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Grammatical Errors as Strategic Adjustments: A Corpus-Based Study of Definite Article Use in EAP Learners' Oral Presentations

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ABSTRACT

Grammatical accuracy remains a persistent challenge for second language learners, particularly in spoken academic contexts. This study investigates the grammatical errors made by English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners during oral presentations at the undergraduate level. The collected data is taken in the recorded form that is transcribed and processed via Antconc 3.5.9.0 software. Corder's theory of error analysis (1967) is adopted as framework to discuss the findings which are presented in the form of four separate tables representing four semesters of BS. Fixed-Size sampling technique is utilized for this study as it follows qualitative research methodology and only the syntactic errors of definite article are considered for discussion and analysis. The finding presents two types of errors one is incorrect use of definite article with proper nouns and second is repetition of definite article with single noun and without noun. The final results justify the purpose of this study and support the argument that even though the errors are due to lack of grammatical knowledge but they are also adopted as strategies by the EAP learners to compensate the pauses they take to think next words or syntactic structure to communicate. This study is beneficial for language teachers and also for researchers who look to analyze stage fright and its impact on language.

Keywords: Error Analysis (EA), English for Academic Purpose (EAP), Syntactic Errors, English as Second Language (ESL), Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

1. Introduction

Errors are the outcome of learners' incomplete knowledge of a language. Learners' grammatical and situational comprehension deficits result in errors (Qadir & Yasmin, 2024). Corder (1967), states that the errors made by the ESL/EFL learners are significant because "they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language" (p.167). Error analysis is an alternative field that was developed and progressed in late 20th century. It was a welcome development for the language teachers who shifted their attention from contrastive analysis to

error analysis. Contrastive analysis was influenced from behaviourism whereas error analysis was more focused on learner performance. In the modern age, language learning demand has also taken big strides, and learners are not merely focused on language learning for mere academic purposes but they are also concerned about business and professional purposes as well (Yasmin et al., 2016). Modern learner needs are different, compared to past needs, so new strategies for teaching and learning must also be developed to match the needs of modern learning trends. Language teachers and researchers are fully aware of these modern needs, and, as a result they shift the target of their research towards finding and devising better learning strategies.

Corder (1973) who has done lot of work on errors he conducted a study on errors and categorized errors as analogical errors, transfer errors and teaching-induced errors. Analogical errors are errors made when a learner apply grammatical rules or patterns where they don't fit specially in similar analogy. Second type of errors are the rules which the learner carries from his mother tongue in L2 as a result errors occur whereas, teaching errors are the errors caused by the insufficient knowledge of teachers.

James (1998) also followed the footsteps of Corder and he analysed errors made by learners which he classified into two distinct categories: the linguistic category, and surface structure taxonomy. Linguistics errors are purely related to the overall language system which encompasses phonetic, phonology, morphology, and syntactic structures. These errors are purely related to the structures of language that operate at a micro level; any alteration in these structures can cause serious error or even result miscommunications for the message recipient, whereas surface structure taxonomy errors are caused by alterations, or changes in a systematic way. This change will result in ungrammaticality but would not affect function of language as much as the micro structures do. These errors have multiple causes: omission, misformation and misordering among others. Learners sometimes make unnecessary omissions of a grammatical features that can result in errors, and misformation and misordering of syntactic structures can also result into errors as sentences would lose coherence.

Students at tertiary level may have already passed academic English as a subject, but they may be unable to communicate fluently and confidently in English; particularly during presentations (Yasmin & Sohail, 2018a). EAP learners in an EFL setting do not get many real-life opportunities to master the four skills of language learning because most of the syllabi are designed the purpose of understanding the material (listening, reading), and may not have the opportunity to practice their productive skills (speaking, writing). When they are asked to deliver a presentation in L2 even though presentations are structured and students prepare well in advance, stage fright and lack of practice can make them shift back to L1 or make significant errors in L2. Learner's lack of practice can cause errors, but they might compensate those errors with strategic adjustments (Yasmin & Sohail, 2018b). As James (1998) explained, "learners' errors are a register of their current perspective on the target language".

There are two main sources of errors in L2 learning: The first is caused by native language interference, whereas the second is caused by the faulty application of rules and unawareness of the restrictions of rules (Richards, 2015). As part of the latter he further discusses developmental errors and clarifies that developmental errors happen when "the learner attempting to build up hypotheses about the English language from his limited experience of it in the classroom or textbook" (p.209).

Language is based on four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), but within the context of EAP, learners often find themselves within a programme that favours the receptive skills of listening and reading over the productive skills of speaking and writing. Worse, due to program or budgetary constraints, they may find themselves focusing on a single receptive skill.

This makes the process of finding ways to communicate more arduous for learners in these environments.

This study was conducted in the context of Murray College Sialkot where students are quite up to the mark as far as reading is concerned but when it comes to master productive skills such as speaking and writing they are unable to meet the standard of tertiary level. At tertiary level students are challenged to show presentation skills that require communication skills. This is a rare and new experience for most students and, to tackle this new challenge, they adopt varying strategies. Hincks (2003) states that this type of new challenge motivates students to stretch their communication skills.

The main purpose of this study is to investigate data collected from presentations delivered by students in this setting. The aim is to analyse errors made by the students and to find out the strategic adjustments made by them to communicate during presentations. The data is collected from four different semesters of students of BS English studying EAP.

2. Research questions

1. What syntactic variations in the use of definite article are found in the presentations of EAP learners?
2. What different strategic adjustments made by EAP learners in their presentations to compensate their lack of grammatical knowledge?
3. What are the development stages of definite article errors in the different semesters of EAP learners?

3. Literature Review

Errors are undesirable problems which occur in both human learning in general and language learning in particular. Language teachers work hard with their students to prevent or minimize these problems and students themselves also strive hard to improve themselves. Corder taxonomy of errors is a framework developed to categorize errors in language learning which can be categorized based on their characteristic. He categorized them as systematic errors and non-systematic errors. Error analysis is a critical tool for teachers to find out the solution to a problem student may have. In the words of Ulla (2014), "the process to observe, analyse, and classify the deviations of the rules of the second language and then to reveal the systems operated by learner" (p. 22). EA is "the first approach to the study of second language acquisition (SLA) which includes an internal focus on learners' creative ability to construct the language" (Saville-Troike, 2012, p. 40). Errors were often treated as negative output of language learning, especially in the views of behaviourists who were more focused on learning as habit formation which can further be enhanced through reinforcement (River, 1968:73).

This strengthens the teachers' role as overseer of the learning process, while the learner is involved in a constant assessment and adjustment to the context for the required communication. The learner's response is rewarded, discouraged or even punished for his correct or incorrect outputs. This is called positive reinforcement and negative reinforcement (Jones & Wheeler, 1983, p.326). Behaviourist had dominated language learning but the baton shifted from them then mentalist led by Noam Chomsky (1986) presented novel concept of language learning. Chomsky stressed on the concept that language learning is innate to children who with their progress in language learning build hypothesis about the systematic rules of language, test hypothesis and make adjustment accordingly (Hadley, 2001). This strategic process of identification of an error and correction of an error is adopted by the learner because every learner is keen enough to improve his knowledge of language and apply it in the production of language. Errors are generally considered a slight or failure of a learner but they are not negative outcome they are

emblem of progress and learner's willingness to develop in the learning process. Errors are identifiable alteration of grammatical rules which are adopted by the learners due to their lack of knowledge or their language competency. As learners grow their knowledge, they identify their errors and correct them. This process goes until the process of learning is going on with every improvement the learners develop a keen desire to master the target language as he improves listener's feedback rewards them with completion of communication process.

Corder (1973) was the pioneer who brought special focus on errors he defined an error as "those features of the learner's utterances which differ from those of any native speaker" (p.260). Latter on Lennon (1991) also supported Corder's definition by referring an error to "a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar conditions of production would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers' native speaker's counterparts" (p.182)

Every language teacher and researcher tries to find out the true reason of errors they conduct tests and studies to know whether the resultant errors in process are functional or cognitive. Sawalmeh (2013) also followed the same terrain and analysed the essays of 32 Saudi Male learners at the University of Hai'l and he investigated and identified the errors made by these learners. He identified different errors which he categorized as errors caused by incorrect use of tense, word order, a singular/plural form, subject-verb agreement, double negatives, spelling, capitalization, articles, sentence fragments, pronouns, and prepositions. He used the findings of this study to suggest some pedagogical strategies which can assist ESL/EFL teachers and learners and are also very helpful for the learners. Another study of Abushihab (2014) is worth mentioning here who conducted a study at the Gazi University of Turkey he asked his first semester students to write an essay of 200-250 words. Findings of this study showed that those students made errors in aspects, tense, preposition, passive voice and morphology. Even though there were errors from word level to sentence level but the errors in tense were at the highest frequency.

Albalawi (2015) also investigated the spelling errors of 45 ESL/ESL learners at Tabuk University in Saudi Arabia and categorized the errors in the following three types: omission, addition, and substitution. His take was that these errors are due to the interference of mother tongue as both native language and foreign languages have different systems. The availability of two separate systems can cause errors as the dominant system of native language forces its way whenever, the speaker tries to speak in target language which results in errors.

Sermsook et al. (2017), also explored the cause of errors and conducted a study at Thai University they investigated errors. The data was taken from 26 selected students who were asked to write sentences. The findings showed that inappropriate use article was the highest percentage of errors whereas, other errors were also identified which were incorrect use of punctuation, subject-verb agreement and spellings. EAP learners are first taught rules of second language and then they are asked to use them but still their lack of practice in second language caused errors.

Atashian & Al-Bahri (2018) also conducted a study and analysed the grammatical errors of Omani learners. They collected the data of 200 EAP learners from B.A (Bachelor of Arts) at the University of Nizwa. The learners were assigned a topic of essay and the errors they committed were categorized into the following three types: tenses, adverbs, and pronouns. There are various studies conducted by different researchers in different settings all the studies reported errors and the categories of errors were also enlisted. The errors can be divided into errors related to cognitive errors and functional errors but the major cause of these errors is complexity of grammatical rules of language which are different for every language as a result however a new language is learnt learners have to strive hard for understanding those rules. This study is also in line with the previous studies discussed above it is different from them in some aspect as all the mentioned studies are primarily focused on

identification and categorization of errors but this study accepts errors as mark of development and they are also taken as strategic adjustments by the learners.

4. Research Methodology

This study focused on errors committed by the students of BS English of Government Murray College Sialkot. The data of four different semesters was collected and analysed to find out the pattern of development of errors. The focus of this study was on two points one if the errors were same in four semesters and whether repetition was a strategic adjustment. This study gave an ample opportunity to know the development in language learning as far as rule and knowledge of language is concerned.

The procedure for data collection adopted by the researcher thoroughly follows the taxonomy of errors presented by Corder's (1967) in his paper "Error Analysis and Remedial Teaching". He recognised two basic functions of error analysis: theoretical and practical. The first one deals with investigation of language learning process itself, whereas the latter deals with of language in action, which helps the teacher and find the best remedial actions to improve on errors. Based on these two functions, he devised a well-formulated procedure for error analysis following these stages: finding errors, identifying errors, describing errors, and classifying the types of errors.

Corder's theory of error analysis (1967) was adopted as theoretical frame work for this study. He presented his theory of error analysis and categorized errors into the following taxonomy: phonological errors, lexical errors, syntactic errors, morphological errors and semantic errors.

The authentic data was collected from students' presentations. For that purpose, presentations of 18 students from first, 15 from third, 16 from fifth and eight from seventh semester were recorded and transcribed for the analysis. The total volume of recording of presentations was 497.38. minutes which were cleansed and 180 minutes recording was transcribed. Researcher informed all the students about recording and purpose of recording. Research purpose of this study was also clarified to them the transcribed data was converted into a corpus and then that corpus was processed and analyzed in Antconc, version 3.5.9.0. Selection of concordances was preferred over other options i.e., collocation, and frequency because concordance present complete view of definite article in a specified syntactic window. This analysis focused on spoken data, with special focus on syntactic errors committed by the students during their presentations. The systemic random sampling technique was adopted for this study as the presentations of 30% students were recorded for the analysis (Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D.2017). This figure ultimately ensured that every third student from the class had opportunity to be part of this study. The qualitative method research design for the data analysis was preferred as it was suitable for describing the errors after identifying them.

5. Findings

The findings were presented in the form of four different sets. The concordance of definite article was identified via corpus-based software and the data was discussed in detail by following Corder's theory of error analysis. The data of four different semesters was investigated individually to find out the syntactic variation in terms of use of article and these findings were also compared to find out the development stages in the course of their four years learning. The discussion began with the analysis of presentations of first semester students. The corpus consisted of 6923 words tokens from which 365 concordance hits were analyzed with special focus on interlanguage.

Table:1

Concordance of definite article, presentations of 1st semester students

Overgeneralization	“The” + Proper Noun	Sr. No	Concordance
		1.	Presenter: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 Theory the PoWo</i> theory the
		4.	Experiment performed by the king ah king James Scott <i>the Scotland</i> similar experiment in 25000 ah in 15000 y
		5.	Language 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.	cognitive 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.	language the natural language source it is based on <i>the</i> it is based on <i>the</i> natural sound

The concordance of definite article presented in the above table was taken from the data of 18 students of semester one accounting for 30% of 55 students. The errors made by the learners were divided into two different types: “the” + proper noun and repetition of definite article. In the both types of errors learners showed lack of awareness of rule and also confusion. The use of definite article with proper noun proved that students were unfamiliar with the rule and repetition of definite article showed that students search for words. This repeated use of definite article with proper noun was a strategic adjustment as it served as gap filler. In the both types, EAP learners made errors which were taken as hints about the unawareness and confusion in their minds.

In the first example definite article was used with the proper noun “Allah” which was an incorrect use of definite article. Following the same trend definite article was again used with other proper nouns like “Australia”, “English”, “Hebrew”, “Scotland”, “Bow Wow”, and “Pow Wow” theory. This incorrect use of definite article with proper nouns showed that the EAP learners lacked grammatical knowledge as a result they kept on using definite article with proper nouns. In other instances, definite article was also repeated twice with single noun. The repetition of definite article showed learners confusion and it is also used as a strategy.

Table:2

Concordance of definite article, presentations of 3rd semester students

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 words or the phrases that show the are the</i> words or phrases, that show
		3.	repetition and simplify <i>the sentence</i> . In this example, <i>the dog is the noun</i> and it is
		4.	complementizers. Determine, determine <i>the words ahm the at the end of the noun</i> . Four types of
		5.	in this sentence I is <i>the noun phrase and the notices the verb</i> phrase and that, that.

Second sample was taken from the presentations of third semester students. The examples were taken from 240 concordance hits which were processed via Antconc from the corpus that consists of 4549 word tokens. This set of data showed major development in EAP learners. They produced grammatical constructions as compare to the students of first semester. As a result, the major errors in the use of article with proper nouns were avoided by the learners and repetition of article with same noun was also mitigated. There were only few errors of definite article and zero error of incorrect use of definite article with proper nouns as well. Though there were some instances where they used repetition of article but this use of definite article is considered as strategy adopted by the learners to fill gaps. Gap fillers were taken as strategies by the speaker when they were short of words. In some examples as in the first example 'the' was used twice with the word basic and category which was unnecessary use of article with the word basic.

Table:3

Concordance of definite article, presentations of 5th semester students

Overgeneralization	“The” + Proper Noun	Sr. No	Concordance
		1.	sorry, GL sound is the sequence of sounds in <i>the English</i> word that shows the reflection of
	Repetition	2.	we study one of the most important novel in <i>the Hamlet</i> , we can study a past line,
		3.	stylistics. 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 words tokens were processed to get 323 concordance hits. Though learners showed development in the second semester but here again incorrect use of definite article was seen. EAP learners used definite article 'the' with proper noun in two instances and the examples were presented in the above table but one thing was consistent and that was repetition. This feature was consistent throughout from the previous sets of data. This use of repeated article was due to a strategy employed by the learners to get some time for thinking as they were experiencing a new or rare experience of speaking English which they did not often experience in regular communication.

Table:4

Concordance of definite article, presentations of 7th semester students

Overgeneralization	“The” + Proper Noun	Sr. No	Concordance
		1.	Grammatical 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'
	Optional use of “the”	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

The last sample set consists of 190 concordance hits, and it was processed from 3903 word tokens. This table has continuity from the previous tables as learners repeated same errors and the pattern showed consistency even though the number of errors were decreasing. The use of repetition of definite article with single noun was the most prominent feature of these four sets of data which was taken as a strategy by the learners. The errors presented in this table were divided into two separate headings. In the first division the errors were headed as the incorrect use of definite article with proper noun which was prevalent in three sets out of four sets but with decreasing tendency and in the second part repetition of definite article with same noun or in some cases without noun was almost same in all the four patterns.

6. Discussion

The above data was analyzed after identifying the errors based on the theory presented by Corder. The syntactic errors were analyzed with special focus on definite article and two patterns of errors were found: one was incorrect use of definite article and second was repetition of definite.

article with or without noun. In the first type the learners incorrectly used definite article, whereas, in the second type the learner repeated the article which was also not accepted as per standard English but both of these errors were used as strategies by the learners. They were presenting in English language which was a rare experience for them even though they can comfortable when they write as they do not make these errors but when it comes to speaking English they find it hard to stick with grammatical rules which was due to lack of practice. Learners of L2 use their mother tongue to think and then that thought is conveyed via L2 which force them to commit serious errors.

7. Conclusion

This study is conducted based on Corder's theory of errors analysis. This study is beneficial for the language teachers as they can understand the errors are not completely due to lack of grammatical knowledge of the learners they can also be made by the learners due to their lack of practice and errors are made as they struggle to devise a reasonable strategy. Learners think in one language and they deliver their thought in another language. This incompatibility of languages causes errors. Their lack of practice despite the fact they had studied rules and constrains of target language but still they found it hard to deliver when it came to speaking. This study is not only beneficial for the language teachers but it can be beneficial for the language researchers as well as there are some gaps which are highlighted for the future researchers who can compare written and spoken data of same students from the same class which can further strengthen or verify the argument that learner's ability differs in spoken and written. Researchers from the field of psychology can also collaborate with language researchers to analyse the impact of stage fright on the learner's mind which causes grammatical errors.

DECLARATION STATEMENTS

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. They also confirm that no external funding was received for this study, beyond the allocation of academic time at their respective university.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study will be provided by the corresponding author on request.

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