

Article usage: a challenge for second language learners of English

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Introduction

Articles is an area of grammar within the field of concept categories namely the definite article, indefinite article and the zero article and these examine the concept covered by definiteness and non-definiteness in either generic or specific reference. The usage of articles is inherently difficult for second language learners to learn, no matter what the background of the learner is. The purpose of the study is to explore the challenges faced by Sri Lankan second language learners in the usage of the article system of English when learning English as a second language.

Literature Review

The English article system is a subunit of grammar under the class of determiners, “There are two articles in English, the definite article ‘the’ and the indefinite article ‘a’ or ‘an’ . Sometimes nouns require no article at all. This is called the ‘the zero article’. (Leech and Svartvik (1994). Accordingly, there is only one definite article, ‘the’ and the indefinite articles ‘a’ and ‘an’ are phonetic variants whose usage depends on the environment. The zero article ‘0’ refers to the absence of a definite or indefinite article before a noun or nominal phrase. This is clearly defined as ‘an abstract unit with no physical realization in the stream of speech: also called a null element’ David Crystal (1992, P. 77). Articles belong to the closed system items. So it cannot be extended by the creation of additional members.

The definite article in English does not have an equivalent in either Sinhala or Tamil but the concept as stated in Chomsky’s Generative theory, is realized in the deeper structure. The study on the effect of systematic instruction on learning the English article system carried out by Peter Master shows how systematic instruction can accelerate the learning of English articles. The definite article is used in different contexts

predominantly to indicate definiteness and in front of superlatives while it is not used with proper nouns and abstract nouns with certain exceptions In English abstract nouns referring to ideas, attributes or qualities are used without the article ‘the’ to refer to that idea or attribute which belongs to everybody or everything.

Error Analysis

Error analysis emphasizes ‘the significance of errors in learners’ inter language system Brown (1994). It is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the errors learners make in inter language. Errors are important sources of information to decide the learners strategy in learning and are found in the learner’s out – put. The teachers come to know the learners struggle to learn the second language while learning it for communicative purposes. Overgeneralization occurs when the learners are not aware of the appropriate rule or the exceptional cases Taylor (1995). Transfer errors occur as a result of learners’ self- construction of a wrong rule which becomes intralingual error. Interference error occurs due to the application of a rule found in the learners’ first language in using the second language and is termed interlanguage error.

Methodology

A corpus of written composition was collected from Tamil medium students who are from state schools in the Piliyandala Zone in Colombo District. One hundred phrases/ sentences with error in the use of articles were selected at random for analysis. The error encountered in the corpus were classified into six distinct categories, ie. Inclusion of ‘the’ (category A); omission of ‘the’ (category B); inclusion of ‘a/an’ (category C); omission of ‘a/an’ (category D); confusion between ‘a’ or ‘an’ (category E); confusion between ‘definite’ and ‘indefinite’(category F). All the errors regarding the use of articles were analyzed with regard to

‘underuse’, ‘overuse’, and misuse of articles and discussed under each category

Analysis of error and discussion

Of the one hundred phrases taken for analysis 25% was under category A and 22% under category B while category C had 18%, category D, 7% and category E, 19 %

The greatest fraction of error in article usage has occurred due to overuse and Overgeneralization, especially in the use of the definite article ‘the’ in the formation of nominal phrases in generic reference and definiteness: the inclusion of ‘the’ in front of non-count nouns and plural count nouns and the omission of ‘the’ in front of both singular and plural and non-count nouns. This can be attributed to the inadequate internalization of the complex relationship in the usage between dichotomies like specific and generic, countable and uncountable, singular and plural, definite and indefinite, common noun and proper noun and also abstract and common. The rules governing article usage and the exceptions have not been observed by the learners.

The presence of an approximating counterpart of the indefinite article in both Tamil and Sinhala does not make the indefinite article usage that problematic as the definite article. As a result, there is misuse of the appropriate article in the appropriate position. Sometimes they seem to compare the sentence with that of their first language, trying to do a literal translation in order to get an L1 equivalent. However articles do not have a one to one correspondence between the L1 & L2 of the learners. So they have used inappropriate rules governing the article usage in English.

Transfer errors in the use of the indefinite article such as the erroneous omission of a /an in forming sentences for indefinite reference and its erroneous inclusion of a/an for the zero form have occurred. The unfamiliarity of the function of the zero form in English and the confusion between the indefinite articles can be the reason of occurrence of intralingual error in the process of transfer. The correct use of the indefinite article ‘a’ for singular count nouns ruled out the inadequate grasp of the rule that singular count nouns are prefixed by an

indefinite article. However the indecision concerning the choice between ‘a’ or ‘an’ has caused error. The confusion in deciding ‘a’ or ‘an’ is remarkable which is reflective of learners’ inability to see the distinctive difference in the phonetic variation of the initial sound of the singular noun thus making the choice on the basis of the occurrence of the letters rather than the sound. This error that has taken the space of 28% is neither attributed to overgeneralization nor is to transfer error as it is developmental in their interlanguage continuum.

In the process of learning the usage of articles, the discovery of a learner centered inappropriate rule reflected in the errors has occurred. The transitory rule the learner discovered is ‘if there is a singular noun to add ‘a’ in front of the noun and ‘the’ to other nouns disregarding the other parameters that govern the usage. This reveals that the concepts relating to articles that are present in his/her deep structure would have appeared in an erroneous form when transferred to the surface structure.

Only a small fraction of error can be categorized as interference error which is caused mainly due to the difference in the syntactic structure between the L1 and the L2 of the learners. Interlingual error corresponds to Chomsky’s generative theory, that the deep grammar, its transformational and generative capacity is generally stimulated to a large extent by one’s native language.

There were errors of indefinite origin, probably due to inattention and also a combination of strategies. Hence classification of errors in this manner can be very broad or general and not specific.

Conclusion

The error analysis shows the general patterns or trends in the usage of “definite”, “indefinite” and the “zero article” in written discourse by my target population. The tendency to use the strategy of overgeneralization in the use of the definite article “the” and a significant use of the strategy of Transfer in the use of the indefinite article were observed. However the inability to see the distinctive difference between the usage of the phonetic variants “a” and “an” was also remarkable. Moreover, there was a distinct pattern of error that was not included in the categorized

error under study and this would have been possibly due to indefinite origin

The nature of error and the source of it were clearly highlighted in the analysis and these could possibly be indicative of the pattern of error in the use of articles during the second language learning whose first language is either Tamil or Sinhala as both language structures do lack a distinct system of articles. In addition the rules of article usage in English are complex as the usage is predominantly governed by meaning and there are exceptions that has to be given due consideration. The study shows the reasons why the definite article 'the' becomes challenging and apparently problematic for learners of English as a second language.

Though the findings may not reflect the general pattern among Sri Lankan learners, they are nevertheless significant indicators of the teaching/learning component. The errors encountered in the corpus is feedback to the teacher who can revise the lesson plan and re-teach adopting reflective practice, so as to make the instruction more effective and convincing to create a learner friendly environment.

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