This study is an analysis of compositions written by Saudi university-level EFL students. It aims at identifying the types of errors they make in the use of the definite/indefinite articles. To achieve this aim, the researcher employed two methods; contrastive analysis and error analysis in identifying, classifying, analyzing and explaining students' errors. Six types of error were identified, and their frequency computed and then compared across the four levels of the study subjects. These types are: (1) omission of the indefinite article (a, an), (2) writing the indefinite article (a) as part of the noun/adjective following it, (3) substitution of the indefinite (a, an) for the definite article (the), (4) substitution of the definite (the) for the indefinite article (a, an) or Ø, (5) use of the indefinite article (a, an) with unmarked plurals, and (6) use of the indefinite article (a, an) with uncountable nouns. Native language transfer was found to play a role in some of students' errors. The analysis revealed that all errors, except two types, were independent of the students' native language (Arabic). The two types of error which could be traced back to the influence of Arabic, among other sources, were: (1) the omission of the indefinite article (a, an) and (2) the substitution of the definite article (the) for the indefinite article (a, an) or Ø. Developmental factors and common learning strategies like simplification and overgeneralization were found to account for the majority of students' errors. The use of these strategies was evident among the students of the four levels who were found to do well on certain items and to have difficulty with others.

Keywords: Error, Definite, Indefinite, Teaching, Learning.

Introduction

Second /foreign language learners often have consistent difficulty and thus make errors when using the language. For many years, errors were considered as a problem that should be eradicated as soon as possible (Corder, 1967). Recently, however, errors are looked on as a device that can assist in language learning process. They give us better insights into the process of learning. Due to this, errors are now regarded as a very important tool for diagnostic purposes in language teaching (AbiSamra, 2003). Thus, analysing errors as an indication of difficulties in language learning has become a popular topic in second/foreign language acquisition research. This kind of analysis can reveal the sources of these errors and the causes of their frequent occurrence. Once the sources and causes are exposed, it will be possible to determine the remedy, as well as the emphasis and sequence of future instruction. Moreover, the role of error analysis in the practical work of the language instructor is seen, not as a strict rubric informing practice at every level, but rather as a pool of information and theory providing the instructor with insights which may affect his/her work to varying degrees. It is a question of influencing attitude and
Errors in the Usage of the English Definite/Indefinite Articles Among Saudi University-Level Students

Being an EFL instructor himself, the researcher is aware that Saudi students in general and those majoring in English in Imam university-college of Languages and Translation have difficulty in their use of English articles. Therefore, this study investigates errors produced by Saudi EFL students in this particular area. It is an attempt to look into this matter for the purpose of adding to the conclusions drawn by previous research.

The Article Systems in the Arabic and English Languages

Arabic (the subjects' mother tongue) and English have similarities and differences in terms of their article systems. The Arabic article system is similar to that of English in meaning, however, form is highly varied. While the Arabic system manifests a binary distinction between the defined and the undefined, the English system exhibits a tripartite distinction. The Arabic defined (marked by the prefix /al/) and the undefined (marked by the absence of /al/ and by the suffix -n) correspond to the English defined (marked by the definite article the) and the undefined (marked by the indefinite articles a, n) and ø. In other words, even though the concept is present in the two languages, definiteness/indefiniteness in English is marked by lexical items such as (the) and (a, an) respectively while it is marked in Arabic by affixes such as the prefix /al/ and the suffix -n, both to mark definiteness and indefiniteness respectively (Lyons, 1999). For example, the following Arabic and English sentences are translation equivalents: Dahara rajulun fi albaldeh (Man appeared in the town).

Arabic has a definite article (al-), which corresponds roughly to the definite article (the) in English. The rules governing its use in Arabic, however, are different from those in English. In English, the definite article (the) is used for an entity already mentioned in a text and for unique references such as the moon, the king, the earth (Swan and Smith, 1987). In Arabic, however, the definite article is expressed by the use of the prefix ‘al-’ such as al-ketab (the book) and its use differs from that of the English definite article in that the definite article ‘al-’ is used in Arabic for all days of the week, some months in the Muslim calendar and many names of people, towns, cities and countries. In Arabic, the name of specific places or locations like park, canteen, school, sea need be collocated with definite article (al-). Unlike the Arabic language, mentioning those places or locations in English does not always require a definite article, unless those places or locations have been specified earlier, or expressed deictically. If the expressions are not expressed deictically, it will then be expressed either with a definite article, or an indefinite article. Arabic grammar also requires one to have the definite article in front of instruments like computer, piano, internet. The English grammar, however, requires the instruments mentioned above be preceded by either a definite article or an indefinite article as necessary. Thus, the sentences below, could be the result of an interference from the Arabic language, are ungrammatical.

My hobbies are cycling, playing and reading the novels.
Sometimes I do my revision using the computer.

Kharma and Hajjaj (1989) summarized the uses of the definite article (the) in Arabic as follows:

- Nouns used generically in Arabic, whether singular or plural, take ‘al’ (the).
- Abstract nouns in Arabic take ‘al’, more frequently than in English.
- When a mass noun refers to the whole kind, it takes ‘al’.
- Some proper nouns take ‘al’, such as ‘al-kahera’ (the Cairo).
- When two nouns are joined by ‘and’, ‘al’ is repeated even when these nouns represent one unit such as ‘al-zawjuwa al-zawjatu’ (the husband and the wife).
- In some idiomatic forms such as: A ‘malufii Al-lailiwa al-nahaari. (I work in the day and the night).
Thus, these are the reasons why Arabic EFL learners overuse the definite article when they write in English and make numerous inter-lingual/interference errors. They (1989, p. 151), in analyzing Arabic speaker errors in English, observed that “English employs a tripartite system to express definiteness/indefiniteness, namely: a, an, the and Ø, whereas Arabic employs a binary system, namely: /al/ (the) and Ø. Part of the confusion in using the English articles arises from this main difference between the two systems.”

With regard to another aspect of a language system, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) claimed that the problematicity of the use of the article system is due in part to whether or not the lexical classification into countable versus uncountable nouns corresponds in the native and target languages. For example, while (furniture) and (equipment) are uncountable in both Arabic and English, (chalk) and (information) are countable in Arabic and uncountable in English. This mismatch may very well add to the complexity of the learner's task, for he/she needs to learn both the article system and other noun distinctions.

The Study Objectives

This study examines the acquisition of the English definite/indefinite articles by a cross-section of Saudi university level students. It has three main objectives:

- To identify the errors that students make in terms of their types and potential sources.
- To compute and compare the relative frequency of these errors to detect any developmental tendencies among students of the different levels of proficiency.
- To determine any potential differences among the subjects which can be attributed to class level.

This study also tackles the question of errors from the students’ point of view. The students' errors were presented to the students to comment on them indicating the causes that led them to make such errors. It was hoped that the students’ perceptions of their errors will shed light on the learning strategies students employ to learn the second language. It was also hoped that on the basis of the students' perceptions of their errors, some important implications will be inferred which may help EFL instructors to improve their teaching methods, and in turn, reduce their students' errors.

The Study Questions

To achieve the objectives cited above, the present study is set to answer the following questions:

1. What are the types and potential sources of the errors Saudi EFL students make in their use of the definite/indefinite articles?
2. Are there any developmental implications in the relative frequency of the occurrence of these errors?
3. Are there any differences in the students' errors which can be attributed to class level?
4. Does L1 background play a role in students' errors?
5. How do students perceive their errors?
6. How do students’ perceptions of their errors help clarify their learning strategies?
7. What are the implications of the students’ perceptions of their errors?

Significance of the Study

This study derives its significance from the significance of the topic it addresses and the fact that its findings will be useful and contribute to ESL/EFL instructors, syllabus designers and course-book writers of English as a second/foreign language in Saudi Arabia in particular and those of Arab world in general.
It also might be of interest to linguists from Saudi Arabia as well as those from the English-speaking countries where most of the English teaching syllabuses and linguistic theories are developed.

This study is concerned with the application of linguistic analysis to a practical problem for Saudi students (whose native language is Arabic) in learning English as a foreign language. The linguistic analysis will involve identification, description and explanation of errors made by Saudi EFL students in using the definite/indefinite articles

**Literature Review**

The English articles (*a, an, the*) and Ø are quite difficult to acquire not only for ESL/EFL learners but also for children learning English as a first language. Master (2002) attributes this difficulty to three facts about the article system:

- Articles are among the most frequent function words in English (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999), making constant rule application difficult over an extended stretch of discourse.
- Function words are normally unstressed and consequently are very difficult for non-native speakers to discern, which affects the availability of input in the spoken mode.
- The article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme, which constitutes a considerable burden for the learner who usually looks for a one-to-one correspondence between form and function, especially in the early stages of language learning.

Articles are believed to be a source of difficulty for learners and instructors of English as a second/foreign language, especially for those whose native languages do not have articles or do have articles or article-like morphemes which are used in ways that differ from English articles (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

L2 learners of English often have consistent difficulty in the use of articles until very late stages of acquisition or do not ever reach the native-like level of performance. Importantly, similar errors with articles have been documented across learner contexts. For example, L2 learners have been found to use bare nouns when they are not appropriate, and they have been found to substitute or overuse the definite article (*the*) in contexts where the indefinite article (*a, an*) is required (Huebner, 1985; Lu, 2001; Ionin & Wexler, 2003; Ionin et al., 2004). The same kinds of errors have been documented in L1 acquisition of English (Brown, 1973; de Villers & de Villers 1973; Maratsos, 1974; Schaeffer & Matthewson, 2005). While there is agreement that all English language learners have difficulty in using articles (at least initially), there is no consensus as to what the reasons for this difficulty are, and whether some reasons could be the same in L1 and L2 acquisition.

The literature has a plethora of research conducted on the processes of learning English articles by EFL/ESL learners. Early studies of English L2 learners found that they omitted articles in their initial inter-language and were less accurate with indefinite articles than with definite articles at early stages, leading to the conclusion that the English L2 acquisition sequence for articles is Ø > *the* > *a* (Huebner 1985, Master 1987, Parrish 1987, Thomas 1989). These conclusions about the order of article acquisition received further support in more recent studies (Robertson, 2000; Lu, 2001; Lardiere, 2005). For instance, studies of Chinese learners of English (Robertson, 2000; Lu, 2001) found that, in beginner groups, article accuracy was significantly higher in definite than in indefinite contexts.

Turning to errors in particular, null articles (Ø) in both definite and indefinite contexts and substitution of the definite article in indefinite contexts are the most widely reported types of errors. Studies of adult L2 learners whose L1s lacked articles found the overgeneralization of the (Ø) article in both definite and indefinite contexts. Article omission in such cases was naturally attributed to L1 transfer, although the absence of a comparison group whose L1s have article systems makes it difficult to know for certain. For learners whose native languages lack articles, researchers (Parrish, 1987; Master, 1997; Ekiert, 2004) reported that (Ø) dominates in all environments for articles in the early stages of
language learning. Parrish (1987) suggested an order of acquisition in which the (Ø) article, the definite article, and the indefinite article are acquired consecutively.

Master (1997) concluded that these learners seem to acquire the (Ø) article first although he warned that one cannot tell the difference between the (Ø) article and omission of the article. Master's data showed that (Ø) accuracy is close to 100% for the low-ability level participants, which then drops, and rises to nearly 100 % again for the high-ability level participants. He further reported that the overuse of (Ø) article decreases with the increase in proficiency level, although the overuse of (Ø) article persists more than the overuse of the other articles. Liu and Gleason (2002, p.5) re-examined Master's data and offered a new interpretation of the overuse of the (Ø) article and underuse of (a) and (the): "his overuse of the (zero) article and the underuse of (the) at the advanced stage would suggest that the two articles are acquired rather late".

Liu and Gleason's hypothesis was supported by Young's (1996) data on the use of articles by Czech and Slovak learners of English, for while definiteness was not encoded by (the) at the early stages of acquisition, it persisted even at the more advanced stages. However, participants encoded indefiniteness by means of the indefinite article (a) at all levels of proficiency with rising frequency as acquisition progressed.

Another common error found in L2 acquisition of English is the overuse of the definite article (the). Huebner (1985) and Parrish (1987) found that initially, L2 learners extended the use of (the) to nouns mentioned in the discourse for the first time. These case studies suggested that L2 learners at early stages of acquisition erroneously associate (the) with specific nouns, overusing (the) in the contexts where the referent of a noun is known to the speaker but not to the hearer. Several studies (Huebner, 1985; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Chaudron and Parker, 1990) found an overuse of the definite article (the), but higher proficiency learners improved in accuracy with indefinite (a). Although both Huebner (1983) and Master (1997) referred to the phenomenon of 'the-flooding' in which (the) is over-generalized with a dramatic rise in usage, Thomas (1989) found the (Ø) article over-generalized across proficiency levels. More recent research with larger sample sizes consisting of Russian, Korean and Mandarin learners of English arrived at the same conclusion concerning (the) overuse in specific reference contexts (Lu, 2001; Ionin & Wexler, 2003; Ionin, et al, 2004).

Research findings show similarities in the kinds of problems facing ESL/EFL learners, of which some are believed to be more serious for learners from certain language backgrounds. The findings of comparative studies of first and second/foreign language acquisition are widely varied. Some morpheme studies (cf., for example, Cook, 1973) reported similar stages of development, while others (cf., for example, Larsen-Freeman, 1975) reported apparent variability in the order of acquisition of different groups. A third group (cf., for example, Ervin-Tripp, 1974) yet limited the similarity to natural learning situations. Corder (1973) maintained that unlike natural language learning, where learners make and test their own hypotheses about the language, second/foreign language learners in tutored situations follow an externally imposed syllabus.

The review of research on the effects of instruction on second/foreign language development suggests that instruction has a positive effect on second/foreign language learning, the rate of acquisition and learners' ultimate level of attainment. Some even go as far as claiming that certain structures may not be acquired if not taught (Cook, 1973). Certain findings, however, exclude any potential influence on the order of acquisition which is believed to be independent of the kind and amount of instruction the learner receives (Long, 1983).

Articles need to be taught because not only do they carry meaning, but also because using them erroneously often causes misreading and confusion (Wrase, 1982; Rinnert and Hansen, 1986). This is made more plausible by Rinnert and Hansen's (1986) report of significant improvement in article use by more than one thousand learners from different native language backgrounds following a systematic instructional approach using self-developed material. It has been reported that very few EFL/ESL textbooks present a systematic approach or adequate practice to positively affect learners' performance in article usage.
Previous Studies

Studies of second/foreign language acquisition have found that learners face difficulty in the usage of English articles in their writing. Studies related to the present study are summarised below in a chronological order.

Al-Motairi's study (1999). The study aimed to investigate and examine the grammatical errors made by Saudi learners of English as a foreign language in their compositions. The results of this study revealed that participants made their written errors in nine grammatical categories: prepositions; articles; tense/verb; present tense third person singular marker; word order; copula; question formation; relative clause and negation. As for errors in articles, the study considered them as general (i.e. very frequent) errors among the participants. In addition, only 19.6% of these grammatical errors committed by Saudi EFL students in their written work could be attributed to the influence exerted by the differences in the grammar field between Arabic and English.

Mizuno's study (1999). The study aimed to investigate errors in the use of English articles. Results revealed that Japanese learners selected articles according to semantic, formal, and phonetic criteria. The results also indicated that L1 interference strongly influences the process of second language acquisition of the articles. The researcher concluded that one should teach the definite article first, as it is the most unmarked and the most frequent, giving more attention to the zero article and to the pragmatic-semantic domain, exposing learners to authentic and meaningful English and to comprehension activities, and presenting the core meaning of each article in comparison with Japanese.

Smith's study (2001). The study aimed to explore errors that Arabic learners of English might commit. He pointed out many examples of errors. Among which, for instance, were mistakes in consonant clusters, word order, questions and negatives, auxiliaries, pronouns, time, tense and aspect, modal verbs, articles, etc. As for articles, he stated that ‘the indefinite article causes the most obvious problems as it is commonly omitted with singular and plural countable nouns’ (p. 205).

Butler's study (2002). The study aimed to examine acquisition of the English article system by Japanese students with varying levels of proficiency. The researcher concluded that the higher the students’ levels of proficiency were, the more target-like usage they could achieve, while lower proficiency learners were strongly influenced by a set of rules that they believed were given by teachers, textbooks, and so on.

Snape's study (2005). The study aimed to study Japanese and Spanish learners of English. Snape found that they differ in their use of the L2 article system in that Spanish learners of English replace indefinite articles with definite ones or vice versa, and that Japanese learners have a ‘mapping problem’ rather than a representational deficit, while Spanish learners have neither (p. 159).

Bataineh's study (2005). The study aimed to identify errors in the use of indefinite articles among Jordanian undergraduate EFL students. She classified different types of errors where she claimed that among all these types of errors identified only the deletion of the indefinite article could be attributed to L1 interference.

Bukhari and Hussain's study (2011). The study aimed to investigate the errors of Pakistani students in prepositions and articles. They found that the total number of errors made by students on the measure of articles was 152. Out of which (127) 83.56 % were observed in indefinite articles and (25) 16.44% were observed in definite articles. They also found that 52.63% of the total errors were omission errors, 19.08% were insertion errors and 28.29% were confusion errors. The results also revealed that Pakistani students faced more difficulties in learning indefinite articles in their writings.

Alhaysony's study (2012). The study aimed to provide a comprehensive account of the types of errors produced by Saudi Arabian female EFL students in their use of articles. The results revealed that while students made a considerable number of errors in their use of articles, omission errors were the most frequent, while substitutions were the least frequent. Additionally, among all types of omission errors identified, the omission of the indefinite article (a) was the most frequent, while the omission of the indefinite article (an) was the least frequent error. Errors relating to the addition of the definite article
(the) were the most frequent, which correlates with the fact that the definite article (the) is used more widely in the Arabic language than in English.

Methodology

The Study Subjects

The subjects for this study were all students of English at Imam Mohammed bin Saud Islamic University - College of Languages and Translation in the second semester of the academic year 1433-1434/2013. The four groups of subjects started their degree in 1430/2010, 1431/2011, 1432/2012 and 1433/2013 respectively, which made them freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors at the time of the research. Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample in terms of proficiency and class level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proficiency level</th>
<th>Class level</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshmen (1433/2013)</td>
<td>Level 1: 38, Level 2: 35</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore (1432/2012)</td>
<td>Level 3: 35, Level 4: 36</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior (1431/2011)</td>
<td>Level 5: 34, Level 6: 35</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior (1430/2010)</td>
<td>Level 7: 32, Level 8: 29</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>274</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A total of 274 male students, all of whom were between 18 and 23 years of age, were selected randomly for the study. Like all Saudi students, the ones who participated in this study started learning English as a foreign language in, or after, the sixth grade (last year in the elementary level). They were homogeneous in terms of their linguistic and socioeconomic background, educational system, and field of study. The subjects lived in an exclusively Arabic-speaking community and had learned English as a foreign language prior to taking it up as their major field of study at the university.

Materials and Procedures

The data of this study have been obtained by two instruments; a written task and students' perceptions of their errors.

Written Task

The subjects were asked to write about one of the following topics:

- Imam University Campus
- Your favourite sports
- Car accidents
- Different kinds of restaurants in Saudi Arabia.
The compositions were all written in 50-minute class sessions. The students were allowed to use their respective choices of an English monolingual dictionary.

**Students' Perceptions of Their Errors**

The students' compositions were marked and then the written errors of each student were underlined and corrected. Later, random sample of subjects were asked to look at their errors and the correction provided and then comment on them, identifying the causes that led them to make such errors. The students' comments constituted the second source of the collected data.

**Data Analysis**

In determining and analyzing students’ errors, the researcher followed the following steps identified by Ellis (1997): Collecting data → Identifying errors → Classifying errors → Analyzing errors → Explaining errors.

For every composition, a word count was made and errors in the use of the definite/indefinite articles were counted, classified and later analyzed. The types and frequency of these errors were compared to observe similarities and/or differences in the type and number of errors made across the four academic year/levels.

The aim of the linguistic analysis of the compositions was to observe errors in the use of the definite/indefinite articles which could be inter-lingual errors caused by the influence of the learners' native language; intra-lingual errors caused by the influence of the target language itself; transfer of training errors caused by faulty material presentation by instructors or textbooks; second language learning strategies which are the processes by which learners form, test, or modify hypotheses about the nature of the target language; or second language communication strategies by which learners attempt to handle the heavy communication demands facing them.

To achieve the objectives of the study, each composition was read twice, once by the researcher and another by one of two independent reviewers. A number of analytical procedures were used to analyze the data: (1) Identifying the deviant forms. This was carried out by a detailed analysis of the output, (2) Analyzing and classifying errors found in the use of the articles and (3) Establishing a frequency count of such errors and the sources of the errors. Data from each reading were organized using the following error categories: (1) omission of the indefinite article (a, an), (2) writing the indefinite article (a) as part of the noun/adjective following it, (3) substitution of the indefinite (a, an) for the definite article (the), (4) substitution of the definite (the) for the indefinite article (a, an) or Ø, (5) use of the indefinite article (a, an) with unmarked plurals, and (6) use of the indefinite article (a, an) with uncountable nouns.

**Findings and Discussion**

In this section, the researcher presents and discusses the findings of the study in light of its objectives. First, the errors made by the four groups of subjects are identified in terms of their types and potential sources; second, the frequency of these errors is computed and compared to detect any developmental tendencies among the four levels; and third, potential differences among the subjects which can be attributed to class level are detected. Table 2 illustrates the number and percentage of errors across proficiency level. The percentage is calculated by dividing the number of errors in each of the six categories by the total number of errors within that category.
Table 2. Classification, number and percentage of errors across academic year/level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students' errors</th>
<th>Omission of the indefinite article</th>
<th>Writing (a) as part of the noun/adjective following it</th>
<th>Substitution of the indefinite article for the definite article</th>
<th>Substitution of the definite article for the indefinite article</th>
<th>Using the indefinite article with unmarked plurals</th>
<th>Using the indefinite article with uncountable nouns</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>#</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshmen (1433/2013)</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>45.5</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>43.5</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore (1432/2012)</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32.3</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior (1431/2011)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior (1430/2010)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Types of Errors

The errors made by students can be classified into two comprehensive types, developmental and interference. The developmental errors include (1) writing the indefinite article (a) as part of the noun/adjective following it, (2) substitution of the indefinite (a, an) for the definite article (the), (3) use of the indefinite article (a, an) with unmarked plurals, and (4) use of the indefinite article (a, an) with uncountable nouns. While the interference errors include (1) omission of the indefinite article (a, an) and (2) substitution of the definite (the) for the indefinite article (a, an) or Ø. The big difference between seniors/juniors and freshmen/sophomores with regard to interference errors (see table 2 above), as a matter of fact, supports Swain's (1971) and Dulay and Burt's (1972) conclusion which states that as second/foreign language learners progress in their learning of the target language, their reliance on their native language decreases. Brown (1994) also found that, at the early stages of language learning, a large number of errors occur due to negative transfer. His study showed that as language learners develop their English, intra-lingual errors overtake inter-lingual errors.

Discussed below are the six types of error the students made in the use of the articles.

Omission of the Indefinite Article

Table 2, above, shows that a large number of errors were made under this category (viz., 87, 66, 26 and 12 errors by freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors, respectively). These errors can be attributed to more than one source, the most obvious of which may be native language transfer, for the students may be giving the equivalent native language structure as a result of their inadequate knowledge of that of the target language, as shown in table 3 below:

Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N.</th>
<th>Ill-formed sentences</th>
<th>Well-formed sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Imam University has beautiful campus.</td>
<td>Imam University has a beautiful campus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Football is international sports game.</td>
<td>Football is an international sports game.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>My brother was injured in car accident.</td>
<td>My brother was injured in a car accident.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A considerable number of the subjects made the error of deleting the indefinite article (a, an) whose use is obligatory with the singular countable nouns (campus), (sports), and (accident). While English requires the use of an indefinite article, Arabic shows indefiniteness by not using an article at all. This result can be attributed to the fact that Arabic has no indefinite article; it is logical to conclude that the omission of the English indefinite article ‘a’ is attributable to Arabic interference (an inter-lingual error). This finding is in line with the studies of Smith (2001), Bataineh (2005), and Alhaysony (2012).

Due to the aforementioned differences between the two languages, ungrammatical structures are produced. The fact that Arabic does not have a distinct marker for indefiniteness the way English does is probably the cause of the students’ deviation from the target language rule. This assumption is further supported by previous work by researchers like Duskova (1969), Richards (1971) and Bataineh (2002), where the same error was made by learners from this and other language backgrounds that either do not have corresponding article systems or articles altogether.

Another potential source of this error is the strategy of simplification. Students could be attempting to reduce the learning burden whereby the target language structure (viz., the indefinite article) is simplified into a form which is compatible with the students’ still developing inter-language system. They may be using the (Ø) article with both singular and plural unidentified countable nouns, which would certainly reduce the system into a more manageable one.

Writing the Indefinite Article (a) as Part of the Noun/Adjective Following It

Although this is by far the most frequent error among the students of the four levels, it seems to be the easiest to explain. Since it could not be traced to either the native or the target language, transfer of training seems to be the ideal explanation, for, very early on in the acquisition process, these students are presented with the indefinite article (a) as an inseparable companion to the noun (and later the adjective) it modifies. It is always (a book), (a pen) or (a pencil) but never (book), (pen) or (pencil). By such presentation, students are led to believe that (a book) is a single item rather than a two-item noun phrase made of an indefinite article and a noun. This is further worsened by the fact that early material presentation is mostly oral, which may mean that by the time the student is exposed to the written form, the misconceived structure has already been imprinted in his/her inter-language system.

This misconception causes them to write the article as part of the following element almost every time they happen to observe the English rule of using one with singular unidentified countable nouns as seen in table 4 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N.</th>
<th>Ill-formed sentences</th>
<th>Well-formed sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No one can deny that Imam University has a beautiful campus.</td>
<td>No one can deny that Imam University has a beautiful campus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Majed Abdullah is a famous footballer in Saudi Arabia.</td>
<td>Majed Abdullah is a famous footballer in Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher himself had noticed his daughter made this error a few times in fear of being reprimanded by EFL teachers who would not tolerate the omission of the article, which seems consistent with Wrase’s (1982) warning against too much worry too early about which article goes where, claiming that to be counter-productive in writing.

It is worth noting that this error is subsequent to that of article omission, because once the learner realizes that an indefinite article is required, he/she often fails to treat it as a separate entity from the noun or adjective it modifies and, thus, continues to produce deviant structures.
Substitution Errors

The substitution of the indefinite article (a, an) or Ø for the definite article (the), and of the definite article (the) for the indefinite article (a, an) or Ø were observed among the students of the four levels, as shown in table 5 below:

Table 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N.</th>
<th>Ill-formed sentences</th>
<th>Well-formed sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Imam university is located in a central province.</td>
<td>Imam university is located in the central province.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Herfy may be an only famous restaurant in the world.</td>
<td>Herfy may be the only famous restaurant in the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Knowing the dangerous of speed makes the person be careful when driving.</td>
<td>Knowing the dangerous of speed makes a person be careful when driving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>He broke his leg in the accident.</td>
<td>He broke his leg in an accident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>He did not have the enough time to leave the car.</td>
<td>He did not have enough time to leave the car.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows numbers as well as the frequency of occurrence of the subjects' errors. The way substitution errors are distributed in Table 2 may appear odd. Compared to freshmen, sophomores, and seniors, juniors made the smallest number of substitutions of the indefinite article (a, an) for the definite articles (the), while seniors erroneously substituted the indefinite for the definite article and the definite for the indefinite article.

Seniors aside, sophomores and juniors exhibit a pattern which is best described as puzzling. Freshmen, sophomores, and juniors seem to do a little worse than seniors in the erroneous substitution of the definite for the indefinite article (compare 36.8%, 25.3%, and 21.1% to 16.8%, respectively). This phenomenon, however, may make better sense if one keeps in mind that the subjects of the former levels made more errors in article omission than seniors (compare 45.5%, 34.6%, and 13.6% to 6.3%). In other words, while freshmen, sophomores, and juniors deleted more indefinite articles, most seniors recognized the fact that English requires the use of one with singular unidentified countable nouns which may have led them to over-generalize the rule to instances where it is not applicable.

The errors related to substitution of indefinite articles (a, an) for the definite article (the), (Consider sentences 1 and 2 above) are apparently not caused by inter-lingual transfer, but rather are due to intra-lingual confusion as Arabic requires the definite article (the) be used in such contexts. This shows that students’ control over the use of articles in English is still developing. This result, however, falls in line with Bataineh's (2005). In contrast, the errors related to substitution of the definite article (the) for the indefinite articles (a, an) or Ø are most likely due to inter-lingual transfer since they reflect the structure of Arabic. For example, in sentences 3, 4, 5 the definite article (the) has been used with the nouns (person, accident, time), which, as mentioned earlier, exists in Arabic but not in English. Furthermore, in Arabic writing, the non-occurrence of a definite article in such sentences reflects impaired control over the Arabic article system. For this reason, the most frequent source of inter-lingual error for Arab learners, with regard to the use of the definite article, is that of over-generalization. This result agrees with Al-Motairi's (1999), Mizuno's (1999) and Alhaysony's (2012).

The Use of the Indefinite Article with Unmarked Plurals

Like the erroneous substitution of the definite for the indefinite article, seniors surprisingly made the largest number of errors in the use of the indefinite article with unmarked plurals, as shown in table 6 below:
Errors in the Usage of the English Definite/Indefinite Articles Among Saudi University-Level Students

Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N.</th>
<th>Ill-formed sentences</th>
<th>Well-formed sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Football is watched by a people from everywhere.</td>
<td>Football is watched by people from everywhere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>They wait for a police to come...</td>
<td>They wait for the police to come...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, they made no errors in the use of the indefinite article with marked plurals. Analogy or overgeneralization of other target language structures could explain this error. Students were probably applying the rules of indefiniteness where it is not applicable.

Furthermore, hypercorrection, or students' tendency to erroneously use the article in places where it is not required for fear of making errors, could explain this type of error. Because they are so often corrected when they drop the article, students occasionally overuse the article to avoid making the error, especially after they have begun to recognize the need for an indefinite article in certain contexts in English.

The Use of the Indefinite Article with Uncountable Nouns

This error occurred with larger frequency in the compositions of the freshmen and gradually decreased in the compositions of the other three groups (13 vs. 6, 4, and 2 for freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors, respectively). Like the previous error, either overgeneralization or hypercorrection could be the source of this error. Consider the sentences in Table 7 below:

Table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N.</th>
<th>Ill-formed sentences</th>
<th>Well-formed sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Young people use an information ...</td>
<td>Young people use information ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Students do a hard work ...</td>
<td>Students do hard work ...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students could be erroneously extending the use of the indefinite article with singular unidentified countable nouns to uncountable ones on the grounds of structural similarity, or they could be overusing the indefinite article to avoid errors of omission.

To conclude, this type of error (i.e. using /a, an/ with uncountable nouns) reflects a lack of knowledge of the exceptions governing countable versus uncountable nouns in English. Since such nouns (e.g. information) have a singular form, students assume wrongly that they are countable singular nouns requiring an indefinite article. Such errors were found to be made by learners of English from different language backgrounds by Richards (1974).

Students' Perceptions of Their Errors

The majority of the students have admitted that most of their errors are due to various factors other than their linguistic competence. Their concentration on content rather than form is the main reason of their errors. Another reason for their errors is the limited time allotted to compositions which prevents them from going over their performance to correct whatever errors or mistakes they have made. Because of the anxiety and the limited time allotted to the compositions, the subjects echoed their Arabic language and produced a number of interference errors. They felt that they did not have enough time to give their performance another moment’s thought; otherwise, they would not have produced such errors, as they
have said in their comments. As a result, and without being aware of these errors, they produced sentences such as the following two incorrect ones:

**This not good.** This incorrect English sentence echoes the correct Arabic sentence, *Hatha laysa jayed* (translation error).

**He is good (a good) footballer.** This incorrect English sentence resembles the correct Arabic sentence. (article omission error).

The parallelism between the Arabic and English sentences is quite clear in students' errors. The two examples above demonstrate that in the first sentence the students dropped the verb 'to be' (is), while in the second one, they used the verb 'to be' but deleted the indefinite article. This supports the students' comments that they 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.

Another major reason for these errors is the difficulty of the target language which is reflected in the general characteristics of rule learning such as wrong generalization, incomplete application of rules, and failure to realize the conditions under which rules apply, as Richards (1971) suggests.

On examining the classification of errors, one can recognize that the majority of these errors are developmental ones, which constitute 58.2% of the total number of the errors made by the students. As such, one might be tempted to conclude that the students are fossilized and may not be able to improve their competence. However, the fact is that these errors, as the students’ comments reveal, do not indicate a sign of fossilization; that is, these nonlinguistic forms are not permanent. Rather, they may destabilize or change into the authentic norms. Fossilization is more likely to take place if the students are not motivated to change. Moreover, these errors are likely to change into slips of the tongue or pen, as Ancker (2000) has claimed. The students who participated in the study are really motivated and have the linguistic competence to eliminate these errors. That is quite clear in their comments on their errors, where they have stated that they have made these errors just because of the limited time allotted to the written task and their concentration on content rather than form.

The students' justification of their errors is indicative for two reasons. First, all the students have expressed their surprise at making these errors simply because, as they have said in their comments, they know the rules that underlie these produced deviant structures and their making them is a matter of carelessness; that is, they are slips of the pen which are not significant for the process of language learning, as Corder (1971) has suggested. Second, it is evident that the students’ claim is acceptable, since they have produced correct structures similar to those deviant ones in other parts of their compositions.

This dogma, the substantial number of errors the students made and their claim that they know the rules that underlie them, can be resolved through recalling the distinction between receptive competence, the grammatical rules by which the learner understands others' oral and written production, and the productive competence, the rules he/she uses to produce utterances in the target language. It is argued that EFL learners employ the correct grammatical rules to perceive others’ written or verbal production. However, when it comes to production, they face some difficulties; although these same rules are available to them, their use becomes optional (Troike, 1969).

Concerning the omission of the definite and indefinite articles, some students have admitted that they do not know when to use them and when not. This failure to learn and understand the use of the articles explains the students’ excessive use of these articles in other situations. It is quite clear that there is a problem with the students’ linguistic competence in this regard. The Arabic language system of the definite and indefinite articles might have a negative effect on the students' wrong use of these articles in the target language, and this really needs to be investigated by researchers.

**The Effect of Class Level**

The subjects made a total of 685 errors in the use of articles, which are divided into 345 errors by freshmen, 206 errors by sophomores, 80 errors by juniors, and 54 errors by seniors.
The analysis of the different types of errors revealed that students' performance varied from one item to another, for as students did well on certain items, they had some difficulty with others. Table 2 shows that students' performance differs significantly from one item to another among the four proficiency levels. Seniors seem to consistently do better than their counterparts, except in the errors of using the indefinite article (a, an) with unmarked plurals, scoring a total error percentage of 7.9 compared to 50.4% by freshmen, 30.1% by sophomores, and 11.7% by juniors. As seniors outdid freshmen, and sophomores in all areas but one (viz., using the indefinite article with unmarked plurals) (compare 26.3%, and 21.1% to 36.8%). They also outdid juniors in all but the avoidance of one error (viz., substitution of the indefinite for the definite article) (compare their 14.5% to the juniors' 9.7%). This phenomenon would not seem so odd if one kept in mind that seniors made the smallest number of errors in article omission. The fact that they used more articles explains their making more errors in substitution of the indefinite for the definite article, and the use of the indefinite article with unmarked plurals.

Some Developmental Implications

In the light of the findings of the study, it is useful to put forward the following developmental implications. It is hoped that they may be of great helpful to the ESL/EFL instructor.

- Students’ comments on their errors reveal that they consider their errors as slips of the tongue or pen. The researcher, therefore, stresses that rather than consider their students’ errors as a manifestation of their poor linguistic competence, language instructors should consider the distinction between the errors which reflect the students’ linguistic competence and those called performance errors, and accordingly, tell their students in advance which errors will be considered slips of the tongue and which will be considered competence ones. Consequently, instructors’ correction will be based on that classification of errors. Furthermore, to reduce their students' fear of failure and to orient them for success, instructors can tell their students that unless the errors hinder understanding, they will not be penalized for them. Through such an understanding between instructors and students, it is hoped that the students will be able to overcome their anxiety and, in turn, reduce their errors.

- Error analysis has been employed to draw a picture of the students’ learning strategies and never meant to eliminate or even reduce their errors. Rather, it is intended to help teachers adjust their teaching methods and understand their students’ learning strategies. Language instructors should be aware of that. Furthermore, errors, regardless of the teaching methods employed in the classroom, are there and will stay as long as foreign language teaching is practiced. Therefore, instructors should not be so worried about them.

- Contrastive analysis aims to make a systematic comparison between learners’ native languages and the target language in order to discover and understand the areas of difficulty that L2 learners face and to predict the errors that they may possible make in their learning of L2 (Crystal, 1997). Language instructors, therefore, need to employ authentic materials and grammatical drills and exercises which are based on contrastive analysis and when the need arises, they can draw their students' attention to the differences between the native and foreign languages. In this case, second/foreign language students' sensitivity and awareness of these differences would be raised and that might help them reduce their interference errors. However, the instructors should be aware of that excessive drills and exercises which are based on aspects of the target language that are different from those of the native language will make the students oversensitive concerning these structures. This oversensitivity will increase the students’ tension when they attempt to use the target language in either their communication or writing production and unintentionally produce interference errors. Therefore, a moderate sensitivity of the differences between the two languages might ease and reduce the students’ tension, while oversensitivity may complicate things and lead the students to make unintentional and unnecessary errors. (Salebi, 2004)
Conclusion

The results obtained above suggest that the majority of errors made by the four groups are the result of common learning processes, such as overgeneralization and simplification of the English article system. The only two types of error that could possibly be ascribed to native language transfer, among other sources, are the omission of the indefinite article (a, an) and the substitution of the definite article (the) for the indefinite article (a, an) or (Ø). With regard to class level and its effect on students' performance, the analysis results revealed that students' performance differs significantly from one item to another among the four proficiency levels. Furthermore, as students progress in their learning the language, their errors gradually decrease and their performance improve.

This study also attempts to tackle the question of error analysis from the students' perspective in order to clarify the learning strategies EFL learners employ when they learn a second/foreign language. Based on the students' types of errors and also their comments on these errors, some developmental implications have been inferred which might help ESL/EFL instructors and methodologists improve their teaching methods, which, in turn, will help reduce the errors made by the students.

References


