by them in the use of articles as anaphoric reference. It was found that the test was significant at alpha .05 while the learners had t = -.707 p =.012 with the advance learners had mean M =3.8, SD =.73 and the secondary had mean M = 3.1, SD = .83.

Discussion

As the result of one sample t test supported the first hypothesis that all the learners either secondary or advance learners had strong tendency to use the article though all of them belonged to different L1 like Urdu, Punjabi which were all articleless languages.

Secondly the researcher hypothesized that there was no significant difference between the errors committed by the secondary and advance learners of English L2. The test was significant but the results were countered to the research hypothesis as the errors committed by the secondary were greater in number as compared to the advance learners. So it indicated that with the more exposure to L2 language the learners would be better able to learn these articles.

Thirdly to see the difference in errors between the two groups on category basis and the first result which was on **Generic basis** showed that there was a significant difference between the two in the generic use of articles as the advance learners showed better understanding of this use than secondary because their P value was .000 which showed greater significance. Another thing is that it also illustrated that the secondary level learners were not made clear by the teachers and teaching material. It is a common observation that the secondary learners are taught that indefinite article "a" is used with

the common noun, "an" is used with nouns having vowel alphabet in the beginning which is why in the first blank most of the secondary level learners used "an airplane" instead of **the world is getting smaller because of <u>the </u>airplane;** where definite article "the" should be used because of the generality. But in the use of articles as determiners in countable vs non-countable nouns there is no significant difference between the two groups as their P value was more than 0.05 which proved that both the groups had no clear understanding of their use. It also showed that both the groups found it hard to use the articles in this category so they committed errors equally.

Again in the use of zero or no articles there is a significant difference between the two groups as the secondary committed more error in the use of zero articles as they put article even where it was not needed like in 14th statement instead of **let us buy sugar,** they thought it as countable and put indefinite article "a" as **let us buy <u>a </u>sugar.**

While advance learners had somewhat clear idea about the use of zero articles. Similarly in the category which was based on specificity there is no significant difference between the groups which again proved that both the groups did not have learnt the proper use of article for specific purpose as they used the wrong article i.e. indefinite or "a" instead of definite article "the".

While in the category of anaphoric use of articles the test was significant which indicated that the advance learners knew that if the antecedent is there in the first part of the sentence always indefinite article "a/an" is used while as the anaphoric expression the second part must contain definite article "the" like the 18th statement **I live in <u>a</u> house in <u>a </u>quiet street in the countryside. <u>The</u> street is called 'Hudson Street'.** While the secondary were not made clear about this use of article.

Conclusion

This article attempted to explore the use of English articles by L2 learners of Punjab (Pakistan) at secondary and advance level and for that purpose a questionnaire consisting of 20 statements was distributed to them and the feedback of those statements was computed on SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). In the light of the results achieved it can be said that both the groups including the secondary and advance L2 learners have strong tendency of using English articles in Pakistani context. As far as errors committed by learners either at secondary or advance level are concerned, there are different factors involved in it. Firstly the wrong notion on the part of the learners at all levels about the use of article. They think it very simple to put any article with any noun without understanding its use. Secondly improper training of the teaching body and lack of proper learning material are responsible for this situation. If the use of articles is taught through systematic way and for an extended period of time it will make the job of the learners easy and they will be in a better position to use them. Furthermore for future research their use can be examined through written scripts, within the context of NP. Even the other categories of determiners like demonstrative, quantifiers etc. can also be observed within the same context.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Use of English Articles

Age------------

Gender: Male/Female----------------   Qualification: ------------------

Mother tongue: Urdu, Punjabi or any other-----------------------

Use "the", "a/an" or no article before these nouns

1. The world is getting smaller because of ------------------- airplane.

2. ---------------- supermarket sells not only -------------- groceries, but also ----------
   liquor, ------------------ plants and ----------------- magazines.

3. ----------------- computers are useful.

4. -------------- university is a place where both ------------ students and ---------------
   teachers learn.

5. It has been proven that ---------------- cigarettes are bad for health.

6. -------------- politician must put in hours of campaigning in order to win ------- race.

7. m---------------- shopping mall can offer everything from exercise to entertainment.

8. shopping mall is rapidly taking the place of "Main Street, USA.

9. I saw----------- milk spill.

10. I admire------------ foliage.

11. I stepped in ------------------- puddle.

12. I bought --------------liter of grape juice.

13. I like ------------American tea.

14. Let us buy ---------- sugar.

15. Is Bob -----------thin?

16.teacher is over there, isn't he?

17. Give me -------------chocolate chip cookie.

18. I live in ----------- house in --------------- quite street in the countryside. ----------
    street is called "Hudson Street".

19. He drank ------------ cup of coffee while he was reading --------------newspaper.

20. In the middle of the wallet there is---------------- lottery ticket.