Troubles with the Articles at Al-Bouib Mixed Basic School (9th Grade)

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Abstract:

This study aims at discussing the basic usage of the article system of the English language. It deals with the four articles *a, an, the* and the zero article for they seem to be problematic of Arabs since the wide range difference between the two languages. It also reveals some problems committed by the 9th grade students at Al-Bouib Mixed Basic School. Fifteen students, nine females and six males, are chosen to fill in the questionnaire paper. The study shows that nearly most of the errors are resulted from the Arabic language.

I. INTRODUCTION

Articles, in their simple view, can be defined as determiners indicating whether or not a noun is a specific one known to both the speaker and the listener (Altenberg & Vago, 2010). The English articles are a, an, the and zero article, where the zero is divided into two branches, the zero and the null article (Master, 1997).

Compared to English, Arabic has an equivalent to the definite article the, but there is no equivalent to the indefinite articles *a* and *an*. However, I believe that the notation, addition of N to the end of a word (Chrysler Corporation, 2009) can be a counterpart of the indefinite articles of the English language except the zero article for there is a zero article in the Arabic language, but Arabic grammarians don't count it as an article, I believe. Therefore, when there is no article associated with nouns, it's called the zero articles.

Troubles of the learners in the system of L2 are derived from many sources; one of which is the difference between the structure of L1 and L2 (Khalil 2000), so Arabic system of the articles and the English one are not alike, therefore, the possibilities in committing errors are clear. According to Miller (2005), such errors (in the article system) don't hinder communication with native speakers, but avoiding them is an indicator of one's mastery of L2 (English).

Though articles don't impede communication with native speakers, they may cause confusion in understanding of some terms or sentences. All of us know the dispute between Arabs and Israel caused by the definite article *the* (the territories or territories?), so one should be aware of such cases in order to avoid being misunderstood.

Miller (2005) points out that the English article system is problematic for non-native speakers of English, and adds that teachers should encourage students to the notion of count ability to improve their usage of the articles. In addition, Crompton (2011) finds that few studies regarding to the problems of the article usage are available, and states that the transfer of the Arabic article system to the English causes the problems for the two systems are totally different from each other.

Salebi (2004) finds lots of errors in written English committed by Saudi students, and one of them is the omission of the indefinite article as in "This is difficult test". It resembles the correct Arabic sentence, "Hatha imtihan sa'ab" (Article Omission Error). Salebi adds that students know the grammatical rules that underlie the deviant sentences they have produced, but because of their reliance on their native language, they have produced these errors.

However, the usage of the articles is subject to the noun classifications in the English language either countable or uncountable, specific or unspecific, generic or non-generic, singular or plural, common noun or proper noun, etc..

II. REVIEWING NOUNS

Articles are connected with nouns, so the light is going to be shed on noun classifications. There are three categories of nouns (Penston, 2005), countable/ uncountable nouns, collective nouns and irregular nouns. Countable nouns can be counted and used in the singular or plural (apple, apples). Uncountable nouns, e.g. sand, can't be counted and

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take only singular verbs. Countable/ uncountable determines the accompanying article, and may be divided into mass nouns (wool) and abstract nouns (honesty).

Collective nouns are also called group nouns. They can take singular or plural verb. However, irregular forms of nouns are problematic. Some of which are nouns that can be singular or plural (sheep), nouns that are always plural (clothes) and etc. (see Appendix B).

III. REFERENCE AND THE ARTICLES

Articles give us information about a noun; they indicate whether or not the noun is a specific one known to both the speaker and listener. Therefore, the articles have four areas of reference in English: Specific, Unspecific, Generic and Unique.

3.1 Specific Reference (Indefinite And Definite)

It means the actual example of the referent (the thing/ person referred to by the word). Look at the following example:

A lion and two tigers are sleeping in the cage. (A lion is indefinite).

The lion is sleeping in the cage. (The lion is definite)

The reference is specific (definite or indefinite), since we have in mind specific specimens of the "class" (Quirk & Greenbaum: 69, 1973).

3.2 Unspecific Reference

It means any one (s) of that kind.

➔ A child could do that (Penston: 99, 2005).

3.3 Generic Reference

It covers a class rather than an actual member of that class.

Tigers are dangerous animals.

The reference is generic, since we are thinking of the class "tiger" without special to specific tigers (Quirk & Greenbaum: 69, 1973).

3.4 Unique Reference (Proper Names + Shared Experience)

Proper nouns don't require an article, but there are exceptions (Penston, 2005). On the other hand, common nouns can be classified as uncountable nouns (water) or countable nouns (universities). Proper names can be converted into common nouns, especially with post modification. For examples, when we say (a Shakespeare), we mean that the author looks like Shakespeare (Quirk & Greenbaum: 69, 1973). Here, the proper noun doesn't function as true proper noun.

(The London she saw…) ➔ She saw: post modification

Some names have a built-in definite article (e.g. The Vatican).

What is countable and what is uncountable is somewhat arbitrary and varies to some extent from language to language. For instance, chalk is uncountable in English but countable in Arabic (طباشير).

3.4.1   Shared Experience (Community Unique)

The sun is unique enough for us.

➔ The sun rises in the East.

➔ We took the TV with us. (Shared Experience).

To conclude, the lexical classification of English nouns is important for article usage depending on the speaker reconceptualization of a classification & by usage in context (Murcia & Freeman, 1999).

IV. THE DEFINITE ARTICLE THE

The is commonly called the definite article; the definite article may be used with both singular and plural nouns, as we can see in (the idea/ the ideas) (Altenberg & Vago, 2010). Arabic language contains the definite article (al)

which can be a counterpart to the English one (see Appendix B for more information about the English definite article). In addition, it can be used with noncount nouns (Azar, 2002) as in the following example:

→ Thank you for *the* fruit.

The definite article can be used with proper names (nouns). When it is used with a proper noun, it indicates superlative quality as in the following example (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973):

→ Are you the Mr. Arafat (the famous)?

    The is generally used when we talk about (Sawn, 1992):

1. Something that is mentioned previously.

    → I have a pen. The pen is on the table.

2. Things that are unique and relevant.

    → the sun/ the earth/ etc.

3. Something that is known to both the speaker and listener.

    → The door was damaged.

V. THE INDEFINITE ARTICLES A AND AN

The articles *a* and *an* have the same meaning and use. The only difference between them is that *a* is used when the next word begins with a consonant sound (a book), while *an* is used when the next word begins with a vowel sound (an apple). *A* and *an* are called indefinite articles. The indefinite articles are used only with singular nouns (Altenberg & Vago, 2010).

Let's discuss: *The photo in the dining room was given to me by an old friend.*

"Painting" and "living room" are singular because we are referring to only one painting and one living room. "Painting" is definite because the following phrase, *in the living room*, makes it clear which painting we are referring to. (However, it could be indefinite if there is more than one painting in the living room that the speaker could be referring to; in that case, the speaker would say "A painting...."). "Living room" is definite because it is clear from the context of the situation that the speaker is referring to the living room closest to where he and the listener are standing (Kohl & Katz, http://www.seas.upenn.edu/~tcp/docs/Articles.pdf).

The definite article *the* is used when the speaker and the receiver have something in common about the noun referred to as:

→ The taxi will be here in quarter of an hour.

The definite article the in the sentence is used to refer to a common knowledge so that the second word taxi is familiar or common to the receiver (the taxi you asked me to stop). In consequence of that, the reference is clear for the sentence contains these co-ordinates (Widdowson, 2007).

VI. THE INDEFINITE ARTICLE Φ (ZERO ARTICLE)

The zero article (or no article) is generally used when we refer to plural nouns and uncountable nouns in a general sense (Sawn, 1992) as in:

→ Water consists from Hydrogen and Oxygen. Contrast:

→ The water in that stream is murky. (We are talking about specific running water)

Proper nouns don't receive an indefinite article, but there are exceptions (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973). For instance, when we describe a man as a Shakespeare, we really don't talk about Shakespeare the author.

Moreover, The following types of nouns usually don't preceded by an article (Sawn, 1992): abstract – Time is short, games – I play tennis, meals – Have you had lunch?, languages – She speaks Arabic, subjects – We study Economics, types of music – I like classical music and jazz, and transport – I come by car.

VII. CLASSIFICATION OF THE ARTICLE ERRORS.

The use of an article in the wrong place is a recursive error among Arab learners. Khalil (2000) classified these errors into three categories: addition, omission and miss election. In this study, the hands are washed with the addition and omission of the articles since these can be replaced with miss election.

7.1 Article Addition

The following errors are attributable to the interference from the Arabic language:

→ * The water is the sinew of * the life.

Usually, English abstract nouns take zero article, but Arabic abstract nouns usually take the definite article the (al), so this is one reason why Arab learners do commit errors in the English system of the articles.

In addition, learners sometimes wrongly add the indefinite article such as:

→ *A students in this school respect their teachers.

7.2 Article Omission

Arab learners sometimes omit the definite or indefinite (a/ an) article when needed. Instead, they use the zero article as in:

→ *mouse chased *ant. *ant is the weakest.

Though the nunnation is a mark for the indefiniteness in the Arabic language, it differs from the English indefinite articles (in some cases).

VIII. METHODOLOGY

8.1. Participant

In order to collect data for the present study, a group of fifteen of the 9th grade students at Al-Bouib Mixed Basic School have been selected at random to answer a questionnaire (see Appendix A). All of whom are Palestinians; their levels at the English language skills are somehow advanced, and surely they are non-native speakers of the English language. Nine of them are females and the remainders are males.

8.2. Material

The material used in this study is a questionnaire paper containing blanks to be filled by the participants (See Appendix A). The questionnaire contains a few sentences eliciting the basic mistakes of the learners related to the English system of the articles. However, the testing (questionnaire) was conducted in 21st of October inside the campus of Al-Bouib Mixed Basic School.

8.3. Procedures

The paper was delivered to the participants. They had to fill in the blanks with the correct article. Then, their results were analyzed depending on their results of the questionnaire.

IX. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

At Al-Bouib Mixed Basic School, students have troubles with the usage of the articles. Though the rules of the articles are made clear for them, they do commit errors since they transfer the rules of their mother tongue (Arabic) to the system of the foreign language they are learning (English). The two systems are totally different from each other, so this transform causes a big problem affecting their results in the exams.

The major effects on conducting this study is to find out the major problems in the usage of the articles by Arab school learners. The findings show that Arab learners at Al-Bouib Mixed Basic School lack the basic rules needed to be a good user of the English system of the articles. Table 1 below summarizes these problems (see Appendix A):

Table1. *Problems with the Articles*

Articles	Number of the Students committed errors	Percentage
a	7	46%
an	5	33%
the	9	60%
zero	11	73%

As shown in the table, the zero article forms the basic problematic case. The reason behind that could be the difference between Arabic and English related to the article system. In the Arabic language, it's acceptable to attach the definite article to abstract nouns (such as water), where it's problematic in the English language in some cases.

In addition, participants commit errors using the definite article as appeared in the table for, I believe, the interference from the Arabic language. None of them adds the definite article to Ramallah since there's no article even in Arabic (رام الله), but there is in Hebron (Al-Khalil). Least of them do commit errors in the indefinite articles field for they have known some rules about the countable and uncountable nouns, but some of them ignored the fact that most of the countable nouns in Arabic are named uncountable nouns in English (e.g. information). Therefore, teachers, in such cases, should be aware of this and should tell the students that languages though have something in common, are totally different from each other.

Table2. *Some of the mistakes committed by the participants:*

Errors	Explanation
1. I live in *the house in Al-Bouib.	Interference from Arabic
2. I travelled from *the Hebron to Ramallah.	Interference from Arabic
3. What *the strange person!	Interference from Arabic
4. *The water is the sinew of *the life.	Interference from Arabic
5.*a students in this school respect their teachers.	Carelessness
6. A cat chased a mouse. The mouse chased *a ant. The ant is the weakest.	English vowel system of sounds

As appeared in Table 2, all the errors could be referred to the mother tongue of the participants. They examine if the article acceptable in Arabic, then apply it to English for they think that what applies to Arabic applies to English. However, one of the errors made by the participants could be named "carelessness" (item 5) for it's clear that the indefinite articles must not be used with a plural noun. Moreover, the English vowel sounds could be difficult for the 9th grade students to understand (item 6) that before a vowel sound, the indefinite article an must be used if the noun is countable and concrete.

The objectives of this study are to throw lights on the troubles facing the 9th grade students at Al-Bouib Mixed Basic School, and to provide the possible solutions for these troubles based on the learners' level at the English language. Moreover, it provides an overall look at the usage of the articles in the English language, so when the problems are apparent, the possible resolutions can be made to, at least, prevent repeating such mistakes.

X. CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the basic usage of the articles. It also deals with some problems produced by the 9th grade students at Al-Bouib Mixed Basic School. The results demonstrate that the main drive behind such errors is the interference from the Arabic language, and little is due to the system of the English language. Khalil (2000) demonstrates these sources and claims that erroneous production of the sentences by the learners is resulted from many sources, and some of which are these in this study. In addition, the acquisition of the English articles by Arab students, at Al-Bouib Mixed Basic School, is totally affected by Arabic. Crumpton (2011) concludes his study as:

> "… suggest that research into generic reference in the English of learners from L1s with and without articles would be worthwhile, possibly revealing negative transfer effects worthy of pedagogic intervention… (p28)'.

All in all, teachers should find a rule governing and preventing such interference from Arabic depending on students' level and knowledge (Master 1997). Avery and Radišić (2007) note that articles in English use are rather complex and they are not salient in the spoken language. Faced with this situation, L2 learners might never acquire this functional category, or might exhibit significant variability in its use. However, though complex, I believe that articles in English can be acquired by Arab learners regardless to the difference between English and Arabic. This can be by following organized methods of teaching and by massive concentration on the differences between LI and L2.

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Fill in the blanks with a/ an / the or zero:

1. I live in ………… house in Al-Bouib.

2. I travelled from …………Hebron to ………… Ramallah.

3. What ………… strange person!

4. ………… water is the sinew of ………… life.

5. ………… students in this school respect their teachers.

6. ………… cat chased ………… mouse. ………… mouse chased ………… ant. ………… ant is ………… weakest.

Appendix B

Problematic Nouns

Penston, T. (2005). *A Concise Grammar for English Language Teachers (P 38).* Greystones, Ireland: TP Publications.

Nouns which usually cause problems are

1) **Nouns always plural,** e.g. *clothes, police, cattle, goods, arms*
2) **Pair nouns,** e.g. *trousers, scissors, glasses (spectacles), scales (weighing).* Some speakers treat some of these as singular, e.g. *The scissors is over there ; Have you got a pliers?* etc. However, the standard usage is *are* and *a pair of* with these (*a pair of scales* is rare, though, and the AmE *a scale* may displace the plural).
3) **Uncountable nouns ending in 's'** e.g. *news, measles, linguistics, athletics, darts* (game).
4) **Nouns ending in 's' which are singular or plural** (with some the meaning may be different for singular and plural), e.g. *means, series, barracks, headquarters.*
5) **Other nouns which are singular or plural,** e.g. *sheep, deer, aircraft.*
6) **Uncountable or plural,** e.g. *travel(s)* (plural usually refers to a person's time/experience travelling, usually for pleasure), *politics* (plural usually refers to political beliefs, operations).
7) **-f to -ves,** e.g. *knife-knives, shelf-shelves,* but *roof-roofs,*and *hoof-hoofs/hooves,* etc.

Appendix C

Definiteness

Five Sources of Definiteness
There are five principal ways in which a reader/listener can know specifically what a noun is referring to (that is, five reasons a noun might be considered definite):

1. The noun has been previously mentioned.

   I saw a funny-looking dog yesterday [first mention, indefinite]. It looked like a cross between a Pekinese and a German shepherd. When it saw my cat, the dog ran away [second mention, definite].

2. A superlative or ranking adjective makes the noun's identity specific.

   The *tallest* girl in the class is 6'2" tall. [There can be only one girl who is the tallest.]
   Please read the *fourth* paragraph on page 3. [There can be only one fourth paragraph.]

   Today is the *most important* day of my life. [There can be only one day that is the most important.]

3. The noun describes a unique person, place, or thing.

   The earth revolves around the sun once every 365 days. [There is only one earth and only one sun--in our solar system, that is!]

4. A modifying word, phrase, or clause follows the noun and makes it clear which specific person or thing you are referring to. But not every noun that is modified in this way is definite; it depends largely on the situation and on what you can reasonably expect your listener/reader to know about.

   Do you remember the girl *who went camping with us*?
   [Using *the* here implies that there was only one girl who went camping with you; otherwise the clause *who went camping with us* would not be sufficient to identify the particular girl that you are referring to. If there were two girls, then you would have to be more specific, saying perhaps "Do you remember the girl *from Iowa* who went camping with us *last May*?"]

   John is reading a book *about quantum physics*.
   [Here the noun *book* is modified by the phrase *about quantum physics*. But there is undoubtedly more than one book about quantum physics. Therefore,

   to make *book* definite, we would have to add more information: the book *about quantum physics that was assigned by Professor Jackson last week*.]

5. The context or situation makes the noun's identity clear. For example, you might ask someone to "Close the door." You would use *the* because it would undoubtedly be clear to both of you which door you were referring to. Similarly, if you tell someone that you are going to the library, that person will assume that you are talking about whichever library is most familiar to both of you—RPI's Folsom Library, for example.

http://www.ccp.rpi.edu/resources/article-usage/

Appendix D

Uses of the Definite Article

Other uses of the definite article

A type of generic use suits the following:

1. musical instruments (BrE):	*Can you play the clarinet?*
2. media and places of entertainment:	*the radio, the theatre, the cinema*
3. metonymy (part for the whole):	*the Crown, the screen, the boards*
4. inventions:	*the microchip, the TV, the pen*

Other fixed expressions and uniques are

5. comparatives and superlatives:	*the faster of the two ... the fastest of them all*
6. adjectives as nouns:	*the rich, the handicapped*
7. geographical names:	*The Nile, The Himalayas*
8. most newspapers:	*The Mirror, The Evening Echo*

Penston, T. (2005). *A Concise Grammar for English Language Teachers (P 100).* Greystones, Ireland: TP Publications.

Appendix E

General Guidelines

Azar, B. (2002). *Understanding and Using English Grammar (P 115).* New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

7-8   GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ARTICLE USAGE

(a) ***The sun*** is bright today. Please hand this book to ***the teacher***. Please open ***the door***. Omar is in ***the kitchen***.	GUIDELINE: Use ***the*** when you know or assume that your listener is familiar with and thinking about the same specific thing or person you are talking about.
(b) Yesterday I saw *some dogs*. ***The dogs*** were chasing *a cat*. ***The cat*** was chasing *a mouse*. ***The mouse*** ran into *a hole*. ***The hole*** was very small.	GUIDELINE: Use ***the*** for the second mention of an indefinite noun.* In (b): first mention = *some dogs, a cat, a mouse, a hole;* second mention = *the dogs, the cat, the mouse, the hole.*
(c) CORRECT: ***Apples*** are my favorite fruit. INCORRECT: *The apples are my favorite fruit.* (d) CORRECT: ***Gold*** is a metal. INCORRECT: *The gold is a metal.*	GUIDELINE: Do NOT use ***the*** with a plural count noun (e.g., *apples*) or a noncount noun (e.g., *gold*) when you are making a generalization.
(e) CORRECT: (1) I drove ***a car***. (2) I drove ***the car***. (3) I drove ***that car***. (4) I drove ***Jim's car***. INCORRECT: I drove *car*.	GUIDELINE: A singular count noun (e.g., *car*) is preceded by a marker: (1) ***a*** or ***an*** (or another singular marker such as ***one, each,*** or ***every***); (2) ***the***; (3) ***this*** or ***that***; (4) a possessive (e.g., ***my, Jim's***)

*****The*** is not used for the second mention of a generic noun. COMPARE:
(1) *What color is **a banana** (generic noun)?* ***A banana*** *(generic noun) is yellow.*
(2) *Joe offered me **a banana** (indefinite noun) or an apple. I chose **the banana** (definite noun).*

**Appendix F**

Answers of the Questionnaire (Appendix A)

Fill in the blanks with a/ an / the or zero:

1. I live in a house in Al-Bouib.

2. I travelled from Hebron to Ramallah.

3. What a strange person!

4. Water is the sinew of life.

5. The students in this school respect their teachers.

6. A cat chased a mouse. The mouse chased an ant. The ant is the weakest.

Appendix G

Article Usage Flow Chart

http://www.ccp.rpi.edu/files/2010/11/CCP_Article_Usage_Flow_chart.pdf
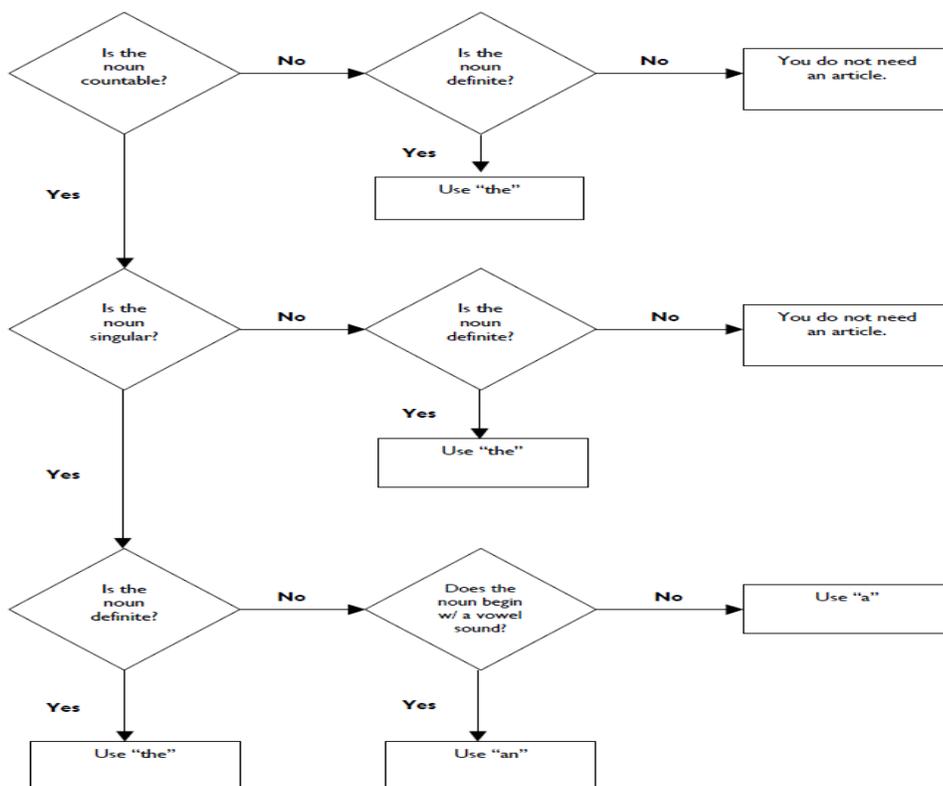
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