High school students' errors in using English Articles as shown in their written exercises = Những lỗi trong việc sử dụng mạo từ Tiếng Anh trong các bài viết của học sinh Trung học phổ thông .M.A Thesis Linguistics: 60 14 10 / Mai Thị Ngân ; Supervisor : Dr. Hà Cẩm Tâm

ABSTRACT

In the process of learning English as a foreign language, Vietnamese high school students do have to face a lot of problems. English article is considered as one of the most troublesome problems for every learner because of its complex uses. This MA minor thesis is an attempt to point out some problems in using English articles of students in writing. It is hoped that the study would be useful for teachers and students in teaching and learning English at high schools.

In order to achieve the goal, two data collection instruments were used including exercises and interviews. While the exercises were designed to collect information reflecting real problems in using English articles, the interviews following that were developed to find out the problems in using articles and some possible causes as well.

Results of the study show that Articles in English are complicated words which cause a lot of difficulties for Vietnamese students. Seven problems: substitution errors, indefinite article forms, deletion of the articles, problems in using indefinite article with marked and unmarked plurals, problems in using indefinite article with uncountable nouns, problems in covering the uses of definite articles and overusing articles were committed in the process of learning and using Articles. Besides, this research also found out that it is the interference of mother tongue, avoidance, overgeneralization and the conditions of learning / training that have great influence on students' foreign-language learning.

It is hoped that from this study, teachers and students would be more aware of the problems to be solved and from the identified problems, they would develop teaching and learning methods accordingly.

PART I: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Rationale

I have decided to undertake a study on **High school students' errors in using English Articles as shown in their written exercises.**

1.2. Aims of the study

To identify problems in using English articles in writing by students of Thach Thanh High School ẩ o. 3 and to suggest some possible solutions to overcome the problems.

1.3. Research question

What problems in using English Articles do students of Thach Thanh High School ẩ o.3 usually encounter in their writing?

1.4. The scope of the study

Students of Thach Thanh High School ẩ o.3.

The exercises used in this study were taken from the textbook "*Tieng Anh 11 and Tieng Anh 12 - chuong trinh co ban"* and the basic grammar books in which the examples involved have been examined, described and classified for pedagogical purpose.

1.5. Methods of the study

In order to identify what problems high school students have in using English Articles in their writings, Quirk's framework was used to the descriptive statistics for data analysis .

1.6. Organization of the study

Part one, Introduction, includes the rationale, the aims, the scope, the research question, the methodology and the organization of the study.

Part two includes two chapters.

Part three presents the conclusions of the major findings, the implications for learning and teaching English articles, and suggestions for further research.

PART II: DEVELOPMENT

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Basic concepts

    1.1.1. Articles in English

    1.1.2. Classification of English articles

      1.1.2.1. Indefinite articles
        a. Form: A - An

        b. Uses of A / An

        c. Omission of A / An
      1.1.2.2. Definite articles:
        a. Form: The
        b. Uses of The
        c. Omission of The

1.1.3. Articles in Noun Phrase

1.2. Review of previous studies.

Master (2002) showed that *the* is the commonest word in English and **a** in the top five and together *the* and *a* make up 8.5% of all English text (Berry, 1993). Scott and Tucker (1974)

found article errors among the top four types of error among high school graduate. But many studies do not all classify errors in the same way or count the same things; Batainehs (2005) only looks at *a*, for example. Scott and Tucker (1974) and Bataineh (2005) do not tally accurate use instances so an overall success or failure rate for each article cannot be calculated. In Scott and Tucker's (1974) and Bataineh's (2005) data, "*Ø-for-a*" is the more frequent error subtype; in Kharma's data "*the-for-a*" is slightly more frequent.

Kharmas (1981) data is the most detailed about types of article use; he identified 5 types of use for *the* and *a* and 3 for *Ø*. Of the ten most common mistakes in his cloze test six are categorized as instances of generic or general use (3 where the correct answer was *Ø*, and 3 where it was *a*), and 3 as misrenderings of idiomatic phrases. (e.g. for <u>an</u> example).

In a range of idiomatic uses learners are likely to "reinstate" definite articles omitted in English (e.g. I went to the bed).
Farghal and al-Zou'bi (2004) compared three different English translations of the Koran and showed evidence that none of the translators has fully acquired how English handles generic reference, using *the* instead of *Ø* with generic plural noun phrases (e.g. *The lions are ferocious animals)* and using *the* in generic singular noun phrases where English would require *a (*e.g. *The wolf ate him* for *A wolf ate him).*

In terms of the role of transfer in causing errors, Scott and Tucker (1974) attributed half their subjects article errors to transfer, and Kharma (1981) attributed the majority of his subjects errors to transfer but adds the compounding effect of "inadequate instruction". Bataineh (2005) considered transfer responsible only for "*Ø-for-a" errors and even then only as a possibility, citing overgeneralization, training* transfer, learning and communication strategies as other possible causes.

In sum, there were many problems for students in using the English articles in the writings, but within a limited time, results of the study will be taken based on the following usages; the uses of articles including errors in using definite article for specific things, errors in using articles for definite or indefinite meaning, errors in misusing articles (as in using **the**

for generic plural or uncountable noun phrases, abstract nouns, mass nouns, using *the* instead of *Ø* with generic plural noun phrases, using *the* in generic singular noun phrases where English would require *a,* using indefinite article for specific singular noun phrases, using *Ø* instead of *the* with the only one of something, not using *the* for classes of people, universally unique items, items unique to a situation, diectically obvious items, items of anaphoric reference, items defined by a relative clause, superlatives, not using *the* to talk about a particular thing / person, when the speaker and listener know which one we are referring to, not using *the* to talk about people/ things in general, using *a / an* for uncountable nouns, not using *a, an* to refer to something for the first time, and *the* to refer it again…).

The types of exercises including filling in, multiple choice and correction exercise and the interviews were also mentioned.

CHAPTER 2: THE STUDY

2.1. Research question

2.2. Data collection instruments

 2.2.1. Exercises

 2.2.2. Interviews

2.3. The participants

2.4. Analytical framework

2.5. Data Analysis

 2.5.1. Uses of articles

The results indicated that the greatest number of errors occurred in using the definite article. The second highest number of errors occurred in using **the** vs. Ø. And the same lowest errors occurred in using both **the** vs. **a** and **a** vs. **an**. In general, students made a lot of mistakes in using articles in writings.

 2.5.2. Types of exercises

The figures indicated that students have many problems in using articles through the mistake correction exercise.

2.5.3. Interviews

Articles in English does not seem new or strange to them. It can be easily understood and remembered because they are usually taught the articles in class when they are taught about nouns and noun phrases, when they do English exercises, tests ... Therefore, the concept of the articles seems not to make them confused. That is they are familiar with the articles in English.

However, a lot of difficulties arise in understanding and using English Articles for the students. When being asked, most students can't be able to list all the usages of each article. Some of them cannot remember **a(n)** used before which cases. Most students could answer **the** is used before noun(s)/ noun phrase(s), **a/an** is used before used before the general ones, but many of them cannot define which noun is specific, which noun is general.

For the third question, the interviewed students said that it is the usages of definite article that make them most confused. That was using **the** before a noun which has become definite as a result of being mentioned a second time, before a noun made definite by the addition of a phrase or clause, before a noun which by reason of locality can represent only one particular thing, before superlative and *first, second*… used as adjectives or pronouns, and *only*, before singular noun can represent a class of animals or things, before a member of a certain group of people, before certain proper names of seas, rivers, group of islands, chains of mountains, plural names of countries, deserts, regions, before other proper names consisting of *adjective + noun* or *noun + of + noun….*

Almost all the interviewed students agreed that practicing is the best way for them to gain achievements in learning English Articles in particular and learning English in general.

2.6. Discussion

From the data analysis and the analytical framework, it can be stated that English Articles raised many problems for high school students.

(i) Problems in covering the uses of Definite Article

(ii) Substitution errors

(iii) Problems in using Indefinite Article forms

(iv) Deletion of the articles

(v)Problems in using the indefinite article with marked and unmarked plural nouns
(vi)Problems in using the indefinite article with uncountable nouns

(vii)Overusing articles

From the problems analyzed above, there are some possible causes as followings:

Firstly, mother tongue can obviously interfere a lot in the process of learning English articles. According to Brown, in early stages of learning a second language, before the system of the second language is familiar, the native language is the only linguistic system in previous experience upon which the learner can draw (Brown, 1994, p213).

The behaviorist theory of language once stated that if language is essentially a set of habits, then when we try to learn new habits, the old ones will interfere with the new ones (å orrish, 1983 : 22), we can assure that the interference of the first language into second language acquisition is inevitable. For this reason, mother tongue interference has been considered one of the major causes of problems in using articles made by most Vietnamese students because the Vietnamese system is quite different from English and there isn't Articles in Vietnamese as well. Abbort, G. and Wingard, P. (1981, p230) assumed: "wherever the structure of the L1 and the language differed, there would be problems in learning and difficulties in performance, and that the greater the differences were, the greater the difficulties would be" Basing on this theory and considering the differences between Vietnamese and English, Vietnamese students certainly have some problems in using English Articles.

Secondly, the avoidance in speaking also leads to this problem. In speaking, when students find it difficult to use certain features of language, they often avoid using them as a strategy in their language learning. For example, articles (a, an, the) may be left out of the utterance when the students are not sure whether the use of that article is correct or not. As

a result, he chooses to avoid using it rather than running the risk of selecting the wrong one. Spada and Lightbown (1999: 75) stated that this "avoidance" may lead to "absence of certain errors, but it also leaves the analysts without information about the learners' developing interlanguage", so that leads to confusing the uses of articles and omission of articles in writing for most students. Besides, learning environment is an external cause of students' errors. Vietnamese students do not have real environment to practice English.

Finally, the overgeneralization is one of the language learning strategies as learners inappropriately use their previously acquired knowledge of the second language. Overgeneralization is a phenomenon in which students apply their existing second language rules to another area where it does not apply and thus causes language errors to appear. And to make it clearer, Corder (1973) also explained that in the process of language learning, we often allocate items to categories. On the basis of these categories, we construct "rules" which predict how the different items will behave.

Based on his theory, to limit errors of overgeneralization, teachers should always remember to supply students with the irregularities or exceptions of each rule and ask them learn by heart these rules.

PART III: CONCLUSIONS

3.1. Major findings

First of all, the results by issues and exercises indicate that high school students made lots of mistakes in using English articles in writings. In which, using definite article (**the)** is the most problematical (see Table 2). Students seem to feel difficult to remember all usages of the definite article. As a result, they usually encounter problems in using it, such as, not using the definite article before a noun (which by reason of locality can represent only one particular thing, or which has become definite as a result of being mentioned a second time), before superlatives and first, second…, before the object or group of objects is unique or considered to be unique...

The use of **the** vs. Ø also caused many problems. Students tend to use **the** before general things / persons instead of Ø and Ø before specific things / persons instead of **the**.

Besides, students seem to feel less confused while learning indefinite articles, they still face many difficulties in using. Firstly, they tend to make mistake between two forms **a** and **an**. Secondly, they have problems in using the indefinite articles with unmarked plurals, uncountable nouns…

Secondly, the results by types of exercises show that the highest number of errors was collected in mistake correction exercise (see Table 3). Many students wrote articles in incorrect positions in this exercise.

Finally, other errors were found based on the results by issues and by types of exercises in this study. For example, substitution errors, deletion of the articles, overusing articles and misusing articles. These problems can be caused by the interference of mother tongue, avoidance, overgeneralization and the conditions of learning / training.

3. 2. Implications for teaching and learning English Articles

As indicated in the finding obtained concerning the errors in using of articles via types of exercises, the first implication is that, the teacher could probably try to teach articles via many types of exercises. This would enable the teacher not to interfere so much with the process of abstraction taking place in the learner's interlanguage system.

The findings of this study suggest that it is necessary for teachers and learners of English at High School to be aware that English articles are very important elements, teachers could design more exercises in variable types for learners. Learners should pay more attention to the exercises relevant to the articles especially in correction exercise.

Besides, one reason for less success in learning and using articles was the role learners played in abstracting out rules in the present study. This would perhaps direct our attention to the second implication from learners' perspectives; in the sense that, instead of using teachers' correction, self-correction is perhaps, in addition to teacher correction, a better alternative for focusing on the correction of regular forms. That is, by doing this, the teacher could involve the learner with the process of hypothesis forming and testing of the correct form.

The sequence of learning followed by learners seems to be the definite article first and indefinite articles next. We must take this sequence into consideration in both classroom teaching practices such as error correction and instructional material writing. One possible explanation for the fact that the definite article was learned better than the indefinite article was that the latter is taken both as a marker for showing singularity of a noun and as an article for showing non-specificity of a noun. Teachers must try to clarify the double function of the indefinite article as well as the different semantic functions of the English article system for second language learners.

3. 3. Limitations of the study

In spite of the researcher's considerable efforts, certain limitations are unavoidable such as, the number of students directly get involved in this research is still limited, all problems in using English Articles haven't been checked due to limited time, the study mentioned on problems in using English Articles in writings only…

3. 4. Suggestions for further studies

Since identifying problems is an inevitable part in the learning process of second language learners of all ages, it offers other researchers large room to conduct further studies relating to this research topic.

Firstly, those who are concerned about this topic can choose other participants for their studies. For example, they can carry out researches about article problems made by the tenth form students, or eleventh form students, or university students, etc . Some may compare with the results from this research to see whether students' article problems have been reduced much or raised according to students' ages.

Besides, other researchers can also concentrate on identifying problems in using articles in speaking, or in idioms. The results from these researches will be very useful because the researchers will have chance to be deeper and larger into a certain type of problems that students usually make.

To sum up, there are many alternatives for other researchers to choose from to do further studies relating to this topic.