

Analysis of Definite and Indefinite Article Usage in Students' Paragraphs

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ABSTRACT

Although they are among the most basic words in the English language, articles make writing difficult for EFL and ESL students. This study looks into how students use definite and indefinite articles in their paragraphs. What is the frequency of definite and indefinite articles in first-year English majors' paragraphs at Salahaddin University's College of Education? To what extent are students accurate in their use of definite and indefinite articles? are the main questions under investigation. The study aims to identify the frequency of definite and indefinite articles in 35 paragraphs written by English majors in their first year at Salahaddin University's College of Education, Erbil, Iraq, in the academic year 2022-2023. The study utilizes conceptual content analysis to ascertain the frequency of articles through descriptive statistics. The findings indicate that first-year English majors struggle to use articles correctly in their writing. They struggle to consistently use definite and indefinite articles appropriately. The results of this study will be significant for both researchers and language instructors. Understanding students' use of definite and indefinite articles can provide valuable insights into potential problems or areas requiring additional instruction. The results of this study have the potential to influence curriculum design and language teaching strategies, ultimately enhancing English language learning and proficiency among EFL and ESL students. Keywords: analysis, definite articles, indefinite articles, students' paragraphs.

Keywords: Analysis, Definite Articles, Indefinite Articles, Students' Paragraphs, Articles

1. INTRODUCTION

Studying definite and indefinite articles in students' writing is essential for enhancing communicative competence, grammar accuracy, and the ability to convey complex meanings. Students at various levels struggle with articles, making it difficult to communicate effectively. The purpose of this study is to analyze how first-year students at Salahaddin University/College of Education-English Department use definite and indefinite articles in their paragraphs. To pinpoint how frequently students use definite and indefinite articles in their writing, the researcher will carry out a frequency analysis using descriptive statistics. Instead of error correction, this study will look into how often articles appear in a sample of 35 chosen paragraphs by students in one of the lectures from a composition writing course.

To better understand how students use definite and indefinite articles in their written paragraphs, a literature review has been written. According to the reviewed literature, using definite and indefinite articles poses challenges for English language learners. The acquisition of English grammatical articles has been of considerable concern since the early 1970s (Brown, 1973; Warden, 1976). According to Hewson (1972), "definite and indefinite articles are among the ten most frequent words in English discourse" (p. 131). Researchers have specifically studied the sensitivity of learners to the definiteness and specificity features. Students with less advanced English language skills frequently flood the word 'the' (Chaudron & Parker, 1990; Huebner, 1983; Master, 1987). Huebner (1983) and Master (1987) noted that their studies showed participants correctly associating 'the' with definiteness. Chaudron & Parker (1990) and Parrish (1987) pointed out that learners may mistakenly associate 'the' with specificity. Master (1997) discusses zero articles in his study and demonstrates their use in place of 'a' and 'the'. Thomas (1989) confirmed that second language learners use more definite articles than

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indefinite articles because they use definite articles in place of indefinite articles.

Many researchers confirm that second language learners struggle to learn articles, yet the underlying causes remain unclear (Butler, 2002). Acquiring English articles may be more difficult for second-language learners who do not have an article system similar to English (Ionin & Montrul, 2010; Romaine, 2003). Teaching strategies such as encouraging students to comprehend countability and the usage of specific articles can enhance their understanding of English articles (Miller, 2005). Crompton (2011) and Adway (2013) investigate the challenges Arab learners encounter when learning English articles, given that their native language lacks an article system. The most common error they observed was the misuse of the definite article for general purposes. Sun (2016) also discusses the challenges faced by English learners due to the use of articles, regardless of whether their native language is equivalent to the English article system. He concluded that learners who have articles in their first language are better at acquiring English language articles. Harb (2014) discussed the factors that make it difficult for speakers of other languages to correctly use definite and indefinite articles in English. The incorrect use of the article system by ESL learners is caused by both internal and external factors. The challenges that students encounter when learning English articles from languages with and without articles are highlighted by Abumlhah (2016). Definitions and indefinite articles are among the most difficult topics in the fields of syntax, grammar, and translation, according to Al-Sulaimaan and Alsinjari (2018).

Alhaysony (2012) used Surface Structure Taxonomies (SST) to examine the types of errors made in using articles by female EFL students in Saudi Arabia. The results showed that the students mostly made omission errors; the omission of the indefinite article "a" was most frequently observed. Furthermore, because the definite article "the" is used so frequently in Arabic, their mistakes in adding it indicate how much the Arabic language has influenced their usage. Alhaisoni et al. (2017) conducted a similar study on Saudi EFL students. The researchers discussed the frequency of errors and the factors that contribute to these errors when using definite and indefinite articles in paragraph writing. The study found that removing articles, definite and indefinite, occurred more frequently than adding or changing one article to another. The majority of observed errors involved correctly using the indefinite article "a" instead of "an" and "the." The study also highlighted the negative impact of the participants' first language. Another study was carried out in another setting by Korean researchers, Kim and Song (2020). They emphasized age as a factor that makes it difficult for Korean learners to acquire English articles. The study's results revealed that the age at which

learners first encountered English articles significantly influenced their speed of comprehension. Exposure at a younger age improves performance in correctly using articles on tasks that evaluate real-time processing, but there were no significant differences between the groups on explicit knowledge tasks.

There are numerous studies on English articles in a variety of contexts, but none on Kurdish EFL students. This study closes the gap by investigating how English definite and indefinite articles are used by Salahaddin University/College of Education students in Erbil, Kurdistan, during the academic year 2022-2023.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definitions and Characteristics of Articles

To use articles, learners must understand determiners and noun phrases in English grammar. Determiners that indicate a noun's specificity or generalizability are called articles. Words with a noun and no verb that can refer to either a specific or general subject are known as noun phrases. Nouns are defined in articles, along with their specificity or genericity indicated. For teaching articles, countability is essential, and definitive articles define the scope of reference (Butler, 2002). When using language in articles, it is important to distinguish between specific and generic references. While generic references indicate what is normal for members of a class, specific references refer to particular specimens of a class. Articles can be singular, plural, definite, or indefinite. Depending on the kind of reference, there are two distinct systems for using articles: definite specific reference and indefinite specific reference (Quirk et al., 1982). When deciding how to use a noun, articles are essential. This decision is frequently made based on the noun's meaning, shared knowledge, context, and whether it is singular, plural, countable, or uncountable. Understanding these expressions is critical for proper article usage, it is crucial to comprehend these expressions. While some languages do not have an article system, articles are subclasses of determiners that distinguish between the uses of nouns. English articles can be either definite or indefinite (Al-Sulaimaan & Alsinjari, 2018). It is believed that the most frequently used words in English are the three articles 'a,' 'an,' and 'the'. According to corpus studies, the word 'a' is the fifth most frequently used word in English, while the word 'the' is the most frequently used overall. Typically, articles lack stress, which contributes to their occasionally challenging pronunciation in spoken language (Master, 2002). Articles make up an important part of the English language. English articles serve a wide range of syntactic

and semantic purposes. As a result, they are essential functional words. When learners are primarily processing language for meaning, they frequently ignore function words, which makes them different from content words. Additionally, speech typically does not stress function words (Adway, 2013). According to the researchers mentioned above, articles are not given much thought, even though students of all levels find them challenging. The procedure for using them is also complicated.

A key component of conversational identification is the definite article, which is derived from dialectic terms. Unlike the meaning or grammatical conventions of the utterance, its use primarily depends on the context. The speaker must employ illocutionary force, which goes beyond literal meaning, to convey the intended message (Awad, 2011). Kempson first introduced quantity and identifiability as truth conditionals for definiteness in 1975. These principles were investigated and presented by Levinson (1987) as important criteria for identifying conversational implications. According to Grice (1975), the speaker's knowledge must be sufficient. The listener can successfully identify the referent with the help of the contextually provided implications. According to Hawkins (1991), the pragmatic context determines definiteness to the greatest extent. The location theory states that the speaker or writer directs the audience or reader to locate the pertinent particulars that helped determine its status as definite within the common pragmatic set. Awad (2011) asserts that the speaker uses the definite article to suggest that something is obvious in light of the situation. When the speaker is unsure of whether the information provided is enough to identify the referent, they use indefinite expressions. So, context is essential for using definite articles correctly.

Nouns in English grammar are categorized as singular or plural, countable or uncountable. Uncountable nouns cannot be made plural, whereas countable nouns can be. To distinguish between definite and indefinite articles, students must determine whether a noun is countable or uncountable, and there are some exceptions (Ould Necir, 2021). Leech and Svartvik (1994) identified two English articles: the definite article 'the' and the indefinite article 'a' or 'an'. According to Harb (2014), most grammar textbooks recommend using indefinite articles in several situations, which can be combined as follows: When the listener or reader is uncertain as to which count noun we are referring to, we use the indefinite article, a/an. A/an can also be used to signify membership in a group for an object or person. When describing someone or their occupation, we use the a/an prefix. When referring to a singular noun, we use the definite article "the". However,

the definite article "the" is frequently used in the following ways: When referring to a specific item, we use the definite article. We use "the" when it is obvious what or who we are referring to. When there is only one of something, we use "the." We also use it to refer to a noun that is well-known to both the speaker (writer) and the listener (reader) (Harb, 2014). Because researchers use different rules for definite and indefinite articles, they are complicated. There are always exceptions to the fixed rules. In summary, mastering the use of articles necessitates a thorough understanding of their syntactic and semantic purposes, as well as the ability to interpret context effectively.

2.2 Challenges Faced by English Learners

Even though the most frequently used words in English are articles like "a," "an," and "the," their usage is surprisingly complicated. The English article system does not have a one-to-one form-meaning relationship, contributing to the complexity. For learners of English as a second language, this complexity poses a variety of challenges (Andersen, 1984). It is not only difficult for beginners but also students who have studied English for a while find it challenging (Kharma, 1981). ESL teachers are well aware that their students frequently struggle to use English articles in a manner that is similar to that of a native speaker. Even more skilled students occasionally make mistakes (Master, 1997). Thomas (1989) observes that certain languages present additional challenges due to their distinct article systems from the English article system. He claims that the problem gets worse for students whose native languages lack an analogous article system to English. For instance, Han et al.'s (2006) corpus study of essays written by TOEFL students from China, Japan, and Russia reveals that 13% of the sentences contain article errors.

It is challenging for teachers to effectively teach the article system because they find it difficult to comprehend how students use articles in English as a second language (Butler, 2002). Swan (1994) contends that learning and teaching English articles or any other aspect of English grammar should be approached based on an understanding of the specific problems that specific learners are facing. Analyzing the errors made by English language learners could lead to the implementation of several improvement methods (Master, 1990 and 1994; Muranoi, 2002). One such method is to give students opportunities to use English articles in real-world contexts. Furthermore, "Using the articles a, an, and the correctly is quite difficult in English grammar," according to Swan (2005, p. 54). Learning English as a second

language requires creating and perfecting English articles through various stages, as well as making various errors because of syntactic and semantic differences (Awad, 2011).

In every million words, the definite article "the" appears 25065276 times, according to the Corpus of Contemporary American English. The word "the" is the most used in English, according to Master (2002). As a result, the high frequency of such a small word can probably have a significant negative impact on learners' proficiency. Despite what has been said, learning the English article system can be very difficult due to a variety of internal factors connected to the language's internal structure. Discourse and lexico-syntactic factors, which divide into two groups, complicate the task of mastery for English language learners (Harb, 2014). The article system is the grammar structure that takes ESL/EFL students the longest to learn, according to Kim and Lakshmanan (2009). Furthermore, Avery and Radisic (2007) claim that second-language learners will never fully master the functional use of English articles. Because of this, EFL/ESL students who are learning English frequently misuse the articles (Adway, 2013).

The aforementioned studies clearly illustrate the challenges faced by ESL and EFL students when learning articles. The next sections will clarify how Salahaddin University first-year English department students used English articles in their writing.

3. METHODOLOGY

The participants in this study are first-year English majors at Salahaddin University's College of Education, Erbil, Iraq, in the academic year 2022-2023. Paragraphs written by the participants are collected as the primary data for analysis. The participants were asked to write paragraphs on some given topics, ensuring that each paragraph contained a sufficient number of sentences to analyze the usage of definite and indefinite articles. The study includes a total of 35 paragraphs. Quantitative content analysis is performed on the gathered paragraphs to ascertain how frequently the participants employed definite and indefinite articles. Researchers like Krippendorff (1980) and Weber (1990) define content analysis as a systematic technique that uses coding rules to extract meaningful results from large bodies of data. Researchers use quantitative conceptual content analysis as a type of content analysis to determine the frequency of definite and indefinite articles. Wilson (2011) talks about conceptual content analysis as the process of coding certain words, concepts, or themes and making inferences based on the patterns that emerge. To

manually count the articles, the researcher read each paragraph a number of times. The researcher then recorded the frequency of definite and indefinite articles in each paragraph in a spreadsheet for statistical purposes. The JASP (Jeffrey's Amazing Statistics Program) was used for conducting descriptive statistics to determine how frequently definite and indefinite articles occur in the paragraphs. This analysis sheds light on the participants' proper and accurate use of articles in their writing.

The study only includes paragraphs from 35 first-year students, which may not accurately represent the entire student population. The findings may be specific to one student sample and may not generalize to all students. However, the results will be very valuable to teachers and students alike. Teachers can identify the problem more easily if they have a better understanding of how students use definite and indefinite articles, especially those who teach composition or essay writing. As a result, they will be able to help students with their English article usage issues.

4. RESULTS

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for articles in 35 compositions written by fresher students in the English Department of the College of Education at Salahaddin University. The mode and median for definite articles are 0 and 1 for indefinite articles, respectively. With a mean of 0.486 for definite articles and 0.857 for indefinite articles, most paragraphs had one indefinite article. For definite articles with a high degree of variation, the standard deviation is 0.742; for indefinite articles with a moderate degree of variation, it is 0.912. The maximum number of articles is three, while the minimum number is zero. There are no missing values, and the total number of compositions is 35.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Articles

	Definite	Indefinite
Valid	35	35
Missing	0	0
Mode	0.000	1.000
Median	0.000	1.000
Mean	0.486	0.857
Std. Deviation	0.742	0.912
Minimum	0.000	0.000
Maximum	3.000	3.000

Table 2 shows the frequency of definite articles in 35 paragraphs written by first-year students at the English Department of Salahaddin University's College of Education. The total number of definite articles in all the paragraphs is 17. The frequency analysis shows that 22 (62.857) paragraphs had no definite articles, 10 (28.571) paragraphs had one article, 2 (5.714) paragraphs had two articles, and 1 (2.857) paragraph had one article. There can be as few as zero or as many as three definite articles. Thus, most of the compositions had zero-definite articles.

Table 1
Frequency of Definite Articles

Definite	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	22	62.857	62.857	62.857
1	10	28.571	28.571	91.429
2	2	5.714	5.714	97.143
3	1	2.857	2.857	100.000
Missing	0	0.000		
Total	35	100.000		

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of indefinite articles. A total of 30 indefinite articles were contained in 35 paragraphs. 14 (% 40) paragraphs had no indefinite articles, 15 (% 42.857) paragraphs had one indefinite article, 3 (% 8.571) paragraphs had two indefinite articles, and 3 (% 8.571) paragraphs had three indefinite articles. They had a minimum of zero indefinite articles and a maximum of three indefinite articles. So, most of the paragraphs had one indefinite article.

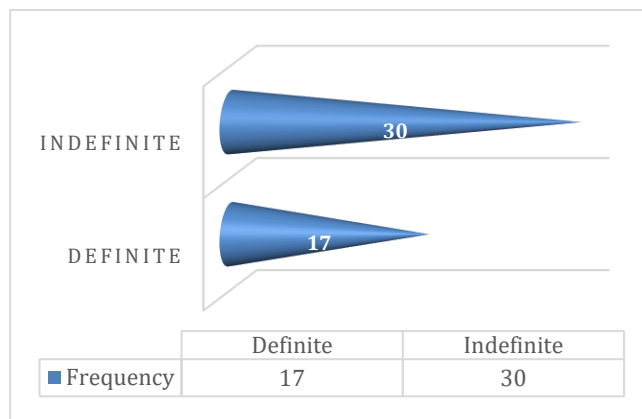
Table 3
Frequency of Indefinite Articles

Indefinite	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	14	40.000	40.000	40.000
1	15	42.857	42.857	82.857
2	3	8.571	8.571	91.429
3	3	8.571	8.571	100.000
Missing	0	0.000		
Total	35	100.000		

The following Figure No. 1 is a bar chart of the number of definite and indefinite articles in 35 paragraphs. The number of indefinite articles is greater than the number of definite articles, as is clearly shown in the figure. The figure shows that there are 17 definite articles such as 'the'

and 30 indefinite articles such as 'a, an'. The students used more indefinite articles in their paragraphs.

Figure 1
Frequency of Definite and Indefinite Articles



5. DISCUSSION

The descriptive statistics and frequency analysis of definite and indefinite articles in the paragraphs written by first-year students offer valuable insights into their usage and patterns. According to the descriptive statistics, the mode and median for definite articles are both zero, indicating that there are very few or no definite articles in the paragraphs. The mean of 0.486 suggests that, on average, there is less than one definite article per paragraph. The standard deviation of 0.742 shows a relatively high degree of variation in the use of definite articles among the paragraphs. In terms of frequency, out of the 35 paragraphs analyzed, 22 paragraphs (%63) did not have any definite articles. This finding suggests that the students may have struggled with understanding when and how to use definite articles, resulting in their underutilization. Only a small proportion of paragraphs (10 paragraphs, %29) included a single definite article, indicating a limited use. The dominance of zero-definite articles and the lower mean value for definite articles indicate that most students did not consistently apply definite articles in their writing, possibly due to the complexities associated with their usage of English grammar. This contradicts Thomas's (1989) assertion that second-language learners use more definite articles than indefinite articles. Other researchers, such as Chaudron & Parker (1990), Huebner (1983), and Master (1987), frequently observed 'the' flooding in less advanced English speakers.

The mode and median for indefinite articles are both 1,

indicating that the most common occurrence is one indefinite article per paragraph. The mean of 0.857 suggests that, on average, there is less than one indefinite article per paragraph. The standard deviation of 0.912 shows a moderate degree of variation in the use of indefinite articles among the paragraphs. In terms of frequency, the majority of paragraphs (24 paragraphs, 69%) contained at least one indefinite article. The higher mean value of indefinite articles, which indicates a relatively more consistent use compared to definite articles, further supports this. Furthermore, three paragraphs (9%) were found to contain three indefinite articles. This indicates that the students were more successful in incorporating indefinite articles into their writing compared to definite articles. The minimal use of articles in students' paragraphs aligns with Master's (1997) findings, which show that students substitute 'a' and 'the' with zero articles. Many researchers, including Butler (2002), confirmed that second language learners find it difficult to learn articles, but the reasons are still not evident. Although central Kurdish has articles like English with little difference, learners are not able to use them properly (Ahmed, 2015). Researchers like Ionin & Montrul (2010) and Romaine (2003) relate the difficulties in learning English articles to the lack of an article system in learners' native languages. It appears that the situation differs when it comes to English article learning for EFL Kurdish students.

Overall, the results suggest that the students still exhibit challenges in accurately incorporating articles into their writing, particularly definite articles. This may be due to the complexity of article usage in English grammar, potential influence from their native language, and a limited vocabulary. According to Hewson (1972), "definite and indefinite articles are among the ten most frequent words in English discourse," but this study shows the lack of articles in paragraphs written by first-year English majors with intermediate levels in English. Adway (2013) identifies errors caused by conventional teaching techniques. It could be due to the uncertain use of definite and indefinite articles, as there are no clear-cut rules. Al-Sulaimaan and Alsinjari (2018) identified definite and indefinite articles as the most challenging areas in the fields of syntax, grammar, and translation. Students may be using indefinite articles as a default choice instead of accurately determining whether a definite or indefinite article is appropriate. Because first-year students are still learning the rules and usage of articles in English grammar, their paragraphs may contain relatively few definite and indefinite articles. When learning articles, beginning or intermediate English language learners usually forget to include them

or use them properly. Although this is a normal part of learning a language, students still require a lot of guidance and teaching to correctly use definite and indefinite articles in English.

6. CONCLUSION

The study aimed to analyze the use of definite and indefinite articles in paragraphs written by first-year English majors at Salahaddin University's College of Education, and the results revealed that students had difficulty properly using articles in their writing. The students did not consistently use definite articles, as the definite article "the" was absent from most of the paragraphs. This implies that it could be challenging for students to comprehend the rules of the appropriate usage of definite articles in English grammar, as the overall frequency is fairly low in the paragraphs. However, students employ indefinite articles slightly more frequently than definite ones. These findings align with previous studies that highlight the difficulties ESL and EFL learners face when acquiring and utilizing articles. Due to their limited vocabulary, native language influence, and English article system complexity, students may struggle. It is crucial to understand that students may use more indefinite articles than definite ones, indicating uncertainty about when to use definite or indefinite articles. The study emphasizes the need for effective language teaching that takes into account the particular challenges that students encounter when using articles. Pedagogical strategies that emphasize comparisons between the learners' native language and English, along with explicit instruction on countability and specific uses of articles, may enhance students' understanding and application of articles. To learn more about how first-year English department students at Salahaddin University's College of Education obtain English articles in their particular context, an extensive study utilizing particular data collection techniques, such as surveys, interviews, or observations, would be necessary. Observing students in conversation classes will be helpful to know about their usage of articles or ask them to express their opinions about certain topics to know the problems that they have with definite and definite English articles.

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