

**An Investigation of Definite Article as Fossilized Errors: Analysis of Classroom Presentations of EAP Students**

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## ABSTRACT

*This study aims to investigate the errors committed by EAP students and for that purpose classroom presentations of the students of BS English are recorded and transcribed to compile a corpus for convenience of sampling and analysis. This prompts the current study to adopt convenient sampling technique and data is processed via antconc to get concordance which has definite article as key inventory. For complete elaboration of the data, qualitative approach is adopted and for theoretical framework Selinker's theory of Interlanguage is followed. The findings of the study prove that EAP learners overgeneralize the rules as they either use definite article with proper nouns or use them in repeated sequences. The repetition is of two types that is consecutive repetition and repetition with different nouns. This study is beneficial for EAP teachers and also leaves research gaps for the researchers as well as they can compare written and spoken samples in future.*

**Keywords:** Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA), English for Academic Purpose (EAP), Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH).

## INTRODUCTION

English has developed into an international language. It has been instrumental in connecting the global community as a result various varieties of English have emerged. The ever increasing varieties were incorporated with different rules and vocabulary from different other regional languages. Thus totally new varieties of English developed which later on labelled as INDE (Indian English), NAME (North American English), and SAE (South African English) etc. The learners of English are of many types belonging to various societies and cultures. Some learners are more focused to learn English for business purpose; some are inclined to learn English for job purpose whereas, some are interested in academic English. The process of first language or native language learning has always been unconscious effort for the learners but second language acquisition, specifically delayed acquisition demands conscious and tiresome efforts on the part of learners. This attracted great deal of research, as a result many notable researchers raked multiple data to find the factors affecting language learning particularly second language acquisition (SLA). Many scholars from the faculties of language, psychology, cognitive and social studies turned their heads to investigate whether language learning is psychological, social or cognitive phenomenon. The findings of these studies were expounded to broaden the canvass of SLA. The early studies conducted in SLA are divided into three categories; studies more concerned with

cognitive aspect, behaviorism and structuralism. Teachers of second language acquisition also turned towards SLA in abundance as they were exposed to various language learning phenomena, during their teaching especially SLA.

Setting on the scholarly voyage of language acquisition from the stand point of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CA) (Lado, 1968) which is an emblem of structuralism. Linguists from structural school of thought were motivated from psychological school of behaviorists. Structural linguists believe that language learning is an outcome of imitation, causing change in behavior. CA has strong ability to identify and predict the potential errors and it helps the learners distinguish between correct and incorrect way of language use. It had dominated linguistics until theories such as Noam Chomsky's transformative generative grammar (1966), Corder's Error Analysis (1975) and Selinker's Interlanguage (1972) emerged. These theories shifted the baton from CA to other developed theories that erected their anchors for a widespread impression.

Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) is one of such theories. Lennberg (1967) was the proponent of CPH that maintained language acquisition as an age confined phenomenon. Lennberg postulated that with growing age the ability to acquire second language thins so his take was more on cognitive rather than social aspect though there are numerous studies which countered Lennberg's theory later on.

The studies of language acquisition historically start from behaviorists and later on tilt towards cognitive linguists, marking the change in the domain of language acquisition which is purely due to the acknowledgement that there is some kind of internal system for language learning. This transition from behaviorists to cognitive linguists has also inspired this study. The current study is mainly concerned with EAP students specially focusing the students of BS English. The narrowed purpose is to investigate the fossilization of definite article errors as definite article has been the main headache for the EAP students. There are various reasons of definite article errors but in this study the main objective is to investigate the development stages of definite article and find out whether students from four different semesters commit same errors and the investigated errors are compared to find fossilization of errors. The data is collected from four semesters to find out what type of errors are committed by the students.

This comparison aims to provide the insight into the reason whether the students from beginning to advanced stage show any development or the rules related to definite article are fossilized. Selinker's interlanguage model has been adopted to investigate fossilization of definite article in EAP students. The research objective is achieved by elaborating quantified data which is processed with Antconc. Primary data for this study is collected from the real-time classroom environment in audio form then the data is transcribed via speech identifier software and that transcription is manually revisited by the researcher. This study is important for many aspects; one for the pedagogical aspect and other for the future researchers who will benefit from it for further studies. Here are the research questions that are used as funnel for the data.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ.1** What are the different errors of definite article in EAP learners?

**RQ.2** What are the development stages of definite article errors in the different semesters of Graduation?

**RQ.3** How the rules of definite articles are fossilized?

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The discussion shifts from unveiling the topic to augmenting it by selecting relevant studies and these studies are presented in thematic order. Based on the topic this discussion builds argument with special

focus on errors in definite article. Errors analysis has been the most important area of interest for SLA researchers. Larry Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (1972) was the major breakthrough for error analysis in language acquisition that is mainly focused on the types and reasons of errors. Many linguists benefitted from Selinker's theory and supported it.

Yule (1985) also supported Selinker's model and presented his view by saying that interlanguage is an interim system which shares features of L1 and L2 and at the same time develops some independent. Interlanguage is mainly concerned about errors detected in second language learning, taking its cue from it precedent theories e.g. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Error Analysis (EA). Tarone (1994) explained Selinker's theory in his own words by saying that interlanguage is taken as distinct linguistic system of language which is totally different from the systems of native language and target language. Error analysis is a common practice for the teachers and learners as they are always looking to correct themselves in the cases of learners and their students in the cases of teachers. Richard (1971) conducted a study that focused on error analysis. He analyzed the speeches of the speakers of different background; Chinese, Czech, Polish, Tagalog, Maori, Maltese and Indians. He found various types of errors such as verb, preposition and article resultantly, he enumerated three types of errors; interface errors, Intralingual errors, and developmental errors.

Articles are among the most widespread errors committed by the EAP learners as many languages other than English either have different rules related to article or they have no articles. English has two main types of articles; definite and indefinite articles making English language unique as many other languages do not have articles.

This is also complemented by Brown (1973) and de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) who also conducted a study and concluded that learners are always at sea with the use of English articles. Though the study is more concerned with the error analysis in the use of article but findings are enough to prove that learners with different backgrounds have issues with the proper use of articles and they are often confused with both types of articles. There is plethora of studies conducted that posit confusion in the use of article by second language learners.

The study conducted by Huebner (1985) proves that L2 learners omit definite article where it is required and even use definite article instead of indefinite article. Learners have been confused with the use of article as they are unaware with the proper use of article and they are also unable to distinguish between definite article and indefinite article. There are various studies previously conducted on error analysis and also error in definite articles. The preceding studies have postulated three main categories of errors in the use of definite articles; omission, confusion and overuse of articles. All of these three categories are major cause of errors for the ESL speakers. Perish (1987) reported that learners use articles with certain nouns that they have fixed in their minds and in some cases if they use articles with a noun at the beginning of a discourse they go on to use article with that particular noun in the whole text. The studies that are reported above are enough to prove that learners of second language are confused with the use of article as there are many reasons which are reported: there can be confusion in the use of definite article; they use them alternately; they develop a fix tendency with a specific word in a discourse etc.

The researchers have employed various theories and methods to analyze errors in articles. Some of them have targeted the cause of errors and others have just analyzed the errors. The complicated nature of English article particularly definite article may have been one of the reasons for errors. However, there are many reasons that are found out by the researchers e.g., countable noun which is one of the basic characteristics of English language system can be one of the reasons (Young, 1996). The study of Master (1997) reported that learners of second language are more accurate in null article. Their accuracy rises up to hundred percent but they have limitations in differentiating between the null article and omission of

article. He further adds that learners of second language also overuse article in some cases resulting in error but their accuracy increases with null article. In English it is common practice to use indefinite article with numerals and common nouns but in other languages like Chinese this practice is very uncommon or null. Lyon (1999) posits that definiteness is a structural or better to say grammatical concept of semantic or pragmatics. English language requires definite article for common nouns to bring definiteness which in the cases of proper nouns and pronouns is brought without the use of article. Lyon notices that “some languages will require generics to be definite while others do not” (1999, p. 278). Similar study of Robertson (2000) augment the discussion that the use of article for the beginner of L2 learners have been confusing which they may be able to compensate with the help of their analytical ability in the later stage but their use of article at the early stages has always been a problem for L2 learners. Since definiteness is described by definite article and indefiniteness is described by indefinite articles which are used with numerals.

This phenomenon is also unique in English which is absent in many other languages as in Chinese which is evident from the study of Butler (2002). Although, there are numerous studies conducted on the errors of articles but no study provided the constructed reason of errors in the use (Nation, I.S., 2013). Based on the findings of previous studies current study is different in the perspective that it aims to find the reasons and types of errors along with special focus on different stages of graduation students in terms of learning besides this it targets to investigate fossilization of errors in definite article. The development in teaching and learning of language has been pervasive that advanced from structuralism to mentalism and later on cognitive linguistics opened new domains. This laid the foundation for this study that cognitive learning style should also be applied in the language teaching to some extent (LA, N., 2020). This study is different from the previous studies all of them are more concerned with error analysis but this study is focused on the reasons of errors.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study mainly focuses on fossilization of rules related to definite article errors in EAP students. For this purpose, Interlanguage of Larry Selinker (1972) is adopted as theoretical framework. Selinker in his seminal article developed interlanguage theory. He quoted that “a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner’s attempted production of a target language (TL) norm”. His theory was a landmark development in SLA that attracted a great deal of studies.

This study aims to investigate fossilization of rules related to definite article and for this purpose errors in definite article are used as a yard stick. Primary data is collected by the researcher from the classroom environment of his college i.e. Government Murray College Sialkot. The data of different semester students is collected and presented in four different categories based on four different semesters; first, third, fifth and seventh semester moreover, the collected data from the four semesters of BS English students is compared to find the development stages in learning of the students. The authentic data is collected in audio form as real-time presentations of the students and the recording of the presentations is transcribed with the help of speech identifier software. For verified and authentic data the transcription is also revisited manually for correction and then converted into plain text for corpus compilation which is processed through Antconc 3.5.9.0 version.

Concordance of definite article has been selected for the analysis as it gives better understanding of a specific word in a given context and for this purpose the 50 words concordance window has been fixed. The systematic random sample technique has been utilized for this study and the presentation of every third student has been reordered for the analysis, accounting for 30% presentations from each class of the total students (Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. 2017). This sample technique is preferred over the other techniques as it is more suitable for evenly distributed sample and it provides equal opportunities to the

participants. This research design is more suitable for providing the findings that are more reliable and valid. Qualitative analysis is followed for this study and to support this design data is presented based on the results of Antconc and those results are explained in qualitative pattern.

## FINDINGS

The findings are discussed in four segments because the data is also segregated in four sets i.e., four semesters of BS level students. The results of these four sets will also be compared with each semester, explaining the difference in errors and the development of students in terms of their learning. The discussion begins with the presentation of first semester students. The corpus consists of 6923 word tokens and 365 concordance hits are analyzed with special focus on interlanguage.

**Table:1 Concordance of definite article for 1<sup>st</sup> semester**

Overgeneralization	The + Proper Noun	Sr. No	Concordance
		1.	esenter:11. Bushra Shahbaz Start with the name of <i>the Allah</i> who is the most merciful and
		2.	<i>the step the ahh the first</i> foot step on <i>the Australia</i> on the land of Australia was
		3.	in 1922 giving these <i>the name</i> of this idea <i>the Bow wo</i> Theory <i>the PoWo</i> theory the
		4.	periment performed by the king ah king James Scott <i>the Scotland</i> similar experiment in 25000 ah in 15000 y
		5.	guage technically more than just borrowing because <i>the English</i> doesn't give back them
		6.	that thus was <i>the Hebrew</i> was the language of the Garden of Eden the third experiment performed
	Repetition	7.	this idea <i>the Bow wo Theory the PoWo theory the Bowwow theory is the human imitation of</i>
		8.	ive abilities in this presentation I will focus on <i>the aaaaah</i> I will focus on <i>the</i>
		9.	foot step (flutter) was a the first the step <i>the ahh the first</i> foot step on the
		10.	ample the different pronunciation of <i>the</i> word p in <i>the in the</i> word tub, stub, bud. The
		11.	If. Example, we discuss the grammar rules or write <i>the or write the or write the history</i>
		12.	anguage the natural language source it is based on <i>the</i> it is based on <i>the</i> natural sound

The above sample is taken from 18 students that is about 30% of the whole EAP learners and the sample shows that all the errors are wrong use of definite article with proper nouns. Concordance of definite article has been selected for analysis as it gives complete context in right and left side of the selected word. The selected sentences are presented above have some very serious errors in the use of articles. In the first sentence definite article is used with a proper noun 'Allah' which is improper use of definite article. Same is the case with another proper noun that is 'Australia' accounting for another error in the use of article.

This erroneous use of definite article continues to be used by the students that is evident from the examples provided above. In English language there is no such convention that allows definite article with a proper noun. In the next examples definite article is used with 'the Bow wow' theory, 'Hebrew', 'Scotland' and 'English'. All these words are proper nouns and EAP learners from first semester have



used definite article with proper nouns because they are unable to use definite article properly according to grammatical rules. However, there are another examples yet to be discussed here. In the next examples the speaker has use definite article without nouns where they had the options to leave it but they preferred it over not using it. This over use of article provides proof of over-generalization of the rules. In the examples seven to 12 in the table definite article is either used overly or repetition of article is found. These results show that EAP learners are not aware about proper use of articles and they also use articles as gap filler that shows how frequently they prefer definite article that ultimately results in errors.

The results of first table are evident to prove the point that students are either using article with proper nouns or they are overgeneralizing definite article. Second sample was taken from the presentation of third semester students. The examples were taken from 240 concordance hits which are processed via Antconc from the corpus that consists of 4549 word tokens, these examples are presented in the tabular form below.

**Table:2 Concordance of definite article for 3<sup>rd</sup> semester**

Overgeneralization	Repetition	Sr. No	Concordance
		1.	are also known as parts of speech. <i>The</i> Basic are <i>the</i> categories of words in a language based
		2.	syntax are <i>the</i> words or <i>the</i> phrases that show <i>the</i> are <i>the</i> words or phrases, that show
		3.	tition and simplify <i>the</i> sentence. In this example, <i>the</i> dog is <i>the</i> noun and it is
		4.	ntizers. Determine, determine <i>the</i> words <i>ahm</i> <i>the</i> at <i>the</i> end of <i>the</i> noun. Four types of
		5.	in this sentence I is <i>the</i> noun phrase and <i>the</i> notices <i>the</i> verb phrase and that, that ,

Five examples are selected from the third semester data for analysis. These errors are different to the errors of first semester where the EAP learners were more inclined to use definite article with proper nouns. But students of third semester used definite article repeatedly with common nouns. The repetition of definite article is erroneous and not a common practice.

Starting from the first example ‘the’ is repeated first it is used with the noun ‘basic’ and letter with ‘categories’. This error is structural errors rather than conceptual. Moving forward the next four examples show different phenomenon. Three articles are used consecutively with three different words though there is no need for the use of article. This use of article can be termed as gap filler rather than grammatical requirement for the article. Same phenomenon is observed in the next four examples where speakers have used definite articles with different common nouns but the repetition of definite article is improper. This use of definite article is not acceptable in English language.

One thing is obvious in these examples that speaker is using definite article as gap filler rather than grammatical requirement which mean that development from first semester to third is obvious EAP learners have developed their insight of definite article and has stopped using articles with proper nouns though mistakes are there but they have changed. After analyzing first two sets, now it’s the turn of next set. The sample of fifth semester students is to be discussed first though the pattern of errors is different in

the first two sets but errors are committed by the two semesters. The results for next two semesters are presented below.

**Table:3 Concordance of definite article for 5<sup>th</sup> semester**

Overgeneralization	The + Proper	Sr. No	Concordance
		1.	sorry, GL sound is the sequence of sounds in <i>the English</i> word that shows the reflection of
		2.	we study one of the most important novel in <i>the Hamlet</i> , we can study a past line,
	Repetition	3.	ylistics. There are lexical terms..diction <i>the co.. The</i> choice of words used by
		4.	rhyme is a type of rhyme that exists between <i>the single between the single line or interna</i>
		5.	in particular text violation, it is <i>the study of the scope of the type of the text</i>
		6.	is related to related to <i>the English word to the English</i> word that shows <i>the low fiction</i>

In the fifth semester 4576 word tokens are processed to get 323 concordance hits. Here again improper use of article is obvious in the examples presented above. Definite article is used with proper nouns such as 'English' and 'Hamlet'. Same mistake pops up again as was analyzed in the first semester. The same pattern of errors is observed throughout the analysis of three samples definite article is repeatedly used with proper nouns by the students of the first and third semesters. Some other instances are also analyzed and in these instances definite article is used with common nouns but the repetition of article either consecutively or with different words is an improper use.

All the examples presented in the previous three tables indicate one thing the resulting errors in the use of article are due to the lack of spoken practice or it can be the cause of confusion. The EAP learners developed interlanguage system in the early stages because in our environment EAP learners have limited opportunity for spoken though they might have extended access to written L2. Though they are quite aware with the rules but they do not have the adaptability in spoken. The last sample set is presented below that consists of 190 concordance hits processed from 3903 word tokens.

**Table:4 Concordance of definite article for 7<sup>th</sup> semester**

Overgeneralization	The + Proper Noun	Sr. No	Concordance
		1.	rammatical structures. One most important digit is <i>the autism</i> , which is used in MU.
		2.	s basically represent the time period during which <i>the English</i> was spread through the missionaries
		3.	they taught the people in English they spread <i>the Christianity</i> more easily the next phase
		4.	used to establish the schools where they promote <i>the Christianity</i> through English language they believe
		5.	words are being used which they adapt from <i>the Babylon</i> and other regional languages. Isn'
	p O	6.	one says, mera naam Ali hai. <i>This is the Code Switching.</i> Cod

			Switching means the
		7.	way of using code. <i>The next example is the Latin language and the Spanish language</i>
		8.	Nigerian English, which includes vocabulary from <i>the Nigerian</i> language and English. Next is
		9.	For example, when you take the example of <i>the Singapore</i> English or Singlish which contains
		10.	The next example is <i>the Latin language and the Spanish language</i> in the classroom. On

After all the discussion of errors in definite article now it time to analyze the most senior class that is seventh semester. The EAP learners who have spent almost four years in learning English still they have issues with the use of definite article. Here the examples show that learners though have decreased the ratio of improper use of definite article but still they have persisted with same errors. Instances of definite article used with proper nouns and repetition of article are still to be seen in the above table. Presenters have used definite article with proper nouns like ‘autism’, ‘English’, ‘Christianity’, and ‘Babylon’. The repetitive committing of same errors proves that the rules have been fossilized. Though they are aware with the rules but lack of speaking opportunity has debarred them to speak fluently as a result their rules are fossilized. There are instances where the use of article could be at the speaker’s choice where he or she could use or restrain from using. But the speakers preferred using it like in the examples of ‘the Nigerian English’, ‘the Singapore English’, ‘the Indian education’ and ‘the Latin language’ etc. These examples prove that EAP learners are not only confuse with the use of definite article but they are using them as gap filler resulting repetition of article.

## DISCUSSION

Selinker’s interlanguage concept is proven from the above data analysis as the samples. The erroneous use of definite article is investigated from the data collected from four different classes of BS English and the repeated errors though they decreased with every senior class but the consistency with errors prove that EAP learners had built a separate system of language that is neither the system of their mother tongue nor the system of L2 but it is a separate system that has been developed by the learners. Their growth in language learning has been conscious but they are unconscious with some of the habits they have developed. The fossilization of definite article in the interlanguage system of EAP learners show that they have not used rules in spoken language though they are fully aware with the rules which they use properly in written texts. Their newly developed habits are completely associated with their L2 speaking and these habits are part of their interlanguage system. The phenomenon with definite article can be summed up in three categories. EAP learners used definite articles in various sequence; repetition with many consecutive common nouns, with proper nouns, with nouns where they could use articles and also avoid using it, as gap fillers.

## CONCLUSION

This study is beneficial in many different aspects. Selinker’s model of interlanguage is once again proven as EAP learners showed consistent results with every passing year. As a teacher of EAP learners there are many take ways; EAP learners should have been provided more and more spoken opportunities, they should be forced to communicated in different contexts to relieve them from confusion, they should be provided more listening input of native speaker’s communication, their interlanguage system needs to be focused more and their definite article should be focused more than previously and for the key take away



for the future researchers is that they can compare spoken data and written data of the same student and same topic to get more insight into the idea that students are more keen to use proper sentence structure in written as compared to spoken.

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