

The English Language And Its 'Articles' : Use and Misuse

Abstract

The present paper proposes to examine the errors made by students in the use of articles. Four groups of twenty each were given a questionnaire to test their grammatical skills. It was noticed that errors in the use of articles were of various kinds and due to diverse reasons. A detailed analysis was undertaken and the conclusion summed up. This article aims to set it forth in detail.

Keywords: Articles, Errors, Reasons

Introduction

The present paper aims at studying and analysing the errors committed by the students in the use of articles. Eighty students were selected from the various colleges of Patiala region. The selected participants were divided into four groups of twenty each. Two parameters formed the basis of the division, viz. their medium of instruction Punjabi vs. English at school and the location of their schools Rural Vs. Urban. Group 'A' (UV) urban vernaculars medium, group 'B' (RV) rural vernacular medium, group 'C' (UE) urban English medium and group 'D' (RE) rural English medium.

Aim of the Study

The Air of this research paper is to examine the error made by the students, while learning English as second Language.

The analysis of the collected data shows that the incorrect use of articles seems to be one of the most problematic area for the learners of English. The wrong use of articles was observed commonly and frequently in the students of four groups i.e. group-A (UV) urban-vernacular, group-B (RV) rural vernacular, group-C (UE) urban English medium and group 'D' (RE) rural-English medium. Three types of errors in the use of articles were observed in the present study.

1. Omission of articles
2. Insertion of articles
3. Interchange of articles

Table 1 below shows the number and types of articles errors committed by the four groups.

Table 1
Analysis of errors in the usage of articles

Types of Errors	Group A (Urban- Vernacular Medium)	Group B (Rural- Vernacular Medium)	Group C (Urban- English Medium)	Group D (Rural- English Medium)
Omission of Articles				
Omission of 'the'	25.45%	27.27%	25.45%	21.82%
Omission of 'A' and 'An'	26.42%	33.02%	21.70%	18.87%
Subtotal	26.09%	31.07%	22.98%	19.88%
Insertion of Articles				
Insertion of 'the'	28.57%	31.43%	11.43%	28.57%
Insertion of 'A' and 'An'	38.54%	31.25%	10.42%	19.79%
Sub-total	34.34%	31.33%	10.84%	23.49%
Wrong use of Articles				
'A' instead of 'the'	31.58%	31.43%	10.53%	36.84%
'A' instead of 'an' and vice versa	25.00%	31.25%	6.25%	12.50%
'the' instead of 'A' and 'An'	30.36%	31.33%	10.71%	33.93%
Confusion between 'A' 'an' and 'one'	30.33%	21.05%	0%	0%
Subtotal	30.17%	30.85%	9.57%	29.79%
Total	30.16%	31.12%	15.20%	23.52%

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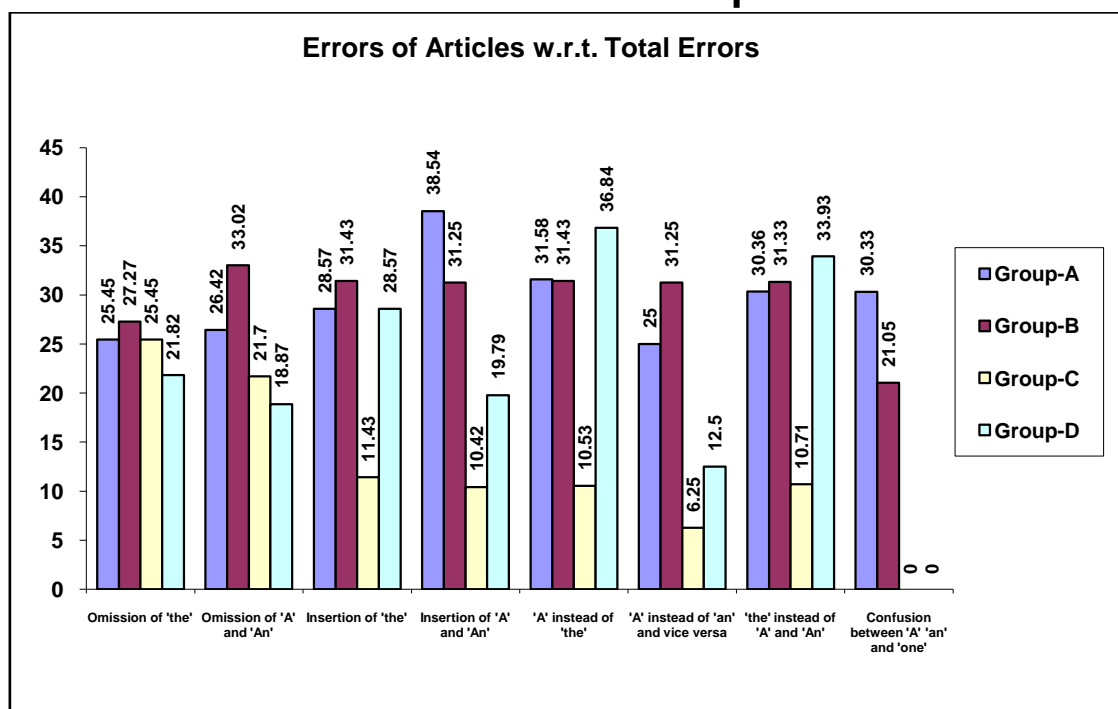


Figure 1 : Percentage of errors in the use articles.

It is clear from the table 1 that omission of articles is found in all the groups: 26% occurred in group A, 31.07% were found in group B, 37 of 64 instances (22.98%) were found in group C and 19.88% occurred in group 'D'. It is worth mentioning here that according to statistics, a few students can affect the high frequency of occurrence. It is being noticed that out of the 64 article errors of the Group C, 21 were made by three subjects. An analysis of the data collected through tests shows that the incorrect use of articles seems to pose a great difficulty for almost all the students both from the English medium as well as Punjabi medium schools. The reason might be that the students are not in the habit of using them in their mother-tongue. The article system does not exist in Punjabi and Hindi which is the first language of most of them. This leads to language transfer. The second contributory factor is the overgeneralization in the use of English articles among Indian learners.

In the discussion that follows, the errors related to the use 'a', 'an' and 'the' have been delineated. In the course of the present research work it was noticed that the students commit various types of errors when articles have to be used. Sometimes they omit articles altogether. At other times they use wrong articles. Samples from the students' performance are discussed below.

Omission of 'the'

1. We must take safety precautions while walking on ____ road.
2. But not in ____ rural areas.
3. I like Diwali ____ most.
4. His residence is behind ____ phul theatre.
5. There is everything available in ____ cities easily.

Omission of 'a' and 'an'

6. ____ thief has stolen my watch.
7. He is not ____ honorable man.
8. I like to become ____ singer.

9. Now I am in ____ college.

10. lot of mosquitoes dwell on dirty water.

It seems to be very easy to pin point the sources of errors in most of the cases. Yet it was very difficult to identify the reason of omission of articles especially in the case of group 'B' and 'A' where the subjects are not aware of sound distinction as in sentences No. 7 where 'h' has a mute sound and takes 'an' article. Sometimes the teaching strategies employed by teachers in teaching articles are responsible for errors like this. The students are generally taught that 'an' is used only before the letters a, e, i, o, u which leads to the error of dropping articles, especially before 'h'. It is observed that the students have not mastered this particular usage of the identified articles even after several years of training. It is possible that the students transfer the pattern of the native language to facilitate new learning. But, here the students are applying their previous knowledge of no article usage in the task of English use. Apart from the influence of the first language, the omission of articles can be seen in terms of 'redundancy reduction' (Richards 1974). The study shows that the students, in order to reduce linguistic burden, simply delete articles in the process of simplification.

Insertion of 'a' and 'an'

11. I have a many oxes.
12. His wife is *an* intelligent.
13. My favorite singer is *a* Amrita Pritam.
14. He is a very tall and smart.
15. When I go to a Ludhiana.

Insertion of 'the'

16. *The* meat is expensive.
17. I like *the* Patiala.
18. I shall give *the* free education to poor.
19. The Indian army always save *the* my country.
20. I pray to *the* God.

On the other hand the high frequency of errors in the insertion of articles as in group 'A' (34.34%), group 'B' (31.06%) and in group 'D' (23.49%) is the result of over-emphasis on article usage. The students have mastered the rule that a noun must have an article preceding it but forget that there is another sub rule that states that a proper noun does not need an introductory article. The subjects of group 'A' (UV) and 'B' (RV) used the article 'a' before a proper noun. For example, sentence no. 13 and 15 is a appropriate example of the same. The use of definite article is also not feasible in all proper nouns as in sentence no. 17. Some of the errors are due to the confusion between the countable and uncountable nouns as illustrated in sentence no. 16 above.

Through the analysis, it is being observed that students of group A (UV), B (RV) and D (RE) are familiar with the rule that article 'an' is added before a vowel sound but are unaware that 'intelligent' is an adjective. The percentage or number, of correct responses is strikingly high in group 'C' (UE) as compared to the other three groups. It may be the result of the emphasis on spoken English in their schools.

'a' in place of 'the'.

21. India is also a best tourist place (the)
22. My brother is a captain of this team (the)
23. I saw a result (the)
24. He is a best player (the)
25. A film was very interesting (the)

'the in place of 'a'

26. I will bring *the* sweater for you.
27. India is *the* big country.
28. My mother is *the* beautiful woman.
29. *The* cool air is blowing.

The tendency to use 'the' article in place of 'a' is relatively strong amongst the students of group 'A' (UV) (30.36%), (B) (RV) (31.33%) and D (RE) (33.93%). They seem to have the knowledge that a noun needs an article and knowledge of this rule makes them interchange articles.

A frequent error was observed in sentence number 29, 'The cool breeze is blowing', which is approximately done wrongly by most of the students.

'a' instead of 'an'

30. There is a ox.
31. My father is a honest man.
32. Because I am a Indian woman.

Confusion between 'a' 'an' and 'one'

33. My village has a *one* swimming pool.
34. I wanted to be a *one* airhostess.
35. I have *an* credit card.

Conclusion

A frequent error noticed during the analysis of data was an apparent confusion between a, an, and one. The students particularly of group B, (RV) often use 'a' or 'an' in addition to 'one'. The distinction between 'a' and 'an' remains vague in the minds of students. They are not clear as to whether the sound has to be taken into consideration or spelling as in sentence number 31. Lack of proper knowledge regarding the use of articles easily traps the students in the confusion. The substitution of 'an' for 'a' in sentence number 35, reflects the nature of lapses or mistakes that can occasionally occur. This type of error is found only in the group 'C'. (UE) students.

References

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