The underlying reasons for the difficulties in use of the English articles for EFL learners: an analysis based on the learners' experiences

Khalil Ahmada * ID, Abdul Qadir Khan a ID

a Department of English, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir Muzaffarabad, Pakistan

Abstract

The use of English articles is the most challenging task for the EFL learners particularly when there is no articles in their native language (L1). The purpose of this study is to investigate the underlying reasons for the difficulties in using English articles by analyzing the learners' own experiences. The data was collected in the form of written feedback from seventy-five adult Pashto (L1) learners of English (L2) having three different educational backgrounds. The data were analyzed by using qualitative thematic analysis software 'MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020'. The results brought forth useful insights for learning and teaching the use of English articles for the adult EFL learners. The underlying reasons were found to be the failure in the identification of the concepts of countability, definiteness/indefiniteness of nouns, variability in physical form and concept of nouns, variability across languages, learners/teachers' attitudes towards articles, lack of article-check in computer software and pedagogical instruction.

1. Introduction

The English article system consists of three articles: (1) the definite article, i.e. *'The'*, (2) the indefinite article, i.e. *'a/an'*, and (3) the zero article, i.e. *Φ*. The definite article *'the'* is used to show definite aspect of an NP. According to Bickerton (1981), an entity is definite provided if the hearer knows about it, unique in a given context or in the universe or usually known as a class that exists in the real world. The function of *'the'* is to denote or to show that both the speaker and the hearer know and identify the entity referred to (Master, 1997). The indefinite article *'a'* is used to indicate non-

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +92-301-819-0420
 E-mail address: khalilahmadphd@gmail.com
 http://dx.doi.org/10.32601/ejal.911479

identifiability. According to Master (1997) the indefinite article '*a*' makes an entity countable. Hence, it often comes before singular count nouns. The indefinite article is realized as *a* before words beginning with consonantal sounds and as '*an*' used before words beginning with vowel sounds. Zero article means when there is a void or no article in front of a noun phrase. For instance, in sentence 'I need water for drinking.' There is no article before the noun 'water'. But this small system of the English articles is not so straight forward when it comes to use for the second/foreign language learners. For the native speakers of English, the use of the English articles is no issue.

Hewson (1972, p.132) has called the English article system a "psycho-mechanism", According to which the native speakers use articles accurately but actually they are unaware of the use. They don't apply any formal rules for the articles. They automatically use them without being conscious to how they are used.

It has been observed that the use of English articles is very difficult for the foreign language learners particularly when there is no article system in their native language. Many researchers have put forward many insights regarding the difficulty in use of the English articles for the second/foreign language learners. Two things make the task using the English articles more difficult, i.e. (a) learners' inconsistent hypotheses about articles at different stages in interlanguage development and (b) the impact of the first language (L1) (Pienemann 1998). Master (2002) is of the opinion that there are three main reasons for the difficulty of the English article system:

 (1) Articles are the most frequent grammatical words in English (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).Thus consistently applying rules to them becomes difficult over a huge amount of discourse.

 (2) English articles are function words and function words are usually unstressed. Thus, they are very difficult for the non-native speakers to identify from other words, which affects the input particularly in the spoken language.

 (3) The English article system keeps the burden of various functions on a single morpheme, which is again very difficult for the L2 learners, who usually are in the habit of a one-word-one-function relation in learning the language.

1.1 The Pashto Language and articles

Pashto is an off-shoot of Indo-Iranian languages. It is spoken in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran. In Pakistan, it is spoken in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province, Federally Administered Areas (FATA) and Baluchistan. It has many regional dialects. Yousafzai is the standard dialect of Pashto. The canonical word order of the Pashto language is Subject-Object-Verb (SOV). Nouns or noun phrases in Pashto have three characteristic features, i.e. gender (masculine and feminine), number (singular and plural) and case, i.e. direct and oblique (Tegey and Robson, 1996). The main classification of the Pashto nouns is into two major categories called

masculine and feminine, in line with the Indo-European languages. Each noun has one or the other gender.

Although the Pashto language does not have an articles system like that of English, yet definiteness and indefiniteness to some extent are conveyed through the linguistic markers such as demonstratives or indefinite numerals. The articles are assumed either to be in-built in the noun phrase, or is represented by indefinite numeral such as /jəʊ/ (one), or by the demonstrative pronouns (Raverty, 1860).

1.2 Why the adult learners?

The dissimilarities in the grammatical structures of different languages can create difficulties for learners and users of a second language (L2), particularly when the grammar of the first language (L1) is totally different from that of the second language (L1). Only through the explicit strategies based on pragmatic and encyclopedic knowledge, such differences can be understood.   And the adults are assumed to be using such explicit strategies for learning second language.

Besides, in Felix's (1985) Competition Model, the adults are armed with two cognitive systems for second language acquisition, i.e. the Language-specific system (LS-system) and the Problem-solving system (PS-system). Each cognitive system is responsible for a specific domain. The LS-system is the system for language, which is only triggered for the purpose of language acquisition. The PS-system is general-problem-solving system and it has a wider scope of applications than the LS-system. The wider scope or range of applications refers to every type of activity which deals with the problem solving such as using explicit strategies, worldly experience and social and pragmatic knowledge. Such kinds of strategies are only carried out by adults.

The linguistic and semantic differences between English and an article-less language make a demand on the L2 learners to make a new correspondence between definiteness/indefiniteness and English articles. This is the reason for choosing the adult learners for the study keeping the idea in mind that children learn languages implicitly, whereas adults must consciously use explicit strategies to learn a second language (Ellis, 2005). The Pashto language does not have functional equivalents of the English articles. They face many difficulties in using the English articles. Therefore, the study aims at exploring the underlying reasons for the difficulties in the use of English articles by the adult Pashto (L1) learners of English (L2) having three different educational backgrounds.

2. Background of the study

It has been generally established that it does not matter whether it is English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) environment, it has been observed that the use of English articles is very difficult for the learners. The

acquisition and the use of English articles become even more arduous task especially when there are no articles in the first languages (L1) of the learners.

There is a large bulk of research conducted on the use of English articles by the learners of English, whose first languages (L1s) lack article system, i.e. Yamada & Matsuura (1982); Huebner (1983); Ionin et al. (2004); Ekiert (2004); Miller (2005); Hawkins et al. (2009) and Ahmad & Khan (2019).

Yamada & Matsuura (1982) studied Japanese EFL learners (35 senior high school students and 35 college students) by using the 'fill-in-the-blank' task. In their findings, the students' performance was better at using the definite article 'the' than 'zero article'.

Huebner (1983) conducted a longitudinal study on a 23 years old Hmong speaker (L1). In his study, the performance of the learner in use of the definite article 'the' was better than the indefinite article 'a/an'. Moreover, the subject overgeneralized the definite article which he termed 'the-flooding'.

Miller's (2005) study was on Chinese (L1) university students. In her findings, the indefinite articles were easy for the student to use, but the concept of definiteness was found to be more problematic for them.

Ahmad & Khan (2019) conducted a cross-sectional study on 75 adult Pashto speakers (L1) having three different educational backgrounds, i.e. Intermediate, Bachelors, and Masters. In their findings, the participant made errors in definite article. The indefinite article 'a/an' was less problematic since its use was confined to singular count nouns.

Looking at the studies on articles use, the finding is not consistent but rather conflicting. These studies have focused either on accuracy or errors, not on the reasons behind them. Moreover, no study has ever been conducted to take the learners on board and their voice be heard regarding the sources of difficulties in the use of the English articles.

Therefore, the study elicited responses from the participants in the form of written feedback regarding their experiences in the use of English articles. The learners are the subjects who undergo practically and experience those difficulties. Therefore, the study is of great significance in finding out the sources of difficulty in the use of the English articles for the Pashto speakers in particular and for the comparable settings in general where the learners' mother tongue (L1) lacks articles system.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Seventy five randomly selected adult Pashto EFL learners participated in this study. The subjects were native speakers of Yousafzai dialect of Pashto (L1) from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (KPK) of Pakistan. They ranged in age from 13 to 24 and none of them had ever been to English speaking country. They were the students

of college (higher secondary class) and University (Tertiary Education). They had been learning English formally in schools since they were five years old. They did not have the opportunity for learning English outside the classrooms. The participants were from three educational levels (25 from each level), i.e. Intermediate, Bachelor and Masters.

3.2. Stimulus

Pashto speakers (L1) were asked to write their personal experiences regarding the difficulty in using the English articles.

3.3. Data Collection

The participants were asked to express their feelings and experiences in the form of written feedback. The respondents expressed themselves fully and brought forth various reasons for the difficulty of using English articles. Their written feedback, on one hand, provided the respondents with a lot of time to think and remind whatever difficulties they faced in the past or face at present, on the other hand they (feedback) allowed the researcher record the real and honest feelings and experiences of the subjects regarding the reasons for the difficulty and misuse of the English articles. The purpose of the study was to bring into focus the possible underlying reasons for the difficulty, confusion and misuse of English articles.

3.4. Data analysis

For the analysis of data, the researcher adopted thematic analysis with its six phases introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data. The researcher closely examines the data to identify common themes – statements, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly.

Thematic Analysis is usually conducted in six phases:

1. Familiarization with the data

2. Coding

3. Generating themes

4. Reviewing themes

5. Defining and naming themes

6. Writing up

The data were analyzed by using qualitative thematic analysis software 'MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020'.

The transcripts of the written feedback were fed into the software. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), the data were tagged with codes and sub-codes. Then with the help of codes and sub-codes, themes were generated as shown in Figure 1:
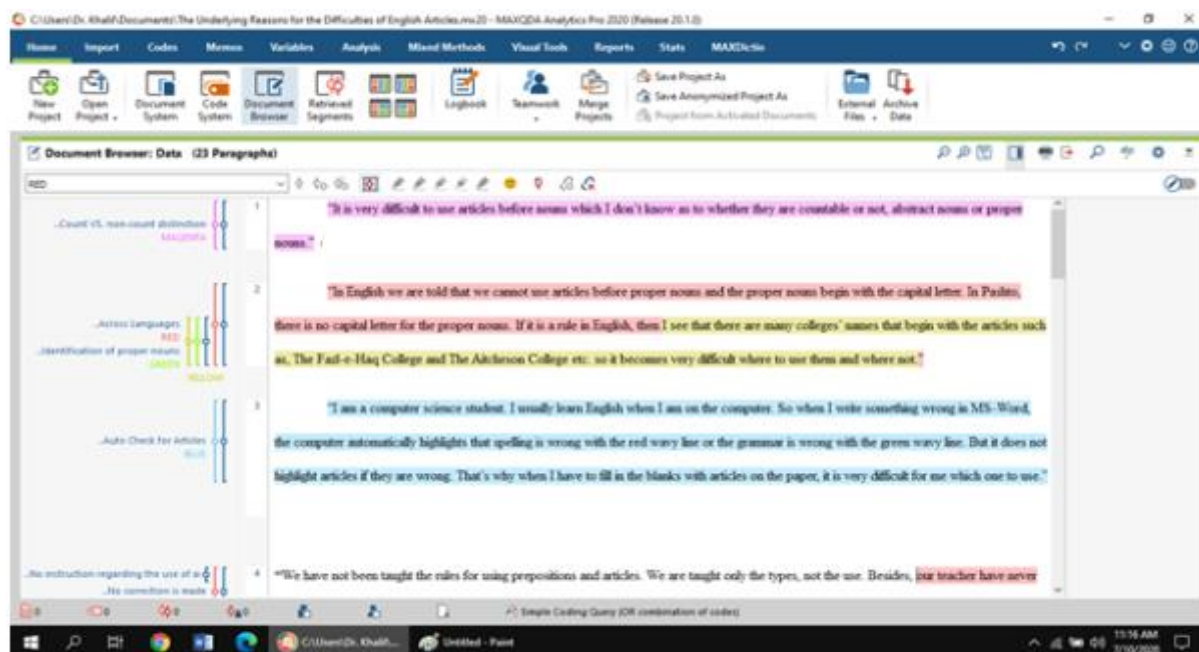

Figure 1. Screenshot of segmentation of the text into codes and themes

Code is a word or phrase that acts as a label for a segment of text, whereas, theme is an implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas. It is considered a thread of underlying meaning implicitly discovered at the interpretative level and elements of subjective understandings of participants. (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Eight themes were identified with the help of codes and sub-codes. Figure 2 shows the eight codes representing eight themes.
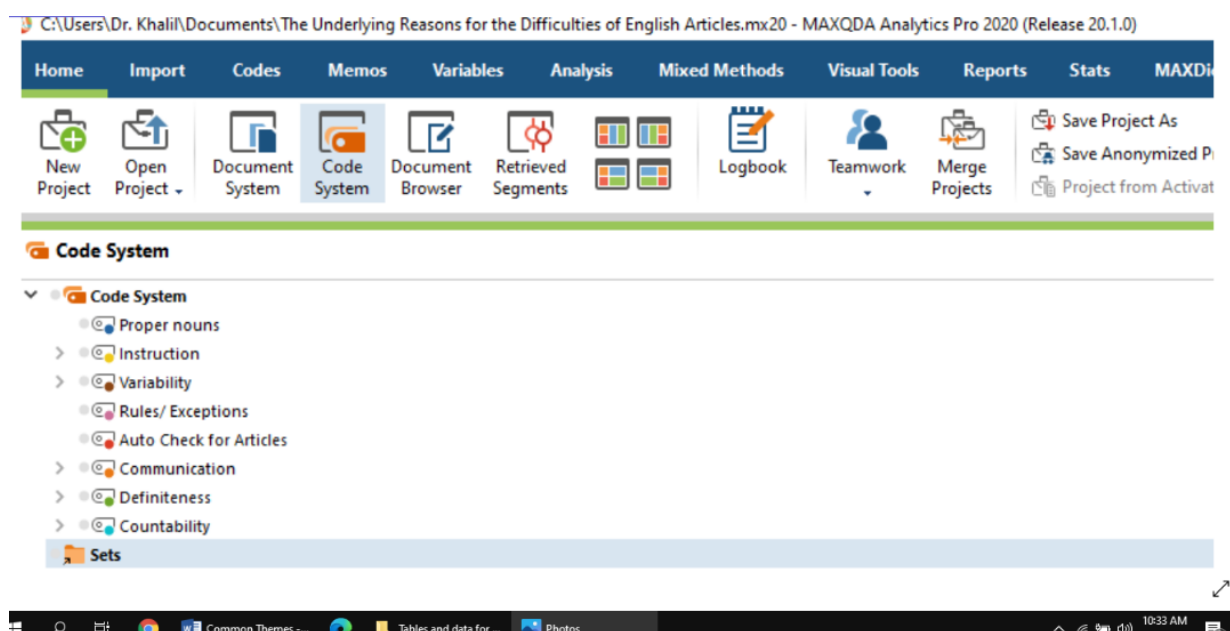
Figure 2. Screenshot of codes as labels for recurring themes

4. Results

In their written feedback, all the participants came up with different reasons for the difficulties in the use of English articles in which some were common, while the others were different from the others. The common reasons, though their wordings were different, were considered as one theme and were labeled with a code. The recurring themes were indicated by the frequency (f) of the themes, i.e. how many times a theme was repeated by the participants.

Eight themes as the underlying reasons for the difficulties in the use of English articles were identified and were tagged with their codes. They are summarized in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Codes, Themes and Frequencies

S.No.	Codes	Themes	Frequency
1	Proper nouns	The difficulty in identification of proper nouns	13
2	Instruction	The use of articles are not taught in classroom	13
3	Variability	The difficulty arises due to the variability of nouns across language, abstract and physical level, and instruction versus real world experiences	23
4	Rules/Exceptions	There are no established rules for the use of English articles	7
5	Auto check for articles	There is no auto check for the articles in computer programs	7
6	Communication	Communication (conveying meaning) is preferred to the correct use of articles by the students as well as teachers	16
7	Definiteness	Definite and indefinite nouns distinction is very difficult as to what noun and where it is definite and what noun and where it is indefinite	30

| 8 | Countability | The identification of count/non-count, and singular/plural nouns is a source of difficulty | 9 |

Then the percentages of the frequencies of the themes and the number of the students who contributed to a particular theme(s) were calculated for the ease of discussion which are given in Figures 3 and 4.
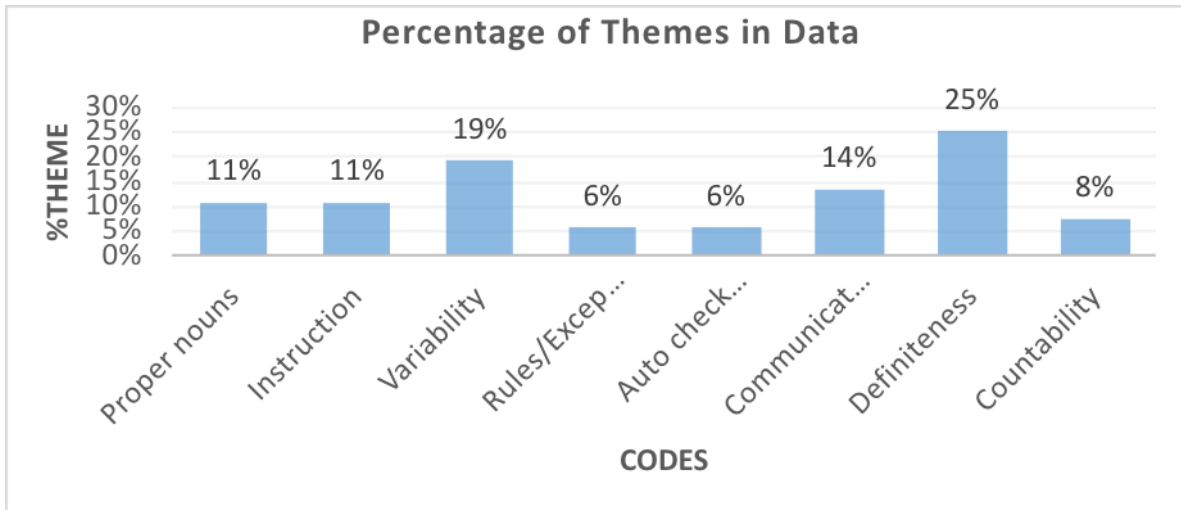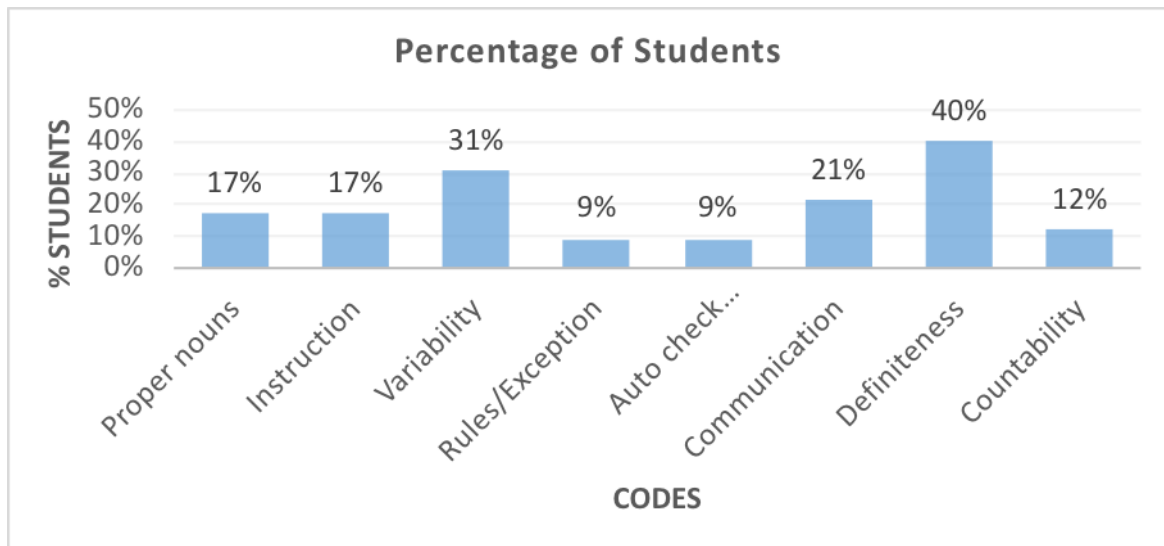
Figure 3. Percentage of themes

Figure 4. Percentage of the students contributing to themes

5. Discussion

The adult Pashto learners of English brought forth in their written feedback a number of reasons that cause the underlying difficulties for the use of the English articles.

5.1. The difficulty in the identification of Proper Nouns

The idea that the learners face difficulty in the identification of proper nouns was repeated in the feedback 13 times and 17% students recorded this notion as given in figures 3 and 4 in results. Sometimes proper names create problems for the learners in using article before them. They get confused when they see the names such as pointed out in the following feedback, the instances of 'University of Peshawar' in contrast with 'University of the Punjab'. Peshawar and Punjab are both proper names but the latter takes 'the' while the former not. The students are taught in classrooms that a proper noun (name) does not take the definite article, but still they see the instances in the names of such places as universities and colleges.

> "It is difficult for me to use *'the'* or *'a'* or to drop them both before some nouns. I get confused when I see that the name of our university is '*University of Peshawar*' but that of Punjab is '*University of the Punjab*'. Peshawar and Punjab are both proper places but one takes *'the'* and the other not. This example creates confusion for me. Besides, In Pashto, there is no capital letter for the proper nouns."

5.2. The use of articles are not taught in classroom

Out of 75 participants, 17% complained against the method of instruction and the attitudes of the teachers towards articles. This idea was repeated 13 times in the feedback. No appropriate rules for the articles use are taught at school. The students are only taught that 'a/an' and 'the' are articles. They are not taught as to what are they? When and where are they used? Besides, their errors in using the English articles are neither properly checked nor corrected. Only it is taught that 'a' and 'an' are indefinite articles and 'the' is called definite article as it is evident from the following comment:

> "We have not been taught the rules for using prepositions and articles. We are taught only the types, not the use. Besides, our teacher have never bothered to correct them for us. They just see to the meaning and the sense what we write or speak. They correct the other things such as full-stops, commas, question mark and the spelling but not articles. That's why I make errors in using them."

This point is also very much important in the sense that most of the teachers particularly the science teachers when they are checking a written project, papers or homework, they just look into the communicative aspect of writing. If the text make sense to them, it is OK even if all the articles have been used wrongly.

5.3. Variability of Nouns

The variability of nouns is three-fold which are indicated by the sub-codes, i.e. variability across languages, variability at abstract and physical levels, and variability in instruction and the real-world experiences. The difficulty in the use of arises due to the variability of nouns across language, abstract and physical level, and instruction versus the real-world experiences. This idea was repeated in results 23 times and 31% students contributed to this idea. The variability in the nature of nouns across languages is one of the sources of difficulty in the use of English articles as it is indicated in the following comment:

> "For me articles are very difficult especially when I write I don't know whether to put '*a*', '*the*' or not to put at all before a noun because sometimes nouns in our own language are plural but in English they are singular like fruit, advice etc. They are countable nouns in Pashto, but in English, they are uncountable. Thus I get confused what article to put before them and either not to put at all."

This difficulty arises due to the L1 transfer effect. When a noun in L1 is countable and in L2 it is uncountable or vice versa, the students translate the countability of nouns to L2 and thus use a wrong article before the noun concerned.

The variability of nouns at physical and abstract levels creates problems in using the English articles. For example cattle, money and fruit are physically countable. We can count the number of cattle, number of bills and number of fruit at physical level, but at abstract level, they are non-count as shown in the following comment:

> "For me the problem is I don't recognize a noun. I get stuck when it comes to counting. Sometimes, physically and at abstract level, a noun does not match. For example money, cattle and fruit are physically countable, but they don't take plural form. This dual nature of nouns at physical and abstract levels is problematic."

So it is advisable for the teachers that the comparative concepts of variability of nouns at physical as well as at abstract level in the target language and in their mother tongue should be highlighted to the learners.

The variability in instruction and the actual experiences also create problems for the learners in using the English articles. This variation is evident from the following comment:

> "These are tricky words for me because we are taught in schools that 'coffee' and 'water' non-count nouns and we should not use article '*a*' before them. But very next time I see in English movies when a person places order, he says, "Bring me *a* coffee please!" or "Bring me *a* water please!" So what is this?

5.4. There are no fixed rules for the use of English articles

There are no fixed rules for the use of English articles. This point was repeated 7 times in results and 9% students contributed to it. It is true that there are so many

exceptions to the rules of learning English articles that the students get confused as to whether it is a rule or exception. It is highlighted in the following comment:

"There are no specific rules for using or dropping the articles. I mean there are no fixed rules for learning articles and prepositions. Even if the rules are there, exceptions are more than the rules. Moreover, in English we are told that we cannot use articles before proper nouns and the proper nouns begin with the capital letter. If it is a rule in English, then I see that there are many colleges' names that begin with the articles such as, The Fazl-e-Haq College and The Aitcheson College etc. so it becomes very difficult where to use them and where not. I get confused as to whether it is the rules or exception."

5.5. There is no auto-check for the articles in computer programs

In the modern days of computer technology, most of the adult learners of English (L2) are accustomed to computer. Most of the time, they read and type text in Microsoft Office. The MS-Word, for example, is set automatically to check their grammar as they type a text. When they make a grammatical error, it highlights it with a wavy green line. But unfortunately, it does not highlight the misuse of the English articles

"I am a computer science student. I usually learn English when I am on the computer. So when I write something wrong in MS-Word, the computer automatically highlights that spelling is wrong with the red wavy line or the grammar is wrong with the green wavy line. But it does not highlight articles if they are wrong. That's why when I have to fill in the blanks with articles on the paper, it is very difficult for me which one to use."

It is a noteworthy point because today is the age of computer, students read e-books and write text in MS-Word. They learn a lot from computer. The computer automatically highlights their spellings and other grammatical errors but of course they don't highlight the misuse of the English articles.

Moreover, this has been highlighted 7 times by 9% students. It is noteworthy for the computer software developer to include into their grammar check, the use of the English articles check too.

5.6. Communication is preferred to the correct use of articles

Articles are usually neglected by the learners as well as teachers when it comes to conveying the meaning. They think that a message can be sent across without bothering for the appropriateness of article use. This idea has been repeated in the feedback 16 times by 21% students. As the learners don't attach any extrinsic value to the articles, so they don't even bother to take pains in learning them. Besides, the teachers in general and science teachers in particular, don't mind the erroneous use of the English articles. This point highlights the attitude of the students as well as the teachers towards learning of the English articles. Unless they have positive attitude

towards mastering the English article system, they cannot become proficient users of articles.

> "It is a fact that writing articles are very difficult when we have to fill in the blanks with them but in normal they are not necessary whether to write one or the other. For me it is enough to communicate my idea and that can be done without the correct use of them."

We have not been corrected by our teachers in the articles and prepositions. So we think if the teacher does not say anything and we are OK in conveying our messages because they don't mind.

The students and teachers hold the view that from the communication perspective, the erroneous use of articles generally does not put any hindrance in conveying the message—which results in the wrong use of articles. Therefore, many learners of English as a second or foreign language do not focus on the labor required for learning the English articles (Master, 1997). Since writing is the most advanced level of proficiency, therefore, a greater degree of accuracy is needed for writing especially for academic writing. Thus the accurate article does not only provide a window into the learning of the language but also for a precise thought and an accurate expression (Master 1997).

5.7. Definite and indefinite nouns distinction is very difficult

The identification of the concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness is the most chanted problem in this study, i.e. 30 times this difficulty was highlighted by 40% participants. It means this problems needs an urgent focus because a huge bulk of the sample raised this point. As pointed out by Miller (2005) that the concept of definiteness is the most problematic in using the English articles. It is comparatively easier for the learners to use indefinite articles, i.e. 'a' and 'an' but it is difficult for them to use' the' or drop it. They are taught that 'the' is used before definite nouns. But in some cases, some nouns sometimes seem to them as definite and sometimes indefinite. If they don't know the definite or indefinite nature of a noun, how is it possible for them to use an article before them?

> "We have been taught to use 'a' before singular nouns that begins with consonant sounds, and 'an' before a noun that begins with a vowel sound. So it is easy for us to use these two. But for me the use of 'the' is difficult because we are told to use 'the' when the noun is definite. But I cannot decide which noun is definite and which is not. For me it is difficult either to use 'the' or to drop it in most cases."

This point provides a good insight for the pedagogy of English article system that before using articles, the concept of the students should be made very clear about the definite and indefinite noun phrases.

5.8. Countability—the identification of count/non-count, and singular/plural nouns is a source of difficulty

Another reason for the difficulty in the use of English articles emerged in the results was the distinction between the count/non-count nouns and singular plural nouns. The difficulty, in most cases, is either grounded in the variability of nouns across languages as discussed earlier or the lack of plural inflection in the nouns particularly non-count nouns. This difficulty is has been repeated in the study 9 times by 12% students and is evident from the following comment:

> "It is very difficult to use articles before nouns which I don't know as to whether they are countable or not, whether they are singular or plural in English because we have to use articles according to them. Sometimes I get confused whether the thing (noun) in a sentence is singular or plural so that I could put article before them. I know that singular noun takes 'a' or 'an' but I cannot identify exactly the noun, not all the times but sometimes."

This insight is very useful in learning and teaching English articles which means countability, particularly the concept of number (singular or plural) is crucial in using the articles. Unless we come to know that a certain NP is singular or plural, countable or non-countable, we cannot decide which article to use before them. This problem lurks particularly in case of non-count nouns. This point is in line with the study of Butler (2002) that the notion of countability is the most difficult problem in articles use.

6. Conclusion

The present study focuses on finding out the underlying difficulties in the use of English articles by the adult Pashto speakers. There are three groups of subjects (25 each) according to their educational level, i.e. Intermediate, Bachelor and Masters. By analyzing their experiences in the form of written feedback, the researcher finds some useful insights that the underlying reasons for the difficulties in the use of English articles were found to the concepts of definiteness/indefiniteness of nouns, variability of nouns, learners/teachers 'attitudes towards articles/ preference to communication, pedagogical instructions, identification of proper nouns, countability, no fixed rules for articles use and lack of articles check in computer programs, respectively.

Contrary to the findings of Butler (2002) where the most difficult reason for the difficulty in the use of artless was countability, the current study found it to be the distinction between definite and indefinite nouns, i.e. 40% students raised this point.

The study highlights the importance of paying attention to the variability of nouns across language, comparing the physical and abstract sides of nouns, and also justifying finding the contrary examples in real life to instruction if they are exceptions.

The teachers may improve their students' understanding of English articles by in the light of this study and they can refute the claim made by Gass and Selinker (2008) that "the English article system appears to be virtually impermeable to instruction". The teachers and the learners both need to have positive attitudes towards learning

and teaching of English articles. They ought to check properly the use of the articles and motivate the students to use them correctly. Furthermore, the rules of article use should be taught based on understanding of the categories of English nouns and their use in different contexts. The rules of article use are suggested to be taught together with examples and contexts. Furthermore, the teachers are supposed to pay attention to make the learners realize the importance of the correct use of the English articles. Yamada and Matsuura (1982) suggest that learners should be required to pay more attention to the article system so that they can improve their mastery of the English articles. Most of time, the students make errors in using English articles just because they do not care about the use of English articles, for they think that a wrong article will not change the meaning of their utterance. Therefore, the learners are required to pay attention to the use of the articles in their discourse particularly in academic writing.

Acknowledgements

The Research and Publication Ethics Statement

The Ethics Committee/Board approval for this study was obtained from University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir Ethical Committee/Board in 07/09/2020 by No 368/ORIC/2020). No ethical considerations were violated in this study.

The Conflict of Interest Statement

In line with the statement of Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), we hereby declare that we had no conflicting interests regarding any parties of this study.

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