

Errors on the Use of Determiner ‘The’ in Education Students’ Compositions Based on Linguistic and Surface Structure Taxonomy

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Abstract

The study focused on the analysis of the errors on the use of determiner (DET) ‘the’ found in the compositions of graduating students enrolled in the program Bachelor of Secondary Education of the Mindoro State College of Agriculture and Technology (MinSCAT) Main Campus. The students’ compositions on the topic influence of digital age on the writing style and written output of the students were collected and analyzed for errors. The finding of the study revealed that the errors on the use of DET ‘the’ were found in the noun phrases (NPs) and prepositional phrases (PPs) categorized under linguistic taxonomy while addition and omission were the errors under surface structure taxonomy. Results of the study could help material developers to create the necessary tasks and exercises and teachers to devise the best teaching strategies for improvement of the students’ grammar skills required for a more effective written output.

Keywords: determiner, linguistic taxonomy, surface structure taxonomy, error analysis

1. Introduction

The use of determiners (DETs), particularly those that constitute the article system, causes great difficulty among nonnative speakers of English. Teachers and students alike, after studying articles for years, find it challenging to decide on the use of DETs, especially in formal academic writing in English that uses more nouns (Ns) than other types of writing. To choose determiners in a way that the statements produced are well-formed and do not violate English grammar can be problematic on the part of the learners.

The difficulty on the use of determiner for the nonnative speakers comes with knowing the kinds of N since every N requires a right choice whether to use a/an, the or Ø. There is a need to identify first which Ns are countable Ns and which are not and also which are generic or specific. Because determiners have built-in restriction, other problems arise. Determiners have limitations with certain noncountable Ns, sometimes mass Ns such as sand, oil, furniture, and sugar. When mass Ns are used as noncountable, they cannot be plural, so they do not combine with determiners that have either the plural or countable feature (Kolln, 2002).

2. The Article ‘The’ As A Determiner and Its Uses

Determiner classes include the indefinite ‘a’ or ‘an,’ which signals only countable Ns, and the definite ‘the’, which can signal all classes of Ns (San Miguel, Barraquio, & Revilla, 2010). ‘The’ is included among the central determiners (McArthur, 1992). ‘The’ is the definite article used to indicate a specific class of Ns or pronouns (PRNs) or a specific member of a class of Ns or PRNs. The definite article is omitted in case there is no specified amount or quantity of the N, for example, Teachers assign homework (an indefinite number of teachers assign an indefinite amount of homework) (Ehrlich, 2011).

Determiners as the signaler or marker in a NP indicate whether it is definite, indefinite, or limiting it in some other way, such as through negation. In addition, determiners may identify the N as specific or general and quantify it specifically or refer to quantity in general (Mateyak, 2000). Moreover, both DETs and Ns are elements required of a NP. The former is used to describe the grammatical element that comes at the beginning of a NP and characterizes the NP that co-occurs with it. These, likewise, help define the relationship of the N to the speaker or listener (or reader). Since NPs, not Ns, are one of the constituents of a sentence, it follows that a N cannot appear by itself in an English sentence: it must minimally be preceded by a DET (Master, 1993). Likewise, Azar (1992), in his book, explicitly mentioned that the article ‘the’ is used in front of singular and plural count Ns as well as the noncount Ns. Also, it is used to refer to the same specific thing or person. Generally, article ‘the’ functions as a definite DET which is placed before a N or NP when a person or thing has already been mentioned in the preceding statements. Likewise, ‘the’ is used when a person or thing is known to both the writer and the reader.

3. Errors on the Use of Determiners

Previous studies highlighted different error patterns in second language article use in English such as the omission of articles and overuse of ‘the’, and ‘a’/‘an’. These errors have been found to be influenced by the learners’ incorrect or incomplete semantic representations linked with articles or the learners’ wrong choice of

the forms during production due to stress on mental processing or their phonological limitations, overgeneralization of the rules and making the wrong prediction, and ignorance of rule restriction (Rajagopal, 2016). Moreover, according to Dulay, Burt & Krashen (1982), omission errors may be due to learners' limited ability to understand the rules of the target language while addition errors, according to Brown (1999), result when the learners have acquired some basic rules without additional refinement. Knowledge on rules, therefore, has significant impact on second language learning.

Second language (L2) learners notoriously commit errors in using articles in their target languages (e.g., a, an, the in English). Fangfang's (2010) investigation showed that most Chinese students had difficulties using the English articles due to their first language transfer and transfer of training when using English, and their acquisition of the English articles seemed to be an unsteady process. Most students seemed to do better in terms of using the indefinite article a/an. Generally, they would commit errors in the use of articles when they are not aware of the type or character of the N and they cannot identify the feature of the N phrase in context. They seemed to do better in the [+definite, +specific] context. Lastly, as there is no article system in Chinese, the students were affected by negative transfer from their first language and chose to leave out the articles when the gap required the definite article 'the' or the indefinite article 'a'/'an'.

In the study conducted by Ngán (n.d.), Quirk's framework was used to the descriptive statistics to analyze the problems on the students' use of English articles in writing. Two data collection instruments including exercises and interviews were used. Results of the study revealed the Vietnamese students' problems in the process of learning and using articles which included substitution errors, indefinite article forms, deletion of the articles, problems in using indefinite article with marked and unmarked plurals, problems in using indefinite article with uncountable Ns, problems in covering the uses of definite articles and overusing articles.

Atibrata's (2012) study investigated Indonesian students' errors in the use of DETs in English writing. This specifically identified students' errors in the use of English DETs and classified them according to the types of determiner and the structural change of DETs. The results of the study showed that most of the incorrect use of the DETs was in the form of articles with 72.44% cases. Structural alterations such as addition, omission, misorder, misinformation, and misuse caused the incorrect use of DETs. With 29.59%, omission was mostly committed.

The study of Gressang (2012) focused on the examination of the use of articles and other discourse morphemes in 20 L1 and 20 L2 English essays. L1 Chinese and Korean writers produced the L2 essays at two proficiency levels. The essays' NPs were marked for part-of-speech, co-reference, syntactic position, and other discourse-relevant features. The error analysis indicated that most L2 mistakes were in the use of the, with almost none in the use of a/an.

Problems related to the use of articles as a DET have long been encountered by the students. In fact, on the study conducted by Inness (1987) to determine the frequency of use of each of the DETs with the foreign university students in the United States as the subject, findings showed that the subject of this study used the articles more frequently than any other DET, however, they also made errors in their use of the articles more frequently than they did in their use of other DETs. Besides, they also chose different incorrect DETs. There was a high frequency of errors in which zero DET was the incorrect choice.

Similar to the aforementioned studies, in case of the use of DETs particularly article 'the,' there were errors observed in the writings of the students of the Mindoro State College of Agriculture and Technology (MinSCAT) in the province of Oriental Mindoro, Philippines who served as participants in this study. Some teachers have also been observed confused or committing errors in the given linguistic aspect. Therefore, to shed light on the errors in using article 'the' as DET of a N or a NP in the collected compositions of the MinSCAT students, this study was performed.

4. Methodology

The respondents for this study consisted of 10 out of 16 fourth year students enrolled in Bachelor of Secondary Education with specialization in English enrolled during the first semester of Academic Year 2016-2017 at the MinSCAT Main Campus. Only 10 of them participated since the rest was not available during the time of the data gathering.

The data collection took place specifically on September 29, 2016 during the class in English 19, one of the specialization courses for Education students who are specializing in English. In this course, students are trained to become fluent in grammar and vocabulary particularly in writing for effective translation and editing of texts. Each of the 10 respondents were asked to write an impromptu composition on the topic related to the effect of digital age on their writing style and written output. The respondents were told that the compositions would be analyzed as part of a research project, but they were not told that the purpose was to analyze the use of DET 'the' to ensure that they would naturally apply their knowledge and skills on the use of DET 'the.' The students were not given any special instructions but they were asked not to use their mobile phones to do research for additional information online and they were instructed that one-page composition in a short paper is enough. In-

class compositions were used so that each composition was written within the same time limit under similar conditions. At the end of the class, the researcher asked for the students' permission to use the compositions for this study.

After collecting the compositions of the students, these were analyzed sentence by sentence for the occurrence of any kind of errors. Each sentence was read carefully. All the sentences with Ns or NPs identified to have errors in terms of use of DET 'the' were selected for the analysis of each error found in the compositions.

All those specific errors identified in the students' compositions were categorized into two taxonomies, as follows: (1) linguistic taxonomy (Politzer & Ramirez, 1973) based on a descriptive grammar of the target language (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985) includes general and specific categories relating to basic sentence structure, NP, PP, and so on; and (2) surface structure taxonomy (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). The second taxonomy is based on four general categories such as omission or errors characterized by the absence of an item that is required to produce a well-formed utterance, addition or errors described by the presence of an item which must not appear in a well-formed utterance, mis(in)formation or use of the wrong form of structure, and misordering.

5. Theoretical Framework

To better understand the study, there is a need to take into consideration those past linguistic studies which employed Error Analysis (EA) proposed in 1960s which has been proven useful for teachers particularly English language teachers to diagnose English learners' writing difficulties, discover the reasons for their difficulties, and thus provide relevant solutions. EA is the study and analysis of the errors committed by second and foreign language learners (Corder, 1981). The procedures in EA include collecting the data, identifying the error, describing the error, explaining the error and drawing conclusion.

A qualitative content analysis of the students' compositions was conducted based on the error analysis approach. Content or document analysis, according to Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen (2006) is a research method applied to written or visual materials for the purpose of identifying specified characteristics of the material." For this, the written productions of the students were analyzed sentence by sentence for the occurrence of errors in the use of determiner 'the.'

6. Results and Discussion

The study described how the selected fourth year Bachelor of Secondary Education specializing in English students use the DET 'the' in writing their compositions. Specifically, the study indicated whether the students overused or omitted the DET 'the.' Overall, 10 compositions which contained a total of 149 statements were analyzed. The average number of sentences per composition was 15 and the longest one was the composition of Student #8 with 20 sentences and the shortest was that of Student #10. The compositions of 10 students contained sentences with varying Ns and NPs on the topic 'How Does Digital Age Influence My Writing Style and Written Output?' The mistakes in the sentences taken from their compositions are underlined as shown in the following statements:

Student #1 has three sentences with errors observed due to incorrect use of DET 'the', as follows:

- (a) *Nowadays, most of the students or children are really aware, appreciative and equipped with electronic devices, gadgets or to the modern technologies.
- (b) *Their styles in writing depend on how they like it to be or on what is trend.

In Sentence (a), aside from the preposition 'to' is incorrect to establish a well-formed utterance, the DET 'the' is not needed before the NP 'modern technologies' or zero DET (\emptyset) is required since this NP is in plural form and does not refer to specific object. In Sentence (b) the use of DET 'the' is needed before the N 'trend' to indicate that the writer points out to specific referent. The simple N 'trend' is described as a generic non-count N but this can appear non-generically with 'the' in a range of context. The absence of 'the' in this statement makes it ungrammatical which is one of the common errors of students (Atibrata, 2012). The use of the N 'trend' was analyzed in terms of correctness based on careful inspection of the source text or composition.

Overall, the emergent errors in the composition of Student #1 are of the following kinds:

Linguistic category and error type: General categories : (a) Prepositional phrase; (b) Noun phrase

Specific categories: (a) Prepositions (misuse of prepositions); Determiner (addition of the article 'the') (b) Determiner (omission of the article 'the')

Surface structure category: (a) Misinformation, Addition (b) Addition

The following are the sentences from the composition of Student #2 which have errors.

- (c) *Digital age influences my writing style and my written output in a way that with the use of technologies, I learn new words and new ideas, and I am updated with the new information, as an advantage for me in writing.
- (d) *On the other side, we also know that the technologies have disadvantages.

In sentence (c) new information is considered to be a general or indefinite N or unspecific referent that does not require DET 'the.' Similarly, determiner 'the' in Sentence (d) is not also needed since the N 'technologies' is in

plural form and it refers to general or indefinite subject or unspecified referent. On the whole, the following are the kinds of emergent errors seen in the composition of Student #3.

Linguistic category and error type: General categories : (c) Prepositional phrase; (d) Noun Phrase

Specific categories: (c) Determiner (addition of the article ‘the’); (d) Determiner (addition of the article ‘the’)

Surface structure category: (c) Addition (d) Addition

Sentence (e) produced by Student# 3 is ‘*The information now is very accessible’, has incorrect use of DET ‘the’. Since the N ‘information’ refers to indefinite or unspecified referent or subject there is no need to add ‘the’. The error committed is described below:

Linguistic category and error type: General category : (e) Noun phrase

Specific category: (e) Determiner (addition of the article ‘the’);

Surface structure category: (e) Addition

Student #5 has errors in the following sentences taken from her composition:

(f) *But because we are in digital age now, there is no question that social media tools and platforms shape the way people, schools and businesses work, but social media has created a new form and route to channel information.

(g) *Because, we are in digital age now there are so many wonderful platforms available to student like me and I am able to express one single idea in so many ways.

Both Sentence (f) and Sentence (g) have prepositional phrase ‘in digital age’. The absence of DET ‘the’ in the given prepositional phrases does not indicate that the NP ‘the digital age’ is the main subject of each composition. Azar (1992) cited that DET ‘the’ is used when a person or thing is known to both the writer and the reader. By adding ‘the’ in the said PPs the reader becomes aware that the writer specifically refers to digital age as the focus of her written discourse. The errors committed by Student #5 are described as follows:

Linguistic category and error type: General category : (f) Prepositional phrase (g) Prepositional phrase

Specific category: (f) Determiner (omission of the article ‘the’) (g) Determiner (omission of the article ‘the’)

Surface structure category: (f) Omission (g) Omission

Student #7 committed errors in the PPs ‘by using the gadgets’ and ‘by the gadgets’ as shown in the following sentences taken from her composition:

(h) *I admit that my writing is affected by using the gadgets.

(i) *I am not that affected by the gadgets in writing because I prefer to use my phone as a reading tool, and for playing games.

In Sentence (h) and Sentence (i), the use of DET ‘the’ is not appropriate since the given N ‘gadgets’ is in plural form and does not refer to definite or specific subject. In general, the errors found in the composition of Student #7 are of the following kinds:

Linguistic category and error type: General categories : (h) Prepositional phrase (i) Prepositional phrase

Specific categories: (h) Determiner (addition of the article ‘the’); (i) Determiner (addition of the article ‘the’)

Surface structure category: (h) Addition (i) Addition

Table 1 shows the summary of the errors found in the compositions of the students who took part in this study.

Table 1. Types of the Emergent Errors in the Students’ Compositions

Student/ Sentence	Error	Reconstruction	Linguistic Description	Surface structure description
#1 (a)	‘...or to the modern technologies.’	‘...or modern technologies.’	Prepositional phrase Determiner	Addition
#1 (b)	‘...what is trend.’	‘...on what is the trend.’	Noun phrase Determiner	Omission
#2 (c)	‘...updated with the new information...’	‘...updated with new information...’	Prepositional phrase Determiner	Addition
#2 (d)	‘...that the technologies...’	‘...that technologies...’	Noun phrase Determiner	Addition
#3 (e)	‘The information...’	‘Information...’	Noun phrase Determiner	Addition
#5 (f)	‘...in digital age now...’	‘...in the digital age now...’	Prepositional phrase Determiner	Omission
#5 (g)	‘...in digital age now...’	‘...in the digital age now...’	Prepositional phrase Determiner	Omission
#7 (h)	‘...by using the gadgets...’	‘...by using gadgets...’	Prepositional phrase Determiner	Addition
#7 (i)	‘...by the gadgets...’	‘...by gadgets...’	Prepositional phrase Determiner	Addition

The table includes both the linguistic categories and surface structure categories. The appropriate equivalents of the errors are presented based on the descriptive grammar of the target language in the

reconstruction column.

Only five of the participants, Student #1, #2, #3, #5, and #7, were identified to have committed errors on the use of DET 'the'. Nine errors on the use of DET were identified as presented in the table. Out of these errors, six errors were categorized as Addition or errors described by the presence of an item which must not appear in well-formed utterance and three were categorized as Omission or errors characterized by the absence of an item that is required to produce a well-formed utterance (Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982). Moreover, as shown in Table 1, the phrases identified with errors were both NP and PP.

Errors commonly committed by the students were omission and addition of DET 'the' which were described using the linguistic and surface structure taxonomy. The students encountered difficulties in determining when to use the DET 'the'. It signifies that their exposures on the use of determiners are limited. The students need varied activities which will enhance their knowledge of rules of grammar and their skills in applying these rules in written discourse. Generally, the foregoing findings are in agreement with the ideas of Dulay, Burt & Krashen (1982) and Brown (1999) that familiarization with the rules is among the causes of errors on the use of DETs.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

The compositions of the students on the topic 'How Does Digital Age Influence My Writing Style and Written Output?' which were subjected to content analysis revealed the need for both teachers and students to pay attention to typical patterns of article usage error particularly the DET 'the'. The students' confusion on the use of DET 'the' whether to include or not before the given NPs and PPs manifests their lack of familiarization with the rules on the use of DET 'the' and of articles in general. Further, their errors committed on the use of DET 'the' which is related to their knowledge on grammar rules affect the quality of their written outputs. Rajagopal's (2016) cited that learners' wrong choice of what form to be used during production could be due to stress on mental processing or their phonological limitations, overgeneralization of the rules and making the wrong prediction, and ignorance of rule restriction.

Therefore, the challenge among teachers is to devise effective means or strategies to guarantee their students' grammar skills. To fully master the English article system, the students should be explored to task-based approach which introduces several drills, exercises and activities to gain competence on the use of articles and allows reading and writing enhancement especially the contrast between minimal pairs of lexical phrases with \emptyset and 'the'. Moreover, there are several possible avenues of further research that could be recommended on the use of determiners by nonnative students of English. Because of the limitations imposed by the analysis of the compositions of only one group of students, it would be useful to involve different learners from various programs and investigate the beginning learner's use of determiners. The results indicate that further research is warranted.

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