AN ANALYSIS OF THE ARTICLE ERRORS IN THE WRITTEN ENGLISH OF STUDENTS IN UMAR SULEIMAN COLLEGE OF EDUCATION GASHUA YOBE STATE NIGERIA.

***[1]Abdulwahab Yerima and [2]Salim Muhammad Aji**

[1]Department of Language and Communication, School of General Studies Education, Umar Suleiman College of Education, Gashua Yobe State Nigeria.

[2]Department of Social Science and Humanity, School of General Studies Education, Umar Suleiman College of Education, Gashua Yobe State Nigeria.

*****Corresponding Author Information:-
E-Mail: abdulwahabyerima@yahoo.com
Phone: +2348066173141

Abstract

This study sought to determine article errors made by students undergoing the Nigeria Certificate in Education in their written English in Umar Suleiman College of Education Gashua. This study stems from the fact that the current dominant medium of accessing knowledge globally is the English language. Unfortunately, the reality in Nigeria is that students' performance in English is very poor, despite the fact that it is being the country's official language and the language of instruction in tertiary institution, error of the use of articles were frequently found in the students' written composition of various kinds. The data collected via tests and interview was analyzed using simple percentages. The results of the analysis showed that the most frequently committed errors by students were omission of 'the' definite article and incorrect use of 'a' indefinite article besides interference in their written English. Based on these findings recommendations were made to integrate contrastive analysis and error analysis as well as the use of interactive strategies in teaching to enhance appropriate use of the article in writing.

Keywords: Analysis, Article Errors, Written English, Students

Introduction

An Article is a determiner indicating the specificity of reference of a noun phrase. It helps to show whether the noun is definite or indefinite, specific or nonspecific, countable or uncountable (Eyisi et al., 2014). Article errors; occur probably in the use of English of the learners, due to limited knowledge and understanding of grammatical rules besides the influence of their native language interference. English, being the language of instruction in Nigerian tertiary institutions, presents particular difficulties to learners because it does not always align with the rules of the language of the immediate community.

In the Nigerian educational system, English language proficiency is crucial for academic success and professional advancement. However, many students struggle with mastering the intricacies of English grammar, including the correct use of articles. This is often reflected in the students' written English, where article errors can detract from the clarity and coherence of their written composition.

By focusing on Umar Suleiman College of Education, Gashua this study is aimed at identifying the specific challenges that are faced by students regarding the use of articles in their written English. The institution, like many other higher institutions in Nigeria, is characterized by linguistic diversity, with students coming from various linguistic backgrounds and exposure to different dialects of English. Understanding the factors contributing to article errors among students in Umar Suleiman College of Education, Gashua, educators are to develop targeted interventions and instructional strategies to improve students' proficiency in English grammar. Additionally, the findings of this study

may have implications for curriculum development and teacher training programs in enhancing English language instruction in Nigerian schools (Inoue, 2020).

Article

An article is a part of speech that indicates, specifies and limits a noun. Articles are normally used before nouns and since they are used to speak about the noun, they can be considered as adjectives. An article is described as any of a small set of words or affixes (such as a, an, and the) used with nouns to limit or give definiteness to the application. Ukamaka (2010) defines an article as one of the kinds of a determiner that is used before nouns, that is, a pre-modifier. Articles are a fundamental component of grammar in English and play a crucial role in specifying and identifying nouns. In English, there are three articles: "a," "an," and "the." (Eyisi et al, 2014). Understanding how to use articles correctly is essential for achieving clarity and precision in writing and communication. An article is a word that is used to indicate that a noun is a noun without describing it. For example, in the sentence ‘the man sold a dog’, the article ‘a’ indicates that the word dog is a noun. Articles can also modify anything that acts as a noun, such as a pronoun or a noun phrase (Inoue, 2020).

Articles, including definite (the) and indefinite (a, an), specify or generalize the nouns they precede. Understanding the appropriate use of articles is essential for clarity and precision in written communication. In grammar, articles are a type of determiner that precedes nouns to provide specificity or generalization to the noun they modify. Articles help indicate whether the noun is definite or indefinite, specific or nonspecific, countable or uncountable (Ukamaka, 2010, James, 2013 & Eyisi et al., 2014).

Types of Articles

Ukamaka (2010) and Beason (2005) identify classes of articles in English – 'a', 'an' and 'the'. These articles are divided into two types namely: definite article and indefinite article

Definite Article

Among the three articles, 'the' is said to be the definite article. A definite article is used to determine something that is specific or particular. It is used before plural nouns and also indicates the superlative degree of comparison. Furthermore, it can be used before collective nouns as well (Brown, 2000 & James, 2013).

Examples of Definite Article:

- He sees the goat.
- The Sun sets in the west.

In the first and the second sentence, the nouns 'Goat' 'Sun' and 'west' are proper nouns and are specific and so the definite article has to be used.

- The children are playing cricket.
- The man is playing football.

In the above sentences, the definite article is used to determine the plural noun, 'children' and 'man'.

- This is the world's longest river.
- This is the tallest man.

In the above sentences, the definite article 'the' is used to denote the superlative degree of comparison.

- The crowd sang along with the band.
- The students of the school.

In the above sentence, the definite article is used before the collective nouns, 'crowd' and 'band' as well as 'students' and 'school'

Indefinite Article

The articles 'an' and 'an' are termed as indefinite articles. An indefinite article, as the name suggests, is used to indicate something that is not definite or specific. It can also be used before singular nouns (Ukamaka, 2010 & Eyisi et al 2014).

Of the two indefinite articles ('a' and 'an'), 'an' is used before singular nouns that start with vowel sounds and 'a' is used before singular nouns that begin with consonant sounds (James, 2013 & Inoue, 2020).

Examples of Indefinite Article:

- I have eaten an apple.
- Do you have an orange?
- I saw an elephant.
- She has a pet dog.
- My mother is a doctor.
- My brother gave me a rubber gum.

Error Analysis

In linguistics, Richard et al. (2002) and Vahdatinejad (2008) described an error as the use of a word, speech act or grammatical items in such a way that it seems imperfect and significant of an incomplete learning. It is considered as a systematic deviation which happens when a learner has not learnt something, and consistently gets it wrong. However, the attempts made to put the error into context have always gone hand in hand with either language learning or second-language acquisition process. Keshavarz (2003) and Fang and Jiang (2007) mentioned that errors are 'signals' that indicate an actual learning process taking place and that the learner has not yet mastered or shown a well-structured in the target language.

All the above definitions stress out that an error is a systematic deviation triggered in the language learning process. The occurrence of errors not only indicates that the learner has not learned something yet, but also gives the linguist an idea of whether the teaching method applied is effective or needs to be changed (Sarfraz, 2011). Relatedly, the actual state of the speaker somehow involves and influences the speaker's performance by either causing a good performance or mistakes. Thus, it is quite obvious that there is some kind of interrelationship between competence and performance; somehow, a speaker can perform well if they have had already satisfied linguistic knowledge (Richard, 2002).

Error Analysis Approach

Before the emergence of error analysis approach, contrastive analysis was the dominant approach used in dealing and conceptualizing the learners. This approach has often gone hand in hand with concept of L1 Interference and precisely the interlingual effect, it claimed that the main cause of committing errors in the process of second language learning is the L1, in other words, the linguistic background of the language learners is also a factor that badly affects the production in the target language or second language. Richard (2002) and Fang

(2007) pointed out that contrastive analysis hypothesis claimed that the principal barrier to second language acquisition is the interference of the first language system with the second language system and that a scientific, structural comparison of the two languages in question would enable people to predict and describe which problems are and which are not. Error analysis approach overwhelmed and announced the decline of the Contrastive Analysis which was only effective in phonology (Richard et al., 2002 and Sarfraz, 2011). In addition, the language effect is more complex and these errors can be caused even by the target language itself and by the applied communicative strategies as well as the type and quality of the second language instructions.

Mitchell and Myles (1998) as cited in Keshavarz (2003) proclaimed that errors**,** if studied**,** could reveal a developing system of the student's L2 language and this system is dynamic and open to changes and resetting of parameters. This view is supported by Stark's (2001) study, who also explains that teachers need to view students' errors positively and should not regard them as the learners' failure to grasp the rules and structures but rather should view the errors as process of learning. He subscribes to the view that errors are normal and inevitable features of learning. He draws inference that errors are essential condition of learning.

Error

An error, in applied linguistics, is an unintended deviation from the immanent rules of a language variety made by a second language learner. Such errors result from the learner's lack of knowledge of the correct rules of the target language variety. A significant distinction is generally made between errors (systematic deviations) and mistakes (speech performance errors) which are not treated the same from a linguistic point of view. The study of learners' errors has been the main area of investigation by linguists in the history of second-language acquisition research (Richard, 2002).

In prescriptive linguistic context, an error is used to describe usages of a language that are considered non-standard or otherwise discouraged normatively. Such usages, however, would not be considered true errors by the majority of linguistic scholars. Modern linguistics generally does not make such judgments about regularly occurring native speech, rejecting the idea of linguistic correctness as scientifically untenable, or at least approaching the concept of correct usage in relative terms. Social perceptions and value claims about different speech varieties, although common socially, are not normally supported by linguistics (Sarfraz, 2011).

Linguistic errors as "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker is reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner." He cites an example Does John can sing? where a preceding do auxiliary verb has been used as an error (Douglas, 2015).

Types of Error

Keshavarz (2003), Fang and Jiang (2007) said as far as the intralingual errors are concerned, they result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than language transfer. Richards (2002) enumerates four main types of Intralingual errors as (1) overgeneralization, (2) ignorance of rule restrictions, (3) incomplete application of rules, and (4) false concepts hypothesized. He added further other six sources of errors as: (1) interference, (2) overgeneralization, (3) performance errors, (4) markers of transitional competence, (5) strategies of communication and assimilation, and (6) teacher-induced errors. .

From the discussions above, it is clear that errors are natural, inevitable and an evidence of a creative process in language learning through which language learners test their hypotheses. Errors also constitute a critical pedagogical feedback for ESL teachers to improve and reflect on their own deficiencies in knowledge, lesson plans and teaching methods. (Brown, 2007)

argued that errors made by learners should be of great interest to teachers for the following reasons:

(1) errors enable the teacher to determine the progress the learners have made in language learning;

(2) errors also enable the teacher to know how a learner processes and utilises the language data he/she has provided.

3) errors also expose the strategies the learners adopt in language learning. This gives some insights into the methods/ strategies that are effective with a group of learners and the ones that are not effective in language teaching.

(4) errors are significant to the language teacher as they help him/her in progressively planning and replanning the language lessons in order to improve learners' language proficiency.

(5) learners' errors enable the language teacher to determine the types and sources in order to plan remedial lessons as well as develop teaching materials that are apt.

(7) errors also help the teacher to develop apt teaching and learning resources cued to the areas of learners' language needs.

(8) Most importantly, errors make the teacher to be supportive .

As a matter of fact, a teacher's attitude to learners' errors determines the extent learners progress through the language curriculum. In doing this, a teacher is expected to be positively disposed towards identifying the errors and classifying them based on their types. In addition, identification of the error sources, planning remedial lessons based on the analysis, and contextualizing their uses in classroom activities, will enable the learners make remarkable progress (Basrah, 2013).Considering the importance of grammar in language

teaching and learning, many researchers have paid close attention to grammatical errors amongst the undergraduates.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the common types of article errors that are frequently committed by students in their written English in Umar Suleiman College of Education Gashau; and
2. To examine the factors that contribute to article errors in the written English of students in Umar Suleiman College of Education Gashua.

Research Questions

1. What are the common types of article errors made by students in their written English in Umar Suleiman College of Education Gashua?
2. What factors contribute to article errors in the written English of students in Umar Suleiman College of Education Gashua?

Methodology

A descriptive survey design is chosen for this study. The essence of adopting this research design is to illicit data from the target population through tests and an interview. The data generated therefore will be subjected to statistical analysis for the purpose of drawing necessary conclusions. In addition, the researchers will only identify and analyze the article errors in the students' written composition. The students are comprised of 150 NCE 1, 2 and 3 in Umar Suleiman College of Education, Gashua.

The instrument utilized in the study is a written composition of not less than 250 words on 'How to Make a Pot in my Locality'. This composition is written within thirty (30) minutes in a classroom situation. Thus, before the collection of data, the subjects are informed about

the purpose of the study which is to investigate a research work, and that the test would not affect their final examination result.

The study is limited to the errors analyzed on definite and indefinite article. Data generated are analyzed in simple percentages.

Results

Research question 1

Table 1: Percentage of Article Errors across Different NCE Levels

Level	Number of Students	Total Words Written	Number of Article Errors	Error Rate (%)
NCE 1	55	16,500	320	2.00%
NCE 2	50	15,000	300	1.94%
NCE 3	50	15,000	290	1.93%

The table shows the frequency of article errors across different NCE levels, the total number of words written by students, and the error rate. The data indicates a slight decrease in the error rate as students' progress to higher levels.

Research Question 2

Table 2 Distribution of Types of Article Errors

Types of Error	Frequency	Percentage%
Omission of "the"	400	33.33%
Incorrect use of "a"	300	25.00%
Incorrect use of "an"	200	16.67%

Overuse of "the"	150	12.50%
Incorrect omission	100	8.33%
Other	50	4.17%
Total	1200	100%

The chart highlights that the omission of "the" is the most common error mostly committed by the students with 400 representing (33.33%) percent, followed by the incorrect use of "a" with 300 of (25.00%) and "an" with 200 representing (16.6%). This suggests that students struggle most with definite articles and choosing the correct indefinite article in the students' written English.

Discussion

The above table shows that a total of 1200 errors are noted in the 150 scripts marked. 400 or (33.33%) percent are cases of omission of 'the', 300 or (25.00%) percent of incorrect use of 'a', 20 or (16.67%) percent of wrong use of 'an', 150 or (12.50%) percent of overuse of 'the', 100 or (8.33%) percent of incorrect omission and 50 or (4.17%) percent for others. From the table above, the analysis shows that the students commit more errors on omission of 'the' and incorrect use of 'a' out of the 1200 errors. Generally, the error sources are both inter-lingual and intra-lingual. The differences in the features of the students' native language and English are a major source of errors .Also, the irregularities in the English grammatical rules is a major challenge. Finally, the inability of students to master grammatical rules and apply them appropriately is equally another source of errors of the use articles that are found in their written composition in English language.

The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions in early NCE 1 to address the common issues related to article usage. Teachers should focus on contextual teaching strategies that help students differentiate between definite and indefinite articles, particularly in relation to noun forms. Additionally, incorporating self-assessment tools in the classroom may enhance students' self-awareness and contribute to better language proficiency (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Conclusion

The research has found out that most of the errors the students make when using article in their written English are due to inadequate knowledge of the rules that govern the use of article in a sentence. The students' inabilities to use articles correctly are sometime caused by intralingual and interlingual transfer on the target language (English). These inabilities are as a result of faulty teaching with wrong application of appropriate pedagogy. The students' linguistic home background or the students' negative attitude towards the language constitute other factors. Beyond that, these patterns should be tackled right at the secondary school level. If that is done, there will be no any need of addressing article errors at the tertiary level of education. Also, there are sufficient grounds to believe that these article error patterns can cut across many institutions in the country. At last, the study has established the fact that the NCE 1 students commit a lot of article errors in their use written composition. These errors of the use of articles have direct negative effects on the academic performance of students in schools.

Recommendations

1. Constant drill practice of the use of article in written discourse should be fully encouraged by the teachers as this will improve students' use of English of language in the course of time.
2. Incompetent and unprofessional teachers should not or allowed to teach English language related courses as this will affect the appropriate way the language should be taught.
3. The students should be encouraged to read varieties of genres related to English language in order to make them much more familiar with the rules of grammar especially in the aspect of article.

References:

Basrah, Anis Zulaikha (2013) Grammatical errors committed by ESL upper secondary school learners in writing. A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Education , Universiti Pendidikan. Retrieved 15th Oct., 2015 from www.academia.edu/.../Grammatical_Errors_Committed_by_ESL_Upper.

Beason, L. (2005). *Handbook of English Grammar and Usage*. New York: McGraw Hill Publishing Company.

Brown, G. (2000). *The Grammar of English Grammars*. New York: Grand Central Publishing Company.

Brown, H.D. (2014). *Principle of Language Learning and Teaching.* Pearson Education.

Douglas, B. (2015). *Principles of Language Learning.* New Jersey.

Eyisi et al (2014). *New Concept for Senior Secondary Schools 3*. Ikeja lagos Nigeria. Learn Africa Publishers.

Fang, X and Jiang X. (2007). Error Analysis and the EFL Classroom Teaching.*US- China Education Review.* 4(9), 10-14

Inoue, Y. (2020). Exploring Article Errors among ESL Learners: A case Study of Secondary Schools in Yobe State, Nigeria. *International Journal of English Language Teaching, 8(3), 45 – 58*

James, C. (2013). *Errors in Language Learning and Use: Exploring Error Analysis.* Rout ledge.

Keshavarz, M. (2003). Error analysis and contrastive analysis: error analysis in translation and learner translation corpora. In: Mitchell, R. and Myles, M. (Eds). *Second Language Learning Theories*. New York: Hodder Arnold

Mitchell, R. and Myles, M. (1998).*Second Language Learning Theories.* New York: Hodder Arnold.

Richard, J.C. & Schmidt, R. (2002). *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (3rd Ed.) London: Longman.

Sarfraz, S. (2011). Error Analysis of the Written English Essays of Pakistani Under graduate Students: A Case Study. Asian Transactions on Basic & Applied Sciences.1(3), 29-5.

Stark, L. (2001). *Analyzing the Interlanguage of ASL Natives.* Newark: University of Delaware.

Ukamaka, C.I. (2010). *Complete English Course for Senior Secondary School.* African First Publishers Ltd.

Vahdatinejad, S. (2008). *Students' Error Analysis and Attitude toward Teacher Feedback Using Selected Software:* University Kebangsaan, Malaysia, Bangi.