



RESEARCH ARTICLE

CAUSES OF ARTICLE USE PROBLEMS BY SAUDI POSTGRADUATE ELCOS STUDENTS  
AT BANGOR UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Transfer theory proposes that errors made by English Foreign Language students are often due to interference from their first language. Consequently, if there are distinctions in the systems governing the use of articles, the first language form tends to be used when students are translating into English. In terms of the Arabic language, no indefinite article is used, in contrast to English; thus, errors due to replacement, overuse, or omission may appear. To assess these effects, 20 Saudi postgraduate ELOCS students at Bangor University were invited to participate in a quantitative study. This involved the use of ten sentences with differing article usage; some required the zero article and definite or indefinite articles, while others required diverse and multiple usage. Statistical analysis using SPSS software, including correlations and ANOVA, illustrated that omission of the article was the most noticeable error, particularly with respect to indefinite articles. This was typically followed by replacing the indefinite article with the definite one. In the case of requirements for indefinite and definite articles in the same sentence, error rates increased. The paper's findings lead to the importance of evaluating potential findings related to learning and teaching strategies but moreover recognises the demand for additional research.

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INTRODUCTION

**Importance of the paper:** This paper focuses only on Saudi postgraduate students undertaking an intensive course in English at ELCOS of the University of Bangor. These students were selected because while they had finished their initial English Foreign Language learning in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, their time spent studying in the UK could have influenced their communication skills; the paper focuses particularly on how article use may have been affected by this phenomenon.

**Transfer Theory:** Language transfer involves many aspects, and typically depends on the language concerned. Translation between Arabic and English is particularly affected in this context. Language transfer is 'the interaction of previously acquired linguistic and/or conceptual knowledge with the present learning event to facilitate new language learning'

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(Odlin, 1989, cited in Brown, 2007, p. 116-8). To increase understanding of language transfer approaches, some examples may be illustrative. Arabic-speaking learners of English may produce a sentence such as *Hissister teacher*, which would be considered structurally correct, because Arabs do not use the indefinite article (*a*) and they do not use the auxiliary verb (*be*). This illustrates the impact of their first language (L1). Several studies such as Odlin (1989), Noor (1996), Upton (2001) and Sarko (2009) demonstrate that language transfer plays an important role in the second language acquisition (SLA). The authors note that the mother tongue influences both negatively and positively the use of a foreign language (L2) in many linguistic areas (e.g. semantics, morphology and phonology). However, not all learners face transfer issues, which are based on aspects such as exposure to the entire language, study methods and time spent studying (Karim and Nassaji, 2013; Naqvi *et al.*, 2014). Sarko (2009) conducted a study of Arabic and French learners of English, who were found to use definite article systems as effectively as English speakers. Consequently, their mother tongue's transfer to the second language was not found to be negatively influential. The rationale for that is that both Arabic and French languages are similar to English in terms of article use. It can be assumed that even if the results of the transfer are not entirely clear,

they will be at least comparable between both languages. In contrast, this transfer will be problematic if several structural aspects of both languages differ (Hong, 2014). Transfer theory is associated with Noam Chomsky's universal grammar theory. The latter theory has major tenets and one of them is that all languages have some critical characteristics. Some languages have more characteristics such as *inter se* than other languages. Chomsky's theory agrees with the transfer theory in that they both propose that participants could transfer their mother tongue abilities to other foreign languages to some extent.

### The effect of L1 articles on L2 Acquisition

This study analyses the effect of the mother tongue on L2 acquisition. L1 is known to impact Arabic English language learners in their acquisition of L2 (Crompton, 2011; Karim 2003; Diab, 2010; Al-Sulmi, 2010; Al-Haysony, 2012; Ridha, 2012; Mourssi, 2013; Abu-Rabia and Sammour, 2013). Crompton (2011) analysed the impact of L1 on highly advanced Arabic L2 learners in order to identify their typical mistakes and to determine the role of transfer in their writing. Participants were students at the University of Sharjah American, and were aged 18–20. More errors were made by participants due to the usage of definitive articles. It was proposed that these mistakes were because of the influence of L1 transfer, particularly relating to so-called interlingual errors, rather than faulty acquisition of the second language (AlKresheh, 2010). From the point of view of the present study, Crompton proposes the main influencer on articles is first language transfer (Crompton, 2011). Crompton's (2011) results illustrate that definite articles are often misused in inappropriate contexts, particularly pair with respect to generic no count nouns. Ridha (2012) examined English language writing samples of 80 Arabic speakers. In agreement with Crompton (2011), Ridha (2012) proposed that most second language errors were due to L1 transfer. The author argues that article omission errors or excessive use of articles are due to the direct transfer of L1 guidelines to L2, particularly in cases involving cities, states or different proper nouns. Many studies note the effect of first language transfer on L2 acquisition. Al-Haysony (2012) analysed 100 Saudi female undergraduates learning English as a major. These students were found to consistently make errors related to articles; they generally removed or used articles in an unsuitable manner. The author asserts that, in contrast to the views of other researchers in the field, teachers are conscious of the differences between L1 and L2 article use. Mourssi (2014) analysed 74 Arabic learners of English, focussing on English article use.

Two-hundred-and-twenty-two versions were written by high-school learners in Oman analysed the objectives of the research. In contrast to past studies of early English language learners, Mourssi's subjects had studied English for a longer time (eight years). Despite this, these participants had problems with the usage of English articles, since their L1 had various rules for article usage. It is important to note the variety in points of view between Western and Arabic scholars in terms of issues to do with article use. The role of L1 in L2 acquisition has received particular attention from such scholars. Western authors, such as Mitchell and Myles (2004), Hinarejos (2010), and Yu (2011), argue that L1's role in L2 acquisition is not particularly significant. Yu (2011) suggests that 'it is clear that the learner's L1 is an important determinant of SLA, but it is not the only determinant, and may not be the most important' (pp. 442-445). Scheidnes *et al.* (2009) propose that 'L2 learners react like other atypical L1 learners when

faced with complex structures. If L1 transfer played a role, it was so minimal that it remained undetected by our task' (pp. 250-251). There are many reasons why Arab scholars' opinions vary from those of Western scholars. Firstly, Arab learners of English produce several interference errors due to their school's teaching methods (Al-Haysony, 2012; Ridha, 2012). Some English tutors of L2 use the L1 of students as a criterion to interpret the principles of the L2, dividing structure systems of both languages. This process may increase problems associated with first language transfer. Having considered the concept of transfer theory, and particularly articles, it is important to note that problems experienced by Saudi Arabian English Foreign Language students in terms of articles are not due to one single factor. Thus, a hypothesis and research question are proposed to be tested by collecting elementary data from Saudi Arabian English Foreign Language learners at the University of Bangor.

### Hypothesis and Research Question

#### Hypothesis

**H1:** *Arabic learners of English make more indefinite than definite article omissions because Arabic does not use indefinite articles, and because using no article in the noun phrase (NP) demands the in definite article.*

#### Research Question

- What are the typical omission, agreement and repetition errors made by Saudi postgraduate students in terms of articles when writing in the English language?

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Dependent and independent variables:** The distinguishment of dependent and independent variables forms a focus of this paper. Independent variables are of particular concern for Arab participants because Arabic is the mother tongue and most of them have a good grasp of it. Exam scores are dependent variables since test findings are specified by different factors, such as participants' English knowledge and time spent to prepare for the exam. Therefore, these variables will allow the case study to be more effectively guided and allow examination of the effect of L1 on L2 acquisition, with special attention on the reasons for using articles.

**Sample:** Twenty Saudi postgraduate students from Bangor University's ELCOS course, aged 21-27, formed the sample. Students did not receive information in Arabic because they were sufficiently familiar with English. Participants were preferred who had taken a broad range of subjects, such as linguistics, business, mathematics, media and biology.

**Data Collection:** Before data gathering, the researcher analysed a set of particular requirements. Data collected must be relevant, and should include a significant amount of L2 production, for example, data regarding possible reasons for Saudi postgraduate students' article use problems. A quantitative methodology is used, and involves asking participants to perform a translation test and focus on the use of English articles. Results of the test will enable the examination of the proposed hypothesis. To test this hypothesis and to respond to the research question, it is essential to gather data that will describe second language participants' use of the definite and indefinite articles 'a', 'an',

'the' and non-article with a particular focus on article usage mistakes, such as replacement, omission and overuse errors.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data was gathered to analyse participants' L2 (English) ability. To do this, a translation exam was prepared, which will also assist in estimating participants' article awareness and ultimately allow them to improve this aspect. Noun phrases will be tested and analysed in terms of article use. Data obtained will enable confirmation of L1 article systems' role in L2 noun phrase use, allowing testing of transfer theory's applicability. All students were given ten Arabic sentences and asked to translate them into English within 30 mins. Learners' English article use was analysed for errors such as replacement, omission and overuse. The sentences contained six indefinite articles, six definite articles, and six nouns without an article. Because the sample size was rather small, learners responded using Microsoft software on the researcher's computer, in order to avoid data loss and so that the researcher could ensure that grammar correction software was off. Testing was conducted in different places on the Bangor University campus (library, cluster rooms and classrooms). Learners were individually tested, allowing confirmation that they did not use any further instructions to finish the task.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis focused on article usage, categorised as either incorrect or correct. Article use was then divided into three error classes: replacement, overuse and omission errors. Error answer ratios were coded to allow statistical analysis, in order to distinguish which error type was the most troublesome for the learners. ANOVA, paired-sample correlations and chi square were used for error ratio and kind analyses, particularly useful for answering the hypothesis. To process the collected data for analysis and to guarantee the rigorousness of the findings, it is important to use relevant software; thus, SPSS was selected.

**RESULTS**

**Outline of Errors:** As Figure 1 illustrates 267 instances of correct article usage were noted. Thus, article usage was relatively good, but with some areas of issue.

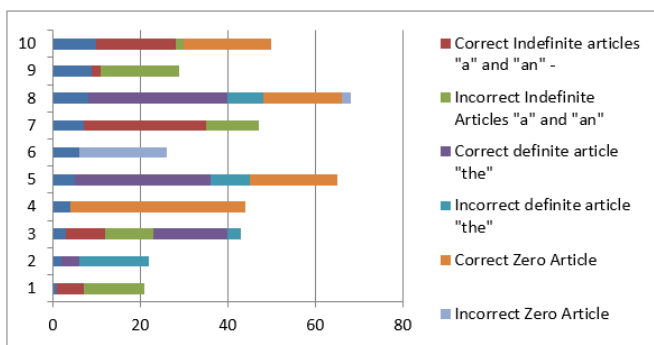


Figure 1. Errors following sentence translation

**Types of Error**

The Arabic language only has a definite article, with the zero article being used instead of the indefinite article. Assuming that errors were due to L1 transfer, it would be expected that

students use the replacement, instead of omission errors which are much more significant; however, that was not the case. If such errors related to indefinite articles, and associating these with omission mistakes, then omission errors were observed to be the most common errors (Figure 2).

Paired Samples Correlations				
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Omission & indefinite article error	4	.860	.140
Pair 2	Omission & definite article error	3	.725	.484

Figure 2. Omission and article errors

Zero article errors were particularly associated with the extension of further definite article systems while no article was required.

The indefinite article was problematic for Saudi learners. They made many omission, repetition and replacement errors. Figure 3 shows article error rates.

Article Type	Number of Instances in the 10 sentences	Percentage correct	Percentage Incorrect
Indefinite article ("a" and "an" usage)	120	52.5%	47.5%
Definite article "the" usage	120	70%	30%
Zero article usage	120	98.3%	1.7%

Figure 3. Error rates across all sentences

Indefinite articles were most problematic for Arabic learners, because as previously mentioned, the use of such articles is not required, in contrast to English. Errors occurring during translation more over occur due to different sent encesturctures, although omission errors were more common than overuse or replacement. In fact, overuse was observed in the eighth sentence where 'the' was applied with the word /coffee/, rather than the correct zero article.

**Over-use**

A rather low standard with respect to repetition and over-use of articles was observed. Hence, statistical analysis was not conducted in this area. In terms of the objectives of this study, overuse is classified as the use of a particular article in locations where other articles should be used (Figure 4).

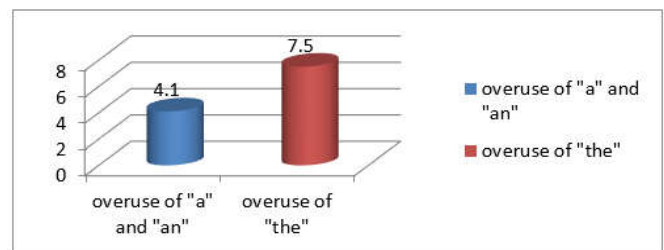


Figure 4. Overuse of articles

The definite article 'the' was overused almost twice as much as 'a' and 'an', which is likely due to L1 interference and the fact that Arabic has extended use of 'the' compared to English.

**Replacement**

Another error illustrated is replacement. This involves definite articles being exchanged for indefinite articles, or using no article in each case. Figure 5 illustrates that the most common

error was replacement of 'a' and 'an' with 'the', followed by the usage of 'an' instead of 'a'.

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Indefinite Article Error	Between Groups	84.750	3	28.250		0.00
	Within Groups	.000	0			
	Total	84.750	3			
Definite Article Error	Between Groups	61.500	2	30.750	1.255	.534
	Within Groups	24.500	1	24.500		
	Total	86.000	3			

Figure 5. ANOVA for replacement

Replacement errors by type are shown in Figure 6.

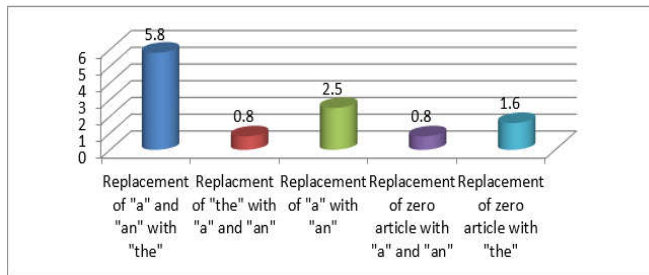


Figure 6. Replacement error by type

It is noticeable that where no article is used, it cannot be adequately assessed whether this was intended, or if the article was simply removed. Further, the total omission ratio for every utterance was examined like a third kind of the error ratio.

### Omission

Article removal or omission were the most common (32%) errors made during sentence translation (Figure 7).

Sentence Number	Article type	Replacement Errors
1	"a"	1
2	"the"	1
3	"an" and "the"	4
4	Zero article	0
5	"the"	1
6	Zero article	0
7	"a"	7
8	"the" (twice) and zero	2
9	"a"	0
10	"an"	2

Figure 7. Error rates

It was observed that if non-articles were required, omission errors were not made. This result is unlikely to be associated with lack of ability or knowledge regarding no article, but may possibly be right by default. This was not able to be confirmed in the present study. Furthermore, in line with the study's research question, the system of article requirements most likely gave rise to these errors. This is supported by paired-sample correlations (Figure 8).

		N	correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	omission	6	.668	.147

Figure 8. Omission of sentence

Figure 8 illustrates that more errors occurred with 'an' and 'a' than for 'the'. This may be due to L1 effects, because Arabic only has the definite article; however, indefinite articles are asserted without the article on the term (no article), and a small alteration to the term's tail, recognised as 'nunnation'. It is furthermore of interest that in the NP of sentence nine, where the indefinite article should be at the beginning of the NP, omissions were at the highest level seen for any sentence. This is most likely because for Saudi students a commencing indefinite article is not recognised as owing a position, or is neglected in line with their L1 model.

## DISCUSSION

### Hypothesis and Research Question Evaluation

The findings support the proposed hypothesis. This conclusion is based on the fact that there was an error ratio of 47.5% over all utterances, and that a significant correlation was found in terms of correct usage of indefinite articles. Furthermore, the fact that 32% of the errors were due to omission further confirms the hypothesis. With respect to this hypothesis, the most important impact on article usage was related to L1 transfer. Regarding the research question, the sentences' analyses illustrate that omission errors are the most common, particularly with respect to indefinite articles 'a' and 'an'. Thus, the research question was able to be essentially answered.

### Implications of the Findings

It was postulated that article errors made by Saudi postgraduate students were due to L1 transfer as well as interference (Odlin, 1989, Brown, 2007). Article omission, and replacing indefinite with definite articles, were the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> most common errors, respectively. Indefinite articles were replaced with the non-article and 'a' with 'an'. This may be due to Arabic's article system, which only has the definite article; in translating into English, a non-article tends to be used, thus providing a potential reason as to why sentences with zero articles are 98% correct, as they reflect L1 rules. One important observation was the incomplete application of the principles of article usage in English, leading to over generalisation. This was supported by the observation that errors were not appropriate in whole cases, and were not influenced by article usage. The fact that 'a' and 'an' were replaced with 'the' confirms the impact of L1, particularly in terms of Arabic. A further noteworthy point is that when the same errors appear in students' writing, tutors note this with comments, which helps students' strategy development for decreasing future errors (Erdogan, 2005).

### Future Research Pathways

A linear study over a 24-month period with a similar model is recommended. Such a study may distinguish what impact stage of acquisition may have on participation of L1 transfer related to articles. The present work has found that L1 transfer and interference leads to increased omission errors, particularly with respect to indefinite articles. Hence, it is recommended that research be conducted which analyses indefinite and definite article errors over a 24-month period. Such a study should also test the replacement of 'an' and 'a' with 'the', and assess the effects of length of learning and proficiency.

## Dedication

This paper could not have been accomplished without the assistance of my father and mother, who have devoted their life to educate and teach their sons and daughters. I am greatly indebted to them in so many ways. They always pray for me and support my emotional, moral and physical necessities. I really thank them for everything they have done for me. I also thank my uncle Abu Haithum who always supports me in obtaining a good education.

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