
PAKISTANI M.PHIL. STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES IN USING THE ENGLISH ARTICLE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

The English article system poses difficulties for English language learners, particularly those whose mother tongues or L1 do not possess the article system as in the English language. This mixed-method study aimed to measure if Pakistani M.Phil. students used the English article system correctly. Moreover, this study also explored the participants' perspectives about the factors which caused problems for them in using the English articles correctly. To achieve these objectives, the present research adapted Miller's (2005) instrument. Through the purposively sampling technique, data was gathered from 108 MPhil students from one of the universities in Balochistan, Pakistan. Overall, the quantitative analysis suggests that the use of correct English articles was a problem for most of the participants. The qualitative data analysis also corresponds with the results of the quantitative data as the participants acknowledged that the English article system caused difficulties for them. From participants' perspectives, such difficulties stem from several factors including lack of reading, absence of articles in participants' L1, government schooling background, teachers' lack of English language proficiency, grammar-based teaching method, and learners' least knowledgeability about the grammatical aspects of the English article system. Based on the findings of this study, pedagogical recommendations are proposed.

KEYWORDS

Articles, English article system, L1 interference, Challenges in the use of English articles

INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of the English articles system has been an area of interest since the beginning of 1970s (Maratsos, 2009). According to Brown (1973), native speakers acquire the appropriate use of articles without making conscious efforts and acquire them early. Nevertheless, learners, whose native or L1 do not possess the article system as in the English language, tend to face the challenges in acquiring or learning the articles (Ionin & Montrul, 2010; Master, 1990; Mizuno, 1999; Romaine, 2003). “In linguistics, an article is often defined as a word (or a determiner) used with a noun to indicate the kind of reference made by the noun” as Harb (2014, p. 88) suggests. There are two types of articles in the English language: the definite (*the*) and indefinite articles (*a/an*) (Leech & Svartvik, 1994). According to Hewson (1972), “the definite and the indefinite article are among the ten most frequent words of English discourse” (p. 131). Similarly, Master (2002) also suggests that the definite article *the* is often used recurrently in the English language. Leech and Svartvik (1994) mentioned that the definite article and the indefinite article *a* or *an* are used for different purposes/functions. According to Richards, Platt, and Platt (1992), the main function of the definite article is to show that the noun refers to a specific example of something. Moreover, they also highlighted that the indefinite article *a* or *an* is mainly used to demonstrate that the noun refers to something general or something that the speakers/writers have not specified.

English articles have different functions and usage (Leech and Svartvik, 1994). Here, some of the main uses are described and discussed so as to highlight the difference between the usage of definite and indefinite articles. Drawing on Murphy's (2019) explanation, the usage of English articles is explained. Moreover, the example sentences are also taken for his book.

First mention and second mention principle

When something is mentioned first time then indefinite article (s) is used. However, something is mentioned second time then definite article is used as can following examples demonstrates:

First mention: “I had a sandwich and an apple for lunch.”

Second mention: “The sandwich wasnot very good but the apple was nice”

General and specific principle

When something is specifically referred to, the definite article is used and when something generally referred to, indefinite article is used as can be seen in the example

below:

General not specific: "Do you have a car?"

Specific: "I cleaned the car yesterday. (=my car)"

As the above-mentioned show, that the main function of the definite article is to show that the noun refers to a specific example of something and the indefinite article a or an is mainly used to demonstrate that the noun refers to something general or something that the speakers/writers have not specified (Richards, Platt, and Platt, 1992). There are many other uses of definite and indefinite articles (for other uses, see Murphy, 2019; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

LITERATURE REVIEW

English article system is the most challenging grammatical aspects to acquire. The English language article includes "a"; "an"; and "the". These words are the most repeatedly used in English (Master, 1997). There is wealth of research which indicate that the article system of English is very much challenging for non-native speakers of English (for detail see, (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Master, 1987; Miller, 2005; Thyab, 2016). More specifically, the languages which do not article system. To put it differently, non-native speakers of English whose L1 lack article system tend to experience challenges in acquiring mastery in English article system. Specifically, Al-Qadi's (2017) investigation aimed to identify and categorize the errors committed by the Arabic EFL speakers in their use of English articles. The intent of the study is also to investigate if Arabic speakers, the Arabic language also does not have article system tends to interfere their usage of the English article system. A mixed method research design was used. Fifty Saudi male EFL learners were asked to complete MCQ test and Surface Structure Taxonomy (SST) technique was used which further classified the errors categories into three main categories, namely omission, addition, and substitution was used to detect errors. In addition, 5 teachers were interviewed. The findings revealed that students' participants made errors in all the three categories identified above. The results of the test and teachers interviewed showed that most of the article errors made were attributed L1 negative transfer. Similar result is drawn by Thyab (2016), the researcher suggests that mother tongue cause the difficulty for the Arabic speakers who are learning English.

Likewise, Chan's (2015) study aimed to measure Cantonese ESL learners' explicit knowledge of English articles. Thirty-three Cantonese ESL learners majoring in the English took part in the study. Survey instrument which consisted closed ranking items and open-ended items was administrated so as to obtain their knowledge about the articles. The result indicated that many participants were confident about the usage, however, they did not regard it as important for the speaking, reading and writing or listening. The respondent lacked the metalanguage knowledge about the article. Based on the study, the researcher suggest that systematic instruction should be given to the

ESL learners to improve their explicit knowledge then they may be able to improve their mastery in the article usage.

Cabuk (2011) conducted a study to investigate the Turkish native speakers if they face difficulties in the English article system in their speaking and writing. There were 20 intermediate students participated in the study. The data was collected by applying two methods: First video recording. The recording was made for a week in the natural classroom setting. The purpose of the video recording was to measure their accuracy in the English article system in learner's oracy. In the second method participants were asked to complete a 37-closed ended item instrument. The purpose of the items was to measure if they correctly use article or not. The findings of the study indicated that the participants face difficulties in using the English article system. Based on the study the researcher suggests it is due to the fact the Turkish language does not have the article system therefore the participants face difficulties in their usage. Furthermore, the researcher suggests the possible reasons for incorrectly using the article system were overgeneralization, negative language transfer and countable and uncountable distinction.

Researchers have reported that learners have experienced challenges in using the correct articles (Ahmed, 2017; Ahmad & Khan, 2019; Chen, 2000). In addition to that, researchers have also identified some of the factors causing difficulties for learners to use the English articles system appropriately (Ahmad & Khan, 2019; Chen, 2000). Specifically, Chen (2000) suggested that for Taiwanese English language learners, English articles could be one of the most difficult structural aspects because their L1 (Chinese) does not have an article system. Furthermore, Chen (2000) also claimed that these learners committed errors because of the influence/interference of their L1. In the context of Pakistan, Ahmed and Khan's (2019) study on Pashto speakers found that they made errors in using the articles because of the difficulty of identifying noun types, NPs environments, and language transfer. Ahmed (2017) also found that MPhil scholars of SBK Women's University Quetta faced difficulty in using the correct English article system. However, what might be the possible factors causing difficulties in using English articles from participants' perspectives is yet to be explored. This study, aimed to measure if Pakistani MPhil students used English articles correctly. Moreover, this study also explored the participants' perspectives about the possible factors which have caused problems for them in using the English article system correctly.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To measure possible challenges Pakistani University social science MPhil students experience when using the English Language Article System in their written English, Quetta, Balochistan.

2. To explore a Pakistani university social sciences MPhil students' views about the English language article system usage in their written English, Quetta, Balochistan.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Do Pakistani University social science MPhil Students correctly use the English Language Article System in their written English?
2. What are the challenges that they face in using the English Language article system in their written English?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

In the present study, the purposive sampling technique was used to gather the data. In purposive sampling, researchers select the participants for the study based on "their judgement of their typicality or possession of the particular characteristic (s) being sought. They assemble the sample to meet their specific needs" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 247). The participants of the study (Table 1) were postgraduate students pursuing their MPhil degrees in different disciplines at the university. Of the total sample, there were 57 (52.8%) male and 51 (47.2%) female respondents. The respondents aged between 21 to 45 years with an average age of ($M = 28.2$). Out of total sample, fourteen participants had attended the local private English language centers. The participants belonged to the various linguistic background as can be seen in the demographic information presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Demographic Information of the participants

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	57	52.8
	Female	51	47.2
Department	Commerce	12	11.1
	Education	11	10.2
	Gender Studies	13	12.0
	Management Sciences	14	13.0
	Psychology	13	12.0
	International Relations	10	9.3
	Library Sciences	10	9.3
	English Literature	15	13.9
	Applied linguistics	10	9.3
	Attended private English language Centers	Yes	14

	No	94	87.0
Native Language	Urdu	24	22.2
	Jafarki	1	0.9
	Pahari	1	0.9
	Turkish	1	0.9
	Balochi	15	13.9
	Pashto	38	35.2
	Hazargi	1	0.9
	Brahvi	15	13.9
	Sindhi	3	2.8
	Persian	2	1.9
	Punjabi	4	3.7
	Siraiki	3	2.8

Instrument

To adapt the instrument for the present study, this researcher reviewed some of the existing reliable instruments which measured students' proficiency in the correct usage of English articles. After reviewing several instruments, this researcher adapted Miller's (2005) instrument because it is most relevant to the scope of this study and also piloted in the context of Pakistan (Ahmed, 2017). During piloting stage, Ahmed (2017) observed that due to difficulty of the task, the participants did not attempt the second section of the instrument which asked participants to fill-up-the blanks. To address this issue, she provided articles choices (i.e., a, an, and the) against each blank so that participants could select the correct options easily. Moreover, the past research focused over participants' proficiency in the correct use of English articles (Miller, 2005, Ahmed, 2017), they did not explore what caused difficulties for them in using English articles correctly. To fill this gap in the context of Pakistan, this researcher added an open-ended question to explore the reasons why the participants faced such difficulties (see Appendix).

Data collection

As previously mentioned, data were gathered from the MPhil students at the university in Balochistan. The instrument had three main sections (see Appendix). Specifically, one section asked participants to provide some demographic information. The other section asked them to fill the blanks with the correct articles. Finally, they were asked to provide the reasons why learners could not gain command over the English article system. The participants were given 30-40 minutes to complete the instrument. After obtaining oral permission from the chairpersons and teachers concerned, the data was collected. Before collecting the data, the researcher himself went to each class and briefed students about the purpose of the study. More importantly, the researcher also explained to the participants that their identities would not be revealed. Moreover, the

researcher also informed them explicitly that the data would be used for this study, and it would only be accessed by the researcher and the supervisors. After briefing about the purpose and ethical issues, all the voluntary participants were given the hard copies of the instruments to respond. The researcher himself collected the data. After the participants completed the instruments, the researcher gathered them.

Data analysis

After gathering the completed instruments, they were coded by providing numbers from 1-108. The participants' close-ended responses were checked according to the answer key provided by Miller (2005). The correct and incorrect responses were inserted in SPSS (version 21) to compute the descriptive statistics.

The participants' responses to the open-ended question were analyzed by using a thematic analysis technique. Clarke and Braun (2017) defines thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (p. 297). The researcher took the following steps to conduct the analysis: To familiarize himself with the data, the texts were read several times. During the third reading, the key message communicated in the data were highlighted to code the data that were relevant to the scope of the research question. Afterward, the researcher has typed all the responses in Microsoft word so the data can be easily coded. After the codes were made, they were merged to construct the themes. Finally, themes were refined for data interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Overall, the findings suggest that MPhil. students, who are also expected to write research theses in English as a partial requirement of their degree, experienced difficult in choosing appropriate English articles. Specifically, the total score of the test on the right use of the English articles (i.e., definite and indefinite English articles) was 16. According to Table 4.1, the mean score of incorrect answers ($M = 9.1$, $SD = 2.5$) was higher than the correct answers ($M = 6.9$, $SD = 2.4$).

Table 2: Results of Overall Test

Test Result	M	SD
Correct Answers	6.9	2.4
Incorrect Answers	9.1	2.5

The test on the appropriate usage of English articles included 12 marks on definite English articles and 4 marks on the indefinite English articles. As for the right use of English articles, the results summarized in Table 4.2 show that the right use of both definite and indefinite English articles posed a challenge for MPhil. students. The mean score of incorrect answers on the use of definite English articles ($M = 6.3$, $SD = 2.1$) was higher than the correct use of definite English articles ($M = 5.6$, $SD = 2.3$).

Similarly, the research participants' inaccuracy in the use of indefinite English articles ($M = 1.2$, $SD = 1.0$) was also higher than their accuracy in the use of indefinite English articles ($M = 2.7$, $SD = 1.1$).

Table 3: Mean Scores of Correct and Incorrect Use of English Articles

English Articles	M	SD
Correct DA	5.6	2.3
Incorrect DA	6.3	2.1
Correct IA	1.2	1.0
Incorrect IA	2.7	1.1

Note: DA = Definite Articles, IA = Indefinite Articles

Out of 108, 93 student participants responded to the open-ended question. In other words, 16 student participants did not attempt the last question of the questionnaire. The participants who responded to the open-ended question acknowledged that they face challenges in using the English article system properly. The participants believed that due to several factors, learners were unable to learn the articles including lack of reading among the learners, absence of articles in their mother tongue, government schooling background, teachers' lack of competency in English, grammar-based teaching method, and learners' least knowledgeability about the English article system. Each extracted theme is discussed along with students' narratives in the following section.

Lack of reading

Lack of reading refers to those learners who are least exposed to reading texts in English and they read texts by their own, particularly books and English newspapers. Therefore, they do not learn to the correct usage of the English article system. Such perspective can be reflected in the following extracts:

“Due to lack reading of English books and lack of understanding of grammatical rules and regulation, we are unaware of using [choosing] articles at accurate place.”

(Participant # 11)

In the above-mentioned extract, the participant believed that one may inexplicitly learn the correct usage of grammar through reading. However, in the Pakistani context since learners are not often habitual of reading books in English; therefore, they “are unaware of the using” the articles correctly.

Another participant reported that learners do not read [English] newspapers; therefore, they often face difficulty in the correct usage of English.

“A non-native writer of English it is difficult for us because we do not study [read] newspapers these things can be done [can be improved] by proper

reading.” (Participant # 12)

In the above-mentioned extracts, participants assumed that if learned were exposed to reading material in English or they read the texts, they might have been proficient in the English article system. However, they believed that since they do not read the texts in the target language, they cannot properly learn the English article system and face challenges.

Absence of article in learners’ L1

The participants considered that since Pakistani learners do not have articles in their L1; therefore, they face difficulties in using them as can be seen in the following extracts:

“Because we cannot use [articles] in our local language that’s why [we] face difficulties in using English articles.”
(Participant # 95)

In the above-mentioned quote, the participant emphasized that learners do not have articles in their mother tongues; therefore, they face problems in using them correctly. In a similar vein, another participant highlighted that being a non-native writer of English, they experience difficulties in using English articles appropriately because it is absent in their first language as can be seen in the following extract:

“It is really difficult for any non-native writer of English because first of all it is not their native language. Secondly, they try to learn English according to their own language pattern. Thirdly, using an article is a complex phenomenon, for example in Urdu [language] reference to [something is made] differently than another language [English]”
(Participant # 29)

In the above-mentioned extracts, the participants believed that they did not have articles in their native language; therefore, they faced difficulty learning and using the English article system. This finding echoes with body of previous studies which suggest that English as a second language/third language learners, particularly those whose native or first languages (L1) do not have the equivalent of the English article system, tend to face the challenges in the acquisition or learning English articles (Ionin & Montrul, 2010; Master, 1990; Mizuno, 1999; Park, 2006; Romaine, 2003). However, it may be noted that having articles in one’s mother tongue “does not necessarily guarantee the proper use of the article English system” (Harb, 2014, p. 98). Pedagogical implications are presented in the conclusion and recommendation section.

Poor teaching of English at government schools

In the following extracts participants highlighted that particularly in the government

school system the students were not properly taught English in general and the English article system in particular. Therefore, the students from the government schooling background faced challenges in using the article system of English correctly at postgraduate level.

*“It is difficult for them to write [an] article or use English language article system appropriately because they are unable to use it is due to [the] government schooling system which is not up to the mark”
(Participant # 14)*

In the above-cited extract, the participant tries to suggest that since in the government schools, teaching in general and English teaching is particular “not up to the mark”, meaning that English is poorly taught, as a result, learners do not develop proficiency in English. These findings are also commensurate with the previous studies (Channa & Panezai, 2019; Shamim, 2008; Shamim & Rashid, 2019).

*“There is always a vast difference b/w the private schooling system and the government schooling system. Private schools [s] emphasis on improving the English language of their students via educating them through books of oxford and adding in their course grammar books which help them out. Unfortunately, governments school do not emphasize much on improvement due to which it difficult to use [communication in the] English language and use the English language article system appropriately. Sometimes private school students also make certain mistakes.
(Participant # 32)*

The participant’s narrative comparing the books and materials used in the private and the government schools suggest that scenario of English language teaching in the private schools is better than the government schools. In other words, in the private schools (the point of reference is the elite private English medium schools), English is emphasised and taught in a way that helps students develop their proficiency in English. Therefore, for the private school students, it is often possible to use the articles properly. Haidar (2019) also found that elite schools in Pakistan “encourage high-level of linguistic competence of the students by nurturing their creativity, critical thinking, and ability to take a broader outlook” (p. 843).

Teachers lack competency in English

Participants predominantly think that since teachers themselves lack competency in English in general and English articles in particular; therefore, they cannot teach learners. Consequently, students cannot learn to use the English articles correctly as the extract below suggests:

“The reason is that the writer cannot use such kinds of words [a, an, the] properly because they are difficult for us and our teachers don’t have [a] good

grip on [the] tongue [English] and they deliver their lecture in Urdu always that's why." (Participant # 1)

In the above-mentioned extract, the participant said that it was problematic for them to use the articles because teachers themselves “don’t have [a] good grip” over English language. The participant may seem to refer to past school teachers and present MPhil course subject teachers. There is a body of previous research findings which suggest that government schools teachers lack competency in English (Shamim, 2008; Channa & Panezai, 2019). In addition to that, the present study findings also suggest that university teachers may also lack competency in English.

In addition to lacking command over English, another participant points out that teachers lack the teaching skills to teach the complex concept of English language article system as it is reflected in the following extract:

“The first reason for having difficulty using articles [appropriately] is that it is not their own language. Secondly, our teachers are not that good at teaching to clear [make us understand] the concept of the students about the technical point [complex concept of article system] of English language.”
(Participant # 31)

Over-emphasis on Grammar

There is a widely held belief among the participants that in the government educational institutes, grammar translation method (GTM) is extensively used method of teaching. Teachers primarily focus on grammatical rules rather than their practical usage. Therefore, learners lag behind in attaining accuracy in the use of articles despite putting efforts. A participant reported that,

“[...] mostly teachers apply grammar-translation method which is the main reason for student’s weakness in grammatical structure [...] excessive and unnecessary focus on grammar and technicalities there rather than focusing the practical usage.”
(Participant # 26)

Another participant reported and suggested that instead of GTM if direct method was used, learners might have been able to learn the proper usage of articles. Learning through GTM, they remained perplexed regarding the appropriate use of the article as can be seen in the following extracts:

“English language article system is a challenging for the non-native writers as due to various reasons. Firstly, they are not taught at the very primary level their basics are not strong. Secondly, government institution has more focus on GTM rather than applying direct method teaching, therefore the students become ambiguous where these articles should be used.” (Participant # 25)

In line with the findings of the present study, Channa and Panezai (2019) also attributed students' lack of English proficiency to the improper teaching methods in the government schools.

Lack of grammatical knowledge about the English articles

Here grammatical knowledge refers to knowledge of the grammar rules and usage of article system of English. The participants also believed that the English articles were troublesome for the learners due to limited grammatical knowledge; therefore, they experienced difficulties in using them appropriately as it is reflected in the following extracts:

“One should be very much clear about the parts of speech, especially using [an] article in [an] appropriate way is very much essential to a non-native writer of English language article. I think without the basics of any language (grammar) one cannot achieve his goal.” (Participant # 10)

In the above-mentioned extract, a participant admitted that it was essential to have grammatical knowledge to properly use the English articles. Having inadequate knowledge of English articles, they committed more articles errors and were not able convey the intended message in written form. This indicates that learners need to be taught the explicit rules of the English article system (Master, 1997) in order help learners enhance their mastery over English articles.

Similarly, another participant believed that since learners were “unaware of the usage of these articles”, and they were not also taught explicitly, they had difficulties in choosing appropriate articles:

“It’s difficult for[a] non-native writer of English to use articles appropriately because we are sometimes unaware of the usage of these articles. We cannot get the proper sense of using them in the sentences. The basic reason of getting confused in the usage of articles is that most of the students don’t have enough knowledge about [the] English language. [Moreover] their base is not strong, and they even don’t know to get the sense of the sentence.”(Participant # 17)

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for teaching and learning the English article system

As the findings of the present study delineated that English article system has posed enormous challenges/difficulties for the MPhil students of a public university. From participants' perspective, such difficulties emanated from several factors including lack of reading among the learners, absence of articles in participants' L1, government schooling background, teachers' lack of English language proficiency, over-emphasis on grammar, and learners' least knowledgeability about the grammatical features of the English article system. Based on the findings of this study, following

recommendations are proffered:

Learners should be encouraged to read texts in English extensively so that they may implicitly learn the English article system. Moreover, learners should also be encouraged to pay specific attention to the articles while reading texts such as, English newspapers, digest, story books, and among other possibilities.

As participants reported that since there were no articles in their L1; therefore, they faced greater difficulties in using them. As the presence of articles may not necessarily guarantee learners' accuracy in the use of articles (Harb, 2014). This suggests two important points. On the hand, learners L1 should not considered as a problem in learning. On the other, this means that there is a need for more explicit and form focused teaching of the English article system so that learners can gain grammatical knowledge about the articles.

Teachers should also be exposed to various teaching methods so they can adapt the contextualized and most appropriate techniques for teaching language in general and the English article system in particular.

Recommendations for the future research directions

The present study has used the survey instrument to investigate the participants' perspectives about difficulties in using the English article system. In the future studies, in-depth interview may be conducted to gain deeper insights into the issue. This study only considered students participants, in the future, university teachers' proficiency in the English article system may be measured and their views about teaching and learning English articles may be sought. The present investigation was conducted in Public Sector University. In the future, both the student and teacher participants of private university may be considered. In the future, a comparative study which will measure the accuracy in the use of English articles of a public and a private sector university may be considered.

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