

The Relationship between EFL Learners' Proficiency Level and Their Performance on a Test of English Articles

Abolfazl Mosaffa Jahromi, Mahmoud Mobaraki*

Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, Jahrom University, Iran, Jahrom, P.O. Box: 74135111

*Corresponding author: mmobaraki@jahromu.ac.ir

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Abstract This study was attempted to investigate the relationship between the learners' level of proficiency and their use of articles. Only definite and indefinite articles have been selected for investigation among the numerous types of articles in English language. The present study also examined the use of articles across the factor of gender. Participants were asked to report their used definite and indefinite articles, after which they were asked to provide answers to the TOEFL test. The results of the participants' performance on the proficiency test were correlated with their use of definite and indefinite articles. The results of the Correlation Coefficient indicated that there were strong, positive, and significant correlations between article use and the level of proficiency of the learners. To examine whether or not differences exist in male and female students' article use, an Independent-samples t-test was computed. The results showed that the preferences for the definite and indefinite articles differed regarding their gender.

Keywords: *proficiency, gender, definite article, indefinite article*

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1. Introduction

A great number of studies in second language (L2) acquisition have shown that L2 learners experience difficulties in acquiring the structures of the target language which are different from those in their native language. English language articles are a good example of the constructions that instantiate a potential learnability problem because they are superficially very similar to the articles in the native language of the learners, in this study Persian, but they possess idiosyncratic morphological and syntactic properties.

The English definite article is among challenging linguistic elements that learners of English feel difficulty with due to its complexity of functions [1-6]. The source of this difficulty has been in focus in many researches [7,8,9,10]. According to Liu and Gleason [11] these studies examined the use of "the" as a whole but results from Master [3] implied that "certain uses of the definite article might be more difficult than others" [11]. Master [12] refers to the importance of the articles in the acquisition of the target language and explains the scarcity of attention to the article system. It has also been observed that the acquisition of the definite article "the" occurs before the indefinite article "a" [12,13,14,15].

The indefinite 'a' article constitutes a form for the previously formless noun. In other words, "it serves to create a boundary, which we interpret to mean *a kind or type of* [[12], p. 225]". Therefore, the indefinite article can be used with the singular count nouns, mass nouns, and the evaluative modifiers before a non-count noun to give them boundary. The indefinite article, according to the COBUILD list of the ten most frequent words in English, is less frequent than the definite article. In this list, the definite article is the most frequent article; however, the indefinite article appears in the sixth grade after the definite article.

According to Master [12], "the general function of 'the' is to single out or identify, or to indicate that the speaker either presumes a noun to be singled out and identified for the hearer or instructs the hearer to do so (p. 225)." Iranian language learners experience difficulties in using the definite article since their native language does not possess the indefinite article 'the'. Because of this reason, they may delete the indefinite article in the sentences where it is required, or else they use it in contexts where no article is required.

Regarding the significance of the instruction on the use of articles, Master [16] has proposed a technique to incorporate the article instruction into the language classrooms. The system which Master has introduced is called the Binary Schema system. According to this system, the two aspects of articles, i.e., the identification

and the classification can be introduced to the students before the explicit instruction is provided. Students can be familiarized with the concept of classification by being instructed to categorize an object into classes. Identification of the articles can be achieved by asking the learners to determine the categories within each class.

After having practiced the concepts of classification and identification, the instructor can have the students practice the elements of the identification and classification. Master [16] has proposed that the teacher can write the elements of the classification and identification on the board. Figure 1 shows the elements of the identification and classification which need to be separately practiced in the classroom.

Classification (<i>a, the</i>)	Identification (<i>the</i>)
Count/non-count	
First mention	Subsequent mention
	Ranking adjectives
	Shared knowledge
Defining post modification	Limiting post modification
Partitive <i>of</i> -phrase	Descriptive <i>of</i> -phrase
Intentional vagueness	
General characteristics	
Existential <i>there</i> and <i>it</i>	Generic <i>the</i>
Classified proper nouns	Proper nouns (<i>'s</i> and <i>the</i>)
Idiomatic phrases	Idiomatic phrases

Figure 1. Summarized aspects of classification and identification (taken from Master, [16])

After the practice of the concepts of identification and classification, the instructor needs to introduce the students with the notions of first and subsequent mention. That is, it is important for the students to know that if the item is being talked about for the first time, the speaker is required to bring it with the indefinite article because it is indefinite or unknown to the listener. However, if the speaker has previously mentioned an item and aims to use it again, s/he needs to use the definite article because the noun is identified and known for the listener.

According to Master [16], at the beginning levels of proficiency it might not be advisable to introduce the articles explicitly to the students. Once learners are in the intermediate level of proficiency, they are more conscious about the target language system than they were before; therefore, they have more systematic knowledge about the use of articles. Thus, teachers can use more cognitive approaches to teach the articles, such as the Binary Schema [16].

According to Anderson (as cited in [16]), when learners are in the advanced level of proficiency, they move from the declarative knowledge to the procedural knowledge.

At the advanced level of proficiency, learners use the rules automatically and rarely attend to the structure of the sentence because they try to convey the meaning. Therefore, when learners engage in communication, they can use the articles and can monitor their use of articles and prevent any future errors. Consequently, at this level it is better to have a more lexical approach than a linguistics one. Because when learners engage in communication, they can use the articles and they can monitor their use of articles and prevent any future errors.

2. Statement of the Problem

Most previous studies have focused on the overall use of articles by language learners. The present study has mapped out a detailed picture of factors possibly influencing the use of articles by investigating into how participants with different levels of proficiency used the definite and indefinite articles. This study also aimed at investigating the differences between male and female learners in using the articles.

3. Significance of the Study

The acquisition of articles and their use has not been widely researched, as this is a relatively delicate area of inquiry. When we examine the articles from a linguistic perspective, a contradiction emerges. According to the universal hypothesis, learners are born with an inner ability to learn the language, on the other hand, research on the use of second language structures mostly focuses on how these learned structures are used. Therefore, there is an assumption that the low proficiency learners do not use the articles accurately since they are not familiar with the target language system. As they become more proficient, they tend to use the articles in appropriate contexts.

A further motivation for this study has come from the differences between male and female learners in the use of articles. It seems that evidence is needed to test this assumption to confirm or question it; particularly, the lack of research into the factor of gender as a potential affecting factor warrants closer inspection.

4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The following research questions were proposed:

1. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' level of proficiency and their performance on the use of English articles?
2. Is there any difference between the learners' gender and the use of English articles?

The above research questions lead to the statement of the following null hypotheses:

H₀₁. There is no relationship between EFL learners' level of proficiency and their performance on the use of English articles.

H₀₂. There is no difference between the learners' gender and the use of English articles.

5. Participants

The participants of the present study included 120 undergraduate students studying English language in Azad University and Animation in Elmi-Karbordi University, Iran. There should be noted that it was entirely up to the students to decide whether they wanted to take part in the study. All of the learners were the native speakers of Persian learning English as a foreign language. Since one of the purposes of the present study was to investigate the differences between male and female learners in the use of definite and indefinite articles, 110 participants were females and 10 of whom were males. The age range and the language spoken at home for all of the participants of this study were the same.

Regarding the fact that the purpose of the study was to correlate the level of proficiency of the learners with their use of articles, the learners were asked to take the TOEFL test.

6. Instrumentation

Two instruments were used in this study to elicit data on learners' use of definite and indefinite articles and their level of proficiency.

6.1. TOEFL

The TOEFL test was administered to the learners because they were assumed to have the ability and the required capacity to understand the TOEFL reading passages. This test was taken from the TOEFL Preparation Kit (2003). The TOEFL preparation Kit has been tested for validity and reliability and therefore is a trustable instrument to use in order to elicit the learners' abilities and knowledge. The reading comprehension questions required the learners to provide answers to the questions related to the text. There were a variety of questions including main idea questions, directly answered detailed questions, and implied detailed questions. In addition to the reading comprehension part of the TOEFL test, the structures section was also used to examine the learners' employed definite and indefinite articles. The structure section of the TOEFL test measures the learner's ability to recognize language that is appropriate for Standard English. In other words, the structure part of the TOEFL test measures the linguistic competence of the learners.

6.2. Article Test

In order to test the learners' use of definite and indefinite articles in English, the article test was used. This article test was aimed at assessing the learners' knowledge of the articles. The learners' were given adequate time to provide answers for the test. The results of this test were then correlated with the learners' scores on the TOEFL test to examine their use of the articles.

7. Design of the Study and Data Analysis

The design of the present study falls into the category of an ex post facto design taking into account the

following reasons: the present study did not examine a causal relationship between the variables, there was not any instructional treatment to bring about a change, there was no random selection of the subjects nor was there a control group, and the researcher did not have control over the variables. According to Hatch and Farhady [17], "ex post facto designs are used when the researcher does not have control over the selection and manipulation of the independent variable (p. 26)." The schematic representation of this design is:

$$\begin{array}{cc} G1 & T1 \\ & G2 \quad T2 \end{array}$$

For the first research question, a Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was used and for the second research question, an Independent Samples t-test was calculated.

As has been mentioned in the foregoing, the present study sought to ascertain the relationship between the EFL learners' use of definite and indefinite articles and their proficiency level. This study was also an attempt to investigate the differences between female and male participants and their use of articles.

The present study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' level of proficiency and their performance on the use of English articles?
2. Is there any difference between male & females in the use of English articles?

8. Results

As explicated before, in order to examine the fact that if any increase or decrease in the proficiency level of learners has a relationship with any increase or decrease in the use of articles, learners' scores on the TOEFL test were correlated with their use of articles. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to investigate the first research question. Also, given the fact that the present study aimed at investigating the differences between the female and male participants in the use of articles, the Independent-samples t-test was run.

Research Question No. 1: Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners' level of proficiency and their performance on the use of English articles?

Firstly, the descriptive statistics were computed for both the TOEFL test and the use of articles. Table 1 demonstrates the descriptive statistics for the TOEFL test.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the TOEFL Test & Use of Articles

	TOEFL	Use of Articles
Mean	28.33	36.63
Std. Deviation	14.829	12.773

A Pearson Correlation Coefficient was conducted to investigate the relationship between the level of proficiency of the learners and their use of articles. The results of the analysis are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. The Relationship between Article Use and Level of Proficiency

		TOEFL	Article
TOEFL	Pearson Correlation	1	.817**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0
	N	120	120
Article	Pearson Correlation	.817**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	
	N	120	120

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results obtained from the correlation coefficient revealed a strong, positive and direct relationship ($r = 0.817$) which is significant at the 0.01 level ($p = 0.000 < 0.01$). It is obvious from the significance of the correlation that the level of proficiency of the participants plays an important role in the appropriate and frequent use of articles.

Research Question No. 2: Is there any difference between male & female language learners in the use of articles?

With regard to the use of articles by male and female participants, the learners of both gender have took part in the present study. The Table 3 below shows the proportion of male and female participants in the present study.

The data analysis for the second research question began with computing the descriptive statistics for the use of articles among both genders. Table 3. exhibits the descriptive statistics.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Article Use across Gender

	Sex	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Article	male	10	49.70	8.782	2.777
	female	110	35.45	12.436	1.186

As Table 3. shows, regarding the mean score and the standard deviation of both participants, the female learners outperformed their male peers in the use of articles. However, in order to reach more reliable results, Independent-samples t-test was computed. Table 4. shows the results.

The results show that the significance level of Levene's test is $p = 0.017$, which means that the variances for the two groups (males and females) are *not* the same. Therefore, the results of the t-test shows that there is a significant difference in the use of articles by the male and female participants and the first null hypothesis is rejected ($t(12.546) = 4.721, p = 0.000$). This means that the female and male participants differed in their use of articles. It is

clear from Table 3 that overall the female participants executed the articles more than their male peers. This finding led to the disconfirmation of the second null hypothesis which pertained to the assumption that there were no differences between male and female participants in the use of articles.

9. Discussion and Conclusions

The present study was an attempt to investigate the possible relationship between the learners' use of articles and their level of proficiency. This study was of significant findings since the issue of English language articles is a multidimensional issue which due to its nature certainly needs more researches and studies.

Of a large number of students, 110 female participants and 10 male participants took part in the present study. The participants were assigned to one of the three proficiency levels, namely beginning, intermediate, and advanced. The participants were asked to provide answers to the article test, i.e., Modern English Exercise for Non-native speakers. Subsequently, pertinent statistical analyses were run which lead to the following results.

9.1. Relationship between Proficiency Level and the Use of Articles

Results obtained from the correlation coefficient indicated that there was a significant and strong relationship between the level of proficiency of the learners and their use of English articles. This strong relationship shows that as schooling progresses, the learners use the language automatically and they are not conscious of the rules governing it. According to Master [12]:

At the high advanced level, when rules of grammar have become largely automatic and thus difficult to consciously correct, a lexical approach to the fine tuning of article usage appears to be an effective pedagogical technique. In tandem with reading and writing development, the articles should be focused upon only as they occur in specific contexts with specific vocabulary, especially the contrast between minimal pairs of lexical phrases with ID and the. This process will have to be repeated with many different lexical items since it can no longer be assumed that learners at this stage will generalize from specific instances. However, learners can be encouraged to foster their own learning of the article system by keeping a tally of their article errors, thus becoming ethnographers of their own learning process. (p. 228)

Table 4. T-test Results for the Article Use by Male and Female Learners

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
									95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Article	Equal variances assumed	5.87	0.01	3.53	118	0.001	14.25	4.02	6.27	22.23
	Equal variances not assumed			4.72	12.54	0	14.25	3.02	7.70	20.80

This finding should not mean that the instructors have to incorporate the instruction on the articles only with the advanced level learners. However, the teachers need to make their students aware of the target language article system even at the lower levels of proficiency. What differs at the lower levels of proficiency is that the teachers should pay attention to the fact that the instruction would be more effective and efficient if they implicitly instruct the articles, either definite or indefinite. One of the best methods to instruct the articles at this level is the use of concrete activities and tasks. In this way, without the conscious awareness of the learners, they can acquire the articles.

9.2. The Differences between Female and Male Learners in the Use of Articles

This study also examined any differences between the male and female learners in the use of definite and indefinite articles. The findings signified a significant difference in the use of articles. It can be concluded that the female learners are more accurate in the use of the target language structures. The fact of the matter, according to the results of the present study, is that the female learners focus on the accuracy of their sentences and are more cautious, yet the male learners are more careless. This conclusion is related to the fact that the acquisition and the use of articles is a very delicate task and requires a great amount of attention.

10. Theoretical Implications

The results of the present study indicated that the level of proficiency of the learners is correlated with their use of articles. Therefore, it can be concluded that the acquisition of the target language structures is not a completely built-in process. There is a major role for the incorporation of instruction of the use of articles.

This study examined the use of definite and indefinite articles. As with the definite article *the*, it does not exist in the mother tongue of the participants. Therefore, according to Master [12], the learners whose mother tongue lacks specific features are one step behind the native speakers of English. They need to create the categories for the non-existent items. Because of this fact “speakers need more time to acquire the article system than do speakers, but they will eventually acquire it [12], p. 228]”.

11. Pedagogical Implications

As is effective for the acquisition of the most aspects of language, instruction is also efficient for the teaching of the article system of the target language. However, the form of the instruction varies with respect to many factors. One of these factors is the learners’ level of proficiency. As with the low proficiency learners, it is best to engage them in activities that require them to use the articles rather than to explicitly describe the article system because at these levels learners are not consciously aware of how the target language system works. The less proficient the learners, the more processing time they need

to exploit in order to compensate for the lack of knowledge. Learners can develop their use of articles if they are regularly required to use them in classroom activities.

With the intermediate proficiency levels, however, it is recommended to provide more frequent instruction on the use of articles. Master [12] best elaborates this position:

At the high intermediate level, once learners have good control of basic structures and vocabulary, they may be ready to turn their attention to the more peripheral aspects of grammar, which include the article system. Since many aspects of article usage are dependent on discourse, the articles should always be taught in tandem with reading and writing skills, especially as an editing skill, since too many article errors may irritate native-speaking readers (e.g. professors), especially if they are not trained in TESOL. (p. 228).

This conscious processing of the target language system weakens with the proficiency of the learners. As the schooling progresses and the knowledge of the learners grows, the learners begin to move from the conscious attention to a more automatic and procedural processing. It is at this stage that the teacher cannot incorporate explicit instruction of the article system because the learners will not pay attention to the corrections as they process the language quickly. Regarding the fact that the advanced learners do go by the oral corrections so fast that they do not internalize them, the teacher needs to provide feedback either in the reading or writing activities. Two different techniques can be utilized for these purposes: spontaneous reactions to the feedback can be closely observed and evaluated; and explicit written feedback can be elicited at regular intervals. In this way the teacher can have the opportunity to understand if her learners are acquiring the target language article system or if they still experience problems with it. They can also utilize this information to decide how much remains for them to learn.

Therefore, the role of the teacher is very special in FLL contexts, as cooperating with the teacher substitutes the aspect of cooperating with native speakers. And the teacher needs to become aware of the needs and purposes of her students in order to best teach the article system or other aspects of the language as well.

12. Suggestions for Further Research

The issue of language articles is a very delicate and significant issue in the acquisition of language. Regarding its vulnerability in the learning process, the present study aimed at examining the issue more closely. However, much remains to be known about the several and numerous issues affecting the use of articles which further studies can compensate.

One of the issues to be investigated is about the mental lexicon, how the hypothesized components of structural knowledge relate to each other and are integrated, and how individuals differ in their knowledge of these different components. This research has shown that even highly proficient learners differ in their ability to use the articles. As the ability to use the articles in appropriate contexts is hypothesized to be part of the mental lexicon, more research needs to be conducted.

Another field of inquiry relates to the measurement of the use of articles in a wider range in different contexts to see if the context in the sentence and the given information affects the choice of articles.

Further research is needed with other groups of learners and teachers both in Iran and with learners of different first languages studying other target languages. Adopting the methods of error analysis, the investigator can search the effect of the native language of learners. In this way, the question of whether the first language of the learners affects their use of articles can be resolved.

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