

THE ENGLISH ARTICLE SYSTEM AND SECOND LANGUAGE PAKISTANI LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY

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Original Article

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Abstract

The article system has always been one of the most difficult features of the English language for Pakistani learners. Even the learners of the advanced proficiency level find difficulty in using the articles correctly and therefore, either underuse or overuse them or substitute wrongly. The purpose of this study was to investigate among Pakistani learners, the accuracy stages in the acquisition of the English article system. Bickerton's (1981) model of article classification was used to identify the noun phrase (NP) contexts in which articles appear. The referentiality in this model is determined by two semantic features whether a noun is a specific referent [\pm SR] and/or known to the Hearer [\pm HK]. The sample population was drawn from the learners studying at the Department of English of the International Islamic University, Islamabad (IIUI) at three proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate and advanced. The results showed that the LI of the learners which is Urdu, a language without articles (-ART), influences the way articles are acquired. In the light of the findings, the study also makes some recommendations that may help improve the Article pedagogy in Pakistan in general and in the IIUI in particular.

Keywords: English articles, Second language, Learners, Pedagogy, Problems, Countability

1. Introduction

It is a common observance that Pakistani learners of English have a tendency to omit articles **the**, **a/an**, and \emptyset where native speakers of English would use them. Not only that, they also at times use articles where they are not required or substitute them wrongly with one another. During more than 20 years of my ELT experience, I have observed that there is a general lack of interest among learners to know about the article system. Since the academic work with wrong use of an article or article omission does not affect the grades of the learners, the teachers and learners both devote very little of their time to learn about articles and therefore, are not aware of the negative impact of the article errors on their linguistic performance. These observations stimulated me to determine the

problems related to the acquisition of articles. This paper is a small contribution in that direction.

A number of studies have been conducted on the problems related to the learning of articles among second language learners (Master 2002; Robertson, 2000) but none so far has been on how Pakistani learners acquire articles. The studies conducted on the acquisition of articles in second language falls into two areas: Pedagogy and its effectiveness, and the process of acquisition (Master, 2009). The purpose of present research is to investigate the acquisition of articles by adult Pakistani learners and it has the following objectives:

1. To determine whether there exists an accuracy order in the acquisition of the articles by adult Pakistani learners.

2. To review the factors that lead to the persistency of problems like overgeneralization or omission of articles
3. To know how the absence of articles in the first language (L1) effects the acquisition of English article system.
4. To bring awareness among Pakistani ELT teachers about the importance of discourse context and the properties of noun phrases in teaching the article system.

As difficult as English articles are to acquire, they are even more difficult to teach. Extensive research has been done to understand the process of acquisition by L2 learners (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1987; Parish, 1987; Tarone and Parish, 1988; Thomas 1989). Research has also been done from the perspective of learners whose L1 does not have articles [-ART] or equivalent of articles. (Robertson, 2000; Lardier 2004, 2005; Parish, 1987; Butler 2002, Snape, 2006; Ekiert, 2004; Hawkins et al 2005, 2006). Hence its imperative to have an overview of the English article system.

1.2 The English Article System

Articles are generally divided into three categories: definite article *the* indefinite article *a* and zero article \emptyset . Although the morphological forms of articles are very limited, the frequency with which they occur in English indicates a variety of the functions they perform to bring syntactic coherence in the discourse.

The articles *the*, *a*, and the zero (\emptyset) give crucial information about the noun phrases they precede. The use of articles encodes specificity, presumed knowledge, countability and number, and gives definite, indefinite and generic meaning to the nouns. The use of definite article *the* refers to the specific noun which the speaker has in mind and the hearer can identify it; for example: 1. 'Please take *the* letter to Aslam'.

The use of indefinite article *a/an* can specify the object or person not identifiable by the hearer; for example: 2. I'll visit *a* friend today.

Sometimes, the indefinite article also refers to an objects or person in a general sense; for example: 3. 'Please, bring me *a* pen'.

The zero article \emptyset is used before plural count nouns and before singular mass nouns. It gives generic meaning to a noun and can also have an idiomatic use; for example:

4. \emptyset Children are playing (plural count noun)
5. She loves \emptyset rice. (mass noun)
6. \emptyset Boys are \emptyset boys. (idiomatic use)

Now we will see in detail the different function of the articles.

2.2.1. Definite *the*

The use of *the* falls into two major categories generic and non-generic (Celic-Murica and Larsen- Freeman.1999; Hawkins, 1978; Greenbaun, Leech and Svartvik, 1985)

The generic use of *the* occurs before singular or plural nouns to mean a species, a race, people or a nation. All the other uses of *the* are non-generic; for example:

7. *The* Pakistani is intelligent. (singular noun)
8. \emptyset Pakistanis are intelligent.(plural noun)

The generic use of *the* is not so common (Parish, 1987; Tarone and Parish,1988) and is most frequently used in the scientific register. In other cases the generic use of *the* can be replaced by the indefinite article *a* if the noun is singular as the example below:

9. *A* Pakistani is intelligent.

To explain the various non-generic uses of *the* in English, most researchers rely on J. Hawkin (1978) who developed a comprehensive theory called 'Location Theory' for this purpose. He has identified a total of eight types of non-generic uses.

1. Anaphoric use.

10. Make *a* circle then make *the* circle green.

2. Visible situation use.

11. Pass me *the* salt please.

3. Immediate situation use:

12. *The* news is wonderful.

4. Larger situation use relying on specific knowledge.

13. By *the* river-side.

5. Larger situation use relying on general knowledge.

14. *The* earth revolves round the sun.

6. Associative anaphoric use:

15. I read a story. *The* ending was all familiar.

7. Unfamiliar use in NPs with explanatory or identifying modifiers:

16. *The* building you're standing in front of is a bank.

8. Unfamiliar use in NPs with non-explanatory modifiers.

17. My friend and I study *the* same subjects.

1.2.2 Indefinite a

The indefinite article *a/an* occurs in an indefinite singular noun phrase (NP) environment to denote the countability of the NP. Its basic function is to introduce a single indefinite entity into the discourse. Its use creates a boundary which makes the mass noun discrete and countable. Indefinite *a* is most frequently used with singular count nouns and generic nouns representative of a class; for example:

18. He killed *a* lion. (singular count noun, does not belong to any particular lion)

19. *A* lion is the king of Jungle. (representing all the lions).

Cowan (2008) states that the indefinite article *a* may also be used before partitives to represent measure quantity for mass noun such as 'a piece of cloth, a cup of tea'.

Robertson (2000) distinguishes **three indefinite environments** for indefinite use:

First is the 'existential use' where the existence of the NP is emphasized by using 'there is' or the verb 'have/got'.

20. There is a cat.

21. You have a book

The **second** indefinite environment is where an object is introduced in the discourse as: the object of a transitive verb such as, 'draw, put'.

22. Draw a horizontal line using your blue pen.

The **third** indefinite environment is where the NP has 'generic reference'.

23. He's a lion

Whatever the environment may be, when indefinite *a* is used, neither the listener nor the speaker can necessarily identify or wants to identify the entity referred to. It often has the meaning 'any one at all' or 'It does not matter which one'.

1.2.3 The zero Article Ø

According to Master (1997) The zero article also called as invisible article is the most indefinite of the articles. Its general function is to remove the boundaries that make the nouns discrete. It gets its name from the fact that it is possible to supply the definite or indefinite article before that particular noun phrase, but the article is not there. The Ø article has many functions (Master 1997:222) which are listed in table 1.

Table 1. Functions of zero article

Function	Plural (limitless nouns)	Noncount (formless/mass nouns)
First mention	Ø Children are innocent.	Ø English is the subject they like.
General characters	Ø Pandas live on bamboo leaves.	Ø Air is necessary for living.
Existential 'there'	There are Ø books everywhere.	There is Ø water in the kettle.
Defining post modification	Ø Mangoes from Multan are good.	Ø Bread from this bakery is stale
Partitive of phrases		
Intentional vagueness	They destroyed Ø bales of cotton. Ø Boys will play football.	Use Ø sulphate of ammonia. Ø Research on morphemes is extensive.

However, as far as this study is concerned, a traditional approach has been adopted where zero refers to any instance in which no article appears before a noun.

In article acquisition studies, articles are usually examined in relation to the context in which they appear. It is the noun phrase environment which determines the type of article to be used there. When using articles, L2 learners must be able to determine not only the countability and noncountability of a noun phrase, but also distinguish definiteness and indefiniteness as applied to NP reference. 2.

Noun Phrase Environments and the Acquisition of Articles^{2.1} Article Use in Different Noun Phrase Environments To understand the acquisition of articles by L2 learners, it is important to first identify the contexts in which the articles appear. It is the NP in discourse that provides the context for the articles. The model which is most commonly used for the analysis of English articles in NP environments is Huebner's (1983) model for article classification which is based on the Bickerton (1981) semantic wheel model (Figure 1).

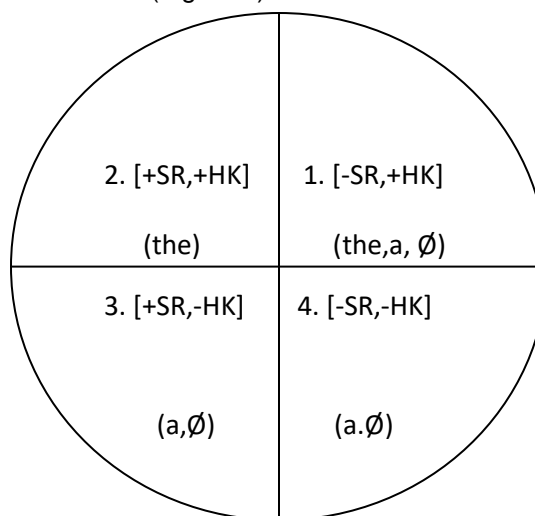


Figure 1. Bickerton's semantic wheel for noun phrase reference (Huebner, 1983)

In Huebner's model, the NP environments for articles are determined by two semantic features of referentiality: whether a noun is a **specific referent** [\pm SR] or whether it is **known to the hearer** [\pm HK]. These two aspects of referentiality give rise to four environments or contexts for article use.

Type 1 nouns [-SR,+ HK] are classified as **generics** and are marked with *a*, *the*, \emptyset .

Type 2 nouns [+SR, +HK] are termed as **referential definites** and are marked with *the* to indicate a specific noun known to both the speaker and hearer.

Type 3 nouns [+SR, -HK] are classified as **first mentioned nouns or referential indefinite** whose referent is not known to the hearer.

Type 4 nouns [-SK, -HK] are classified as **non-referentials indefinites** because these are the nouns which are nonspecific for both the speaker and hearer. Non-referentials are marked by *a* and \emptyset .

Some researchers including Butler (2002) and Thomas (1989) found it necessary to also include idiomatic expressions and conventional uses of NP environments. They are termed as **Type 5** nouns. The articles remain unchanged in all types of context and they are not affected by the speaker or hearer's ability or inability to identify the referent. Not following the conventions is considered an article error. The idiomatic category, like type 1 category of generics, is marked with *the*, *a*, \emptyset . All five types of NPs have been considered for the analysis of articles in this study.

Recently, some researchers have replaced the classification scheme of \pm HR and \pm SR with definiteness and specificity (Ionin, Ko, and Wexler, 2004).

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) are of the view that the correct use of articles depends on the classification of nouns:

common verses proper, count verses noncount, and single verses plural.

In Table 2, below, are given the types of article-use depending on the countability of the reference in type 1, 3 and 4 NP environments.

Table 2. English articles in different environments (adapted from Butler (478:2002))

Noun phrase types and article use with reference to countability	Examples
<p>Type 1: [-SR, +HK], generics and unspicifiable: [a(an)], [the], [Ø] [a(n) [+count] [+sg]]_{NP} [the [+count] [+sg]]_{NP} [Ø [+count] [+sg]]_{NP} or [Ø [-count]]_{NP}</p> <p>Type 2: [+SR, +HR], referential definite: [the] [the]_{NP} Exphora, homophora [the]_{NP} cataphora [the]_{NP} Anaphoric reference [the]_{NP} Connotative reference [the]_{NP} Extended reference [the]_{NP} Unexplanatory modifiers [the]_{NP} Unique in all contexts</p> <p>Type 3: [+SR, -HK], referential indefinites, first mention: [a(an)], [Ø] [a(n) [+count] [+sg]] [Ø [+count] [-sg]]_{NP} or [Ø [-count]]_{NP}</p> <p>Type 4: [-SR, -HK], nonreferentials: [a(n)], [Ø] [a(n) [+count] [+sg]]_{NP} [Ø [+count] [-sg]]_{NP}</p> <p>Type 5: Idioms and other conventional uses (including uses with pronouns): [a(n)], [the], [Ø] [a(n) [idiom or other use]] [the [idiom or other use]] [Ø [idiom or other use]]</p>	<p>A cat likes mice <i>The</i> whale is a mammal. Ø language is a great blessing of Allah</p> <p>Pass me <i>the</i> pen <i>The</i> idea of coming to the UK When I found a red box in front of my house, it was too late. <i>The</i> box blew up with a terrific explosion.</p> <p>This book did not sell well even though <i>the</i> author was famous writer. I won a million dollar lottery. <i>The</i> news quickly spread all over town <i>The</i> first person to jump into the cold water was my brother. There are nine planets traveling around <i>the</i> sun.</p> <p>I saw a strange man standing at the gate. I keep sending Ø messages to him.</p> <p>I'm going to buy a new bicycle. He used to be a lawyer. Ø foreigners would come with better solution for this matter.</p> <p>All of a sudden, he woke up from his coma. In the 1960s, there were lots of protests against the Vietnam War. He has been thrown out of work, and his family is now living Ø hand to mouth.</p>

3 Stages in the Acquisition of Articles for L2 Learners

Research on article acquisition shows that L2 learners of English generally have difficulty acquiring articles if their L1 does not have articles [-ART]. Depending on whether the learners are from [+ART] or [-ART], the sequence in which they acquire English articles is different. According to Master (1987, 1997) articles are acquired differently depending on whether or not articles are present in the L1 of the learners.

As far as Urdu is concerned, regarding article acquisition by L2 learners, there are two issues that need to be considered. The first one is that the frequency of error type is different for different types of tasks performed (Khurma, 1981; Muzimo, 1985; Tarone, 1985; Tarone and Parish 1988). Generally, production tasks such as interviews and essay writing produce lower error rates than objective tests like cloze tests. The reason attributed to it is that in production tasks learners avoid using articles if they are not sure of its use. It has also been found that the metalanguage knowledge does not always reflect the linguistic competency (Birdsibgm, 1987).

2.4 Factors affecting the acquisition of articles

There are many factors that affect the acquisition of articles, particularly those related to the lack of articles in L1. Huebner, 1985; Robertson, 2000; and Thomas, 1989 have provided a number of explanations for

the problems related to the acquisition of articles. As regards L1 influence Avery and Radisic (2007) have explained some of the following factors.

2.4.1. Syntactic deficit

Syntactic deficit, also called Failed Functional Features Hypothesis was proposed by Hawkins and Chan (1997) who states that if a language lacks a particular functional category, it is assumed that this could lead to a syntactic deficit in the acquisition of a language function that has that has that category. Pakistani learners whose L1, Urdu does not have a category for articles can be seen as having a syntactic deficit because they omit articles or use them where they are not required.

2.4.2 Phonological deficit

The Theory of Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis (Goad, White and Steele (2003); Goad and White (2004, 2006) provides a phonological account of L2 spoken production of inflectional morphology and function words including articles. As the phonological factors are not the concern of this study, therefore, they will not be investigated.

2.4.3 Universal Grammar

Researchers like White, (2003) and Cook, (2003) assume that the acquisition of L1 and L2 is governed by an innately specified system called Universal Grammar (UG). (Chomsky, 1968, Schachter, 1988). With regards to article acquisition, for researchers working within the UG paradigm, definiteness and indefiniteness are a universal property of language that requires speakers to distinguish specific from nonspecific referents and shared from unshared background knowledge. In English, the article system conveys the concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness and distinguishes shared from unshared knowledge; whereas, in Urdu, these concepts are achieved through word order, verbal aspects demonstrative and new and old information.

2.4.4 Topic Prominent verses Subject Prominent Languages

According to Li and Thomson (1981), if a particular language structure plays an important role in the construction of sentences, then a language is said to be prominent in that linguistic aspect. For example, English is said to be subject prominent and therefore differentiates between subject and object/predicate on the surface level.

As most topic-prominent languages do not have articles, these learners encounter some difficulty in the acquisition of a language that is subject prominent and has articles. Urdu being [-ART] tends often to be more a topic prominent language and mark definiteness through word order.

2.4.5 The Role of Instruction

Henson and Peirrad (2005) define instruction as:

“Any systematic attempt to enable or facilitate language learning by manipulating the mechanism of learning and or the conditions under which they occur” (p.2).

For Krashen (1981,1985) the language acquisition process proceeds along some fixed natural path irrespective of the kind or amount of instruction the learner gets. People learn a language in spite of what goes in the classroom. Alternatively, we can say that instruction does not intervene in the acquisition of articles. Many other linguists (Chaudron, 1988; Ellis 1984; 1985, 1990; Harley 1988) also support the idea and are of the view that second language acquisition is a self contained process that follows its own course, a process neither dependent on nor influenced by external factors like instruction. As for acquisition of Articles, Dulay, Burt and Krashen, (1982) argue that English articles are unteachable but can be acquired through exposure. Ekiert (2004) supports the view that Article acquisition follows its own

developmental path more influenced by L1 than instruction environment differences.

Definiteness and Indefiniteness

In English the concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness are mainly achieved through the article system (**a, the, Ø**); In English *the* marks [+definite] NPs, while *a* marks [-definite] NPs. If a NP is [+definite], the speaker assumes that the hearer shares the speaker's knowledge of the existence of a unique individual in the noun phrase; otherwise, the NP is indefinite in this context. (Ionin, ko and Wexler, 2004).

3.1 Definiteness and Indefiniteness in the English

Definiteness in English is a grammatical concept and has specialized grammatical means such as article system and demonstratives to encode this concept. A definite expression often marks identifiability, familiarity, uniqueness and inclusiveness. The two articles of English *the* and *a* are used in [+definite] and [-definite] context. While *a* is used in singular [-definite] contexts, only *the* is used in singular and plural [+definite] context. According to Heim (1999, cit in Ionin & Wexler, 2003), *the* is specified [+definite], and *a* is underspecified for definiteness. This means that *the* can be used only when the conditions of definiteness have been satisfied, whereas *a* does not have such requirements.

Lyon (1999) has enlisted and explained a number of conditions which a noun phrase needs to fulfill at one time or another to qualify as a definite noun phrase which are as follows:

- a. **Familiarity and unidentifiability**
 - **Situational use of *the***
 - **Anaphoric *the***
 - **Associative use of *the***
- b. **Identifiability**
- c. **Uniqueness and Inclusiveness**

3.2 Indefinites

When it comes to indefinites, their relationship to identifiability and inclusiveness is not so simple; sometimes *a* is neutral, Sometimes there are cases where *a* is not neutral and instead signals uniqueness and the choice of *a* rather than *the* makes a significant difference (Lyons, 1999:12).

Not all languages have definite or indefinite articles to express definiteness and indefiniteness. There are many alternative ways to convey these concepts. [-ART] languages which includes Urdu use grammatical categories such as demonstratives, proper nouns, personal and possessive pronouns, quantifiers, cardinality and word order to mark definiteness. Since Urdu is [-ART] language and the force of definiteness is often expressed through these categories and word order.

Urdu does not have a category for articles and is conveyed through a number of morphological, syntactic and discourse strategies. Also, definiteness in Urdu is generally an unmarked category and indefiniteness is a marked category and is indicated by the determiner *ek* (one) or *koi* (any) before a NP.

Due to space limitations the current article cannot look into all concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness in Urdu to explain the factors which effect the acquisition of English article by Pakistani learners.

4. Method

This is a pseudo-longitudinal quantitative research. A pseudo-longitudinal is a synchronic study designed in a way that we can infer diachronic development between two variables (Rasinger, 2008). The study is quantitative because it is based on quantifiable and measurable data gathered from the writings of the learners of the three

proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate and advanced.

To answer the objectives, a methodology was devised which consisted of identifying sample population, an appropriate research instruments for collecting the required data, collating the data and analyzing it for any article acquisition pattern that may emerge.

4.1. Situational Background

Most of the students who study under the ELT programme of the Department of English are mainly from different Departments. For language teaching there are three proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate and advanced. The strength of students in each level varies from 15 to 25. At times; more than 50% of the students are foreigners.

All those students who apply for different faculty programmes in the University are required to pass the English language proficiency test at the time of admission. The students, who get thirty-five or above marks, are exempted from taking English language classes and, therefore, they can start their respective faculty courses directly.

Each class lasts for one semester (sixteen weeks with twenty-five hours of studies per week). The language students, therefore, spend from one to three semesters studying the English language, depending on the proficiency level they are at.

The courses are skill-based and, at all three levels, students are taught reading, writing, listening and speaking as skills. Grammar is taught separately. The grammar syllabus, like the other four skills, is based on a set of objectives. The **articles** are part of the grammar objectives. As is normally the case with all language courses, the teaching of articles is not emphasized sufficiently enough to become a focus of attention in the class. Nevertheless, all English teachers, while checking the written work of students, do point out errors of articles along with other language

errors. Occasionally, the teachers also explain to the learners the remedial measures they need to take to eliminate the article errors. However, the progress that learners make in the use of articles is never monitored.

4.2 Population

The target population of this study is adult Pakistani learners whose first language is Urdu and learning English as a second language.

Guided by this understanding of Urdu as L1 for Pakistani learners, I was at ease to select my sample population from among the Pakistani learners at IIUI. The sampling was non-random and can be termed as 'convenience samples' (Bryman, 2004) because participants were chosen on the basis of who was available at that time. The participants of the study were learning English and were of three proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate and advanced. They all had acquired their Urdu along with their mother tongue which varied from Punjabi, Kashmiri, Balochi, and Pashto to Sindhi. They use their mother tongue at home but outside home they use Urdu for all communication purposes. They can, therefore, be taken as representative of the adult Pakistani learners.

This research is pseudo-longitudinal because it looked into the relationship between article acquisition and three language proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate and advanced. The participants from the three groups were different and the linguistic data for each group was collected only once in point of time, that is at the end of their semester. A total of nine Pakistani learners, three from each level, were selected. Students are usually required to write at least three different types of compositions in their terminal examination.

4.3 Instrument

The end of term achievement tests of the participants were used as instruments for collecting data to know the article accuracy rate for Pakistani learners. They may be termed as subject completed instruments (Wallen, 2000) because the researcher requested the participants written scripts (product), for getting evidence for her research.

The instrument consisted of a total of eighteen compositions, two from each participant, which had written, in their terminal examination. These compositions were between 150 and 250 words in length. The topics varied from narrative to descriptive to argumentative. Following were the topics of the compositions.

Table 3. Topics of the participants compositions

Level	Descriptive	Narrative	Argumentative
Elementary	Describing a person	A memorable day	
Intermediate	Describing a person		University bus service
Advanced		A story	Garbage Problem

These compositions were examined for articles used in obligatory contexts. Lightbown and Spada (2006) define obligatory contexts as the "place in a sentence where the morpheme is necessary to make the sentence grammatically correct" (p.83). For the research not only the obligatory contexts were

taken into account but also the articles used in non-obligatory contexts were examined. A total of 115 noun phrases were identified for each group of participants but in the end only 113 each were selected for the elementary and 113 for the intermediate and 107 for the advanced.

4.4 Data Coding

The data collected for the study were quantitative data. In these compositions, each article with its noun phrase was underlined, numbered and coded for easy recognition. Each NP was examined for its type and labeled accordingly. The tabulation was done by transferring the data to a summary sheet prepared for this purpose. Separate data sheets were utilized for the elementary, intermediate and advanced levels to record the data for the three types of articles *the*, *a*, and \emptyset . The following categories of NP types defined by Huebner (1983) were used and they have already been discussed.

Coding key for NP types

T1 = Type 1: [-SR, +HK], generics, (a, the \emptyset)

T2 = Type 2: [+SR, +HK], referential definites/generic definites, (the)

T3 = Type 3: [+SR, -HK], referential indefinites, (a, \emptyset)

T4 = Type 4: [-SR, -HK], non referentials, (a, \emptyset)

T5 = Type 5: Idioms, conventional uses, (a, \emptyset)

4.5 Data Analysis

According to Lightbown and Spada (2006), the development of grammatical morphemes in L2 learners is studied by analysing the learners speech or writing. The researcher identifies the obligatory contexts for each morpheme. Identifying obligatory context means locating the places in a sentence where the morpheme is necessary to make the sentence grammatically correct. Then these obligatory contexts are counted. After counting the number of obligatory contexts, the researcher counts the correctly supplied morphemes. The next step is to divide the number of correctly supplied morphemes by the total number of obligatory contexts and multiply the answer by 100 to get the accuracy percentage for each morpheme. Then, these morphemes could be

ranked from the highest to lowest to give the accuracy order for that morpheme.

5. Results and Discussion

To see how well the learners were able to use the three types of articles, *the*, *a*, \emptyset , the data collected was analyzed in the following ways:

- First, the percentage scores of the correct responses were calculated for each semantic article type [\pm SR, \pm HR] for each proficiency level. Then, these percentage scores were plotted on the line charts to display the accuracy rate for each semantic type for each group of learners.
- Then another measure SOC (Supplied in Obligatory Context) was employed to determine the accuracy percentage for each article type for each level. As mentioned earlier, if an article type is oversupplied or overgeneralised, SOC will inflate the accuracy rate.
- Then TLU (Target-Like Use) measure was used to redress the problem of inflated rates in article accuracy of the learners. The TLU measurement gives a more realistic picture of the learners' performance as it reflects the actual accuracy rate of the articles.
- Finally, UOC (Used in Obligatory Contexts) was employed to indicate the overuse or under use of the articles in the three proficiency levels.

5.1.1 Semantic article types results and analysis

The results of the aforementioned measures used for the analysis of the data are presented here. First of all we will look at our findings according to the semantic noun types.

Table 4 presents the percentage of accuracy rate for five semantic article types and Figure 3 illustrates the acquisition curves to show the difference between the three proficiency groups.

Table 4. Percentage of article accuracy among three proficiency groups

Proficiency Level	Percentage of Article Accuracy				
	Type 1: Generics [-SR,+HK] (a, the, Ø)	Type 2: Referential definites [+SR,+HK] (the)	Type 3: Referential indefinites [+SR, -HK] (a,Ø)	Type 4: Non- referentials [-SR,-HK] (a,Ø)	Type 5: Idioms (a, the,Ø)
Elementary	3/7= 42%	17/47=36.1%	27/49=55.1%	0/7=0.0%	2/3=66.6%
Intermediate	5/12=41.0%	19/36=52.0%	23/41=56.0%	10/19=52.6%	4/4=100%
Advanced	10/12=83%	32/34=91.1%	12/20=60.0%	9/12=75.0%	6/6=100%

5.1.2 SOC results and analysis

In order to see the rate of correct suppliance of articles in obligatory contexts, SOC measure was used. The following formula was used:

$$\text{SOC} = \frac{\text{Number of Correct suppliance in obligatory contexts}}{\text{Number of obligatory contexts}}$$

The SOC readings for the three groups are given in Table 5.

Table 5. SOC accuracy rate for three proficiency groups

Proficiency Level	SOC accuracy rate		
	The	A	Ø
Elementary	19/52=36.5%	10/30=33.3%	20/28=71.1%
Intermediate	24/43=55.8%	20/40=50%	17/28=60.7%
Advanced	38/63=60.3%	13/23=56.7%	18/21=85.7%

5.1.3 TLU results and analysis

The following formula was used to identify the acquisition order for TLU,:

$$\text{TLU} = \frac{\text{number of correct suppliances in obligatory contexts}}{(\text{number of obligatory contexts}) + (\text{number of suppliance in non-obligatory contexts})}$$

Table 6. Average TLU accuracy rate for the three proficiency groups

Proficiency Group	Average TLU Accuracy Rate		
	The	A	Ø
Elementary	0.365	0.333	0.711
Intermediate	0.558	0.500	0.607
Advanced	0.603	0.567	0.857

Elementary	19/35=22.3%	10/52=19.2%	20/36=55.5%
Intermediate	24/62=38.7%	20/60=33.3%	17/39=43.5%
Advanced	38/88=43.1%	13/33=39.0%	18/24=75.0%

5.1.4 UOC results and analysis

UOC measure was employed to find out the overuse or under use of the articles by the learners of the three groups. The formula used for this purpose was as under:

UOC = Total no. of suppliance in obligatory and non-obligatory contexts

No. of obligatory contexts

While TLU is used to measure article accuracy, UOC is used to measure article usage and indicates the overuse or overuse of articles. Table 7 gives the scores of the three proficiency levels in the use of articles.

Table 7. UOC scores for article use

Proficiency Group	Average UOC Accuracy Rate		
	<i>The</i>	<i>A</i>	∅
Elementary	52/23=226.0%	30/19=157.8%	59/71=83.0%
Intermediate	33/28=117.8%	40/23=173.9%	28/62=45.1%
Advanced	63/43=146.5%	23/13=176.9%	21/51=41.5%

5.2 Factors affecting article acquisition

Based on the results of the three measures which were employed for finding out the article acquisition order for Pakistani learners, it appears that the [-ART] L1 of the Pakistani learners, which is Urdu, affects the article acquisition in two ways. Firstly, the learners tend to overgeneralize the English article system rules. Secondly, they omit articles because of negative transfer of their L1. Overgeneralization is referred to as using the existing L2 knowledge to expend it to new knowledge incorrectly or to use the rule where it is does not belong (Ellis, 1985).

Now we will look into the features were overgeneralised in different semantic contexts.

Parish and Thomas (1989) claim that *the* is associated with specific context [+SR] rather than the hearer known [+HR]. So, the referential indefinites [+SR, -HK] was the context recognized to be the main feature that causes over-generalization of *the*. The same was also found for the participants of this study. Figure 1 also reveals the fact that accuracy for referential indefinites [+SR, -HR] was the lowest for the elementary level. It improved to 4th place for intermediate learners, but then dropped to number 3 in the accuracy sequence. The Pakistani learners across the proficiency group replaced *a* with ∅ rather than *the* indicating that their [-ART] L1 was guiding them in determining the indefinites as definite.

The Urdu language does not also mark [+SR, +HR] definite specific and generic nouns, therefore, the elementary learners had the most difficulty in assigning an article to a specific category of noun phrases. This is apparently a case of L1 influence. In case of type 2 [+SR, +HR] phrases, the tendency to avoid the use of *the* for the referential definite resulted in the misuse of *a* among the elementary and intermediate learners. This tendency seems to be again rooted in their L1. As Urdu does not have a category for the definite articles in their L1, and instead personal pronouns, demonstratives, quantifiers are used to identify the referents; therefore, the learners end up using *the* in the contexts where other articles are required. The UOC measure of *the* for the elementary learners is also very high which is evidence of overgeneralization of the rule pertaining to *the*.

The high use of \emptyset as well as the high accuracy rate \emptyset for all the learners of three levels, is a phenomenon worth investigation. In most cases, they avoided the use of *the* and replaced it with either \emptyset or with grammatical categories similar to those in Urdu, most commonly with pronouns. One reason for omitting an article or replacing \emptyset with *a*, or *the*, is that the learners cannot fully grasp the concept of nonidentifiability of the referent from the context, and they follow the rules of their L1. They consider the use of articles unnecessary because in Urdu a bare NP can be interpreted as either definite or indefinite depending on its position in the clause. They sometimes also associate *a* with number 'one'. Consequently, the use of 'one' leads to the omission of articles.

Master (1997) and Parrish (1987) interpreted this omission of articles as an indication of mastering of \emptyset article which is at its initial stages. Thomas (1989), however, adopted a more realistic approach and termed the more frequent use of \emptyset in *a* and *the* context as the failure to use any article.

There are numerous other factors related to article acquisition problems, but only those have been highlighted which are related to this study. By taking into consideration these factors, the teachers can suggest better remedies for the difficulties Pakistani learners have when using articles.

5.3 Pedagogical implications

The present study on the acquisition of English articles has yielded some important results.

Different factors that affect the article choice are referentiality and countability of the noun phrases and information status of the subject and object. The information status, though an important factor in article acquisition, has not been the focus here because its not part of the study.

ELT teachers must take into consideration the fact that teaching English article system to learners is not of much help without making them aware of the underlying reasons for their choice of article. The teachers, for their part, must be well-informed about how the semantic article types mark the specificity and definiteness and how [-ART] L1 influences in overgeneralization of article rules, consequently making learners overuse or under the articles or omitting them altogether. All this information would help teachers in dealing with the learner's problem of assigning wrong article in the wrong context. It is suggested that while introducing the article system in class, formulaic and rigid article rules should be avoided. Contextualised meaning-based activities related to articles, would be more helpful because the correct use of article depends on the context.

The article acquisition order for Pakistani learners revealed through TLU measure has important implications. Trying to teach *a* before *the* or \emptyset will not help because the learners would follow their natural acquisition order which is identified as $\emptyset > the > a$. Ordering

activities which are inconsistent with the acquisition order will only add to the confusion about articles. Therefore, following the natural article acquisition order for Pakistani learners may be more beneficial than strictly following the sequence in grammar books.

The countability concept factor is another issue in the article acquisition which cannot be overlooked. As Laudiere (2005) points out that article choices in the indefinite context is more difficult because the learners need to determine the number countability. In Chaudron and Parker (1990), learners first appear to use \emptyset in [-HR] context and use *a* only when they gain an understanding of countability. Therefore, focus on distinguishing countable and non-countable or mass noun on the basis of NP context will help the learners understand the article system better.

Lastly, the acquisition of English article system is a long process and the teachers need the awareness that even the proficient L2 user sometimes, have a problem using articles correctly. Therefore, ELT teachers need to be patient when teaching articles.

As regards teaching the English article system, the researcher proposes the following approach:

- Firstly, encourage learners to determine definiteness before countability;
- Then, analyse the discourse context for referentially, especially the perspectives of the speaker and the hearer; that is, the interlocutor, to determine the definiteness or indefiniteness of a NP; and
- Finally, focus on the conceptualization of countability; and

To more effectively ascertain the definiteness or indefiniteness of a NP, the teacher may emphasis the discourse context. Learners

should be helped to the perspective of the interlocutors, especially the speaker's presumptions about the hearer's knowledge. The understanding of the discourse context is even more important for Pakistani learners because, at times, they understand the definite article as that which is identifiable and the indefinite article as that which is unidentifiable. They usually try to determine the identity of the referent of the NP based on their own ability, without taking into consideration the discourse context and the interlocutors. Therefore, when the learners seek the identification of the referent outside the discourse context, article errors may occur.

When teachers equate the identifiability of the NP referent with the definite article, they should make it clear to the learners that this identifiability lies in the speaker's assumption about the hearer's knowledge of the referent. There is a possibility of making an error, if the learners try to identify the NP referent based on their ability outside the discourse context.

Another important issue that needs to be considered is the concept of the count noun and noncount noun. The rigid classification of a noun as either countable or noncountable can lead to article errors. Yule (1998) is of the opinion that when considering countability, it is useful to know whether an entity possesses boundaries and stands as an individual or it is boundless.

Hence focusing on the discourse context for referentiality, and conceptualization of countability, the learners can improve their understanding of English articles.

5.4 Conclusions

As far I know, no research as has ever been conducted in Pakistan to examine the article acquisition process of Pakistani learners. This study is a small contribution to filling the gap that exists in the L2 article acquisition literature. The sample population consisting of nine participants from three proficiency levels can

hardly be called a representative of all Pakistani L2 learners. However, the research does reflect partly on the acquisition process of Pakistani learners whose L1 is Urdu and also provides some reasons as to why many Pakistani learners face difficulties in using articles. Therefore, the study can assist ELT teachers in making informed decisions when planning their lessons on articles. This study, it is hoped, may help other researchers in initiating similar projects.

The difficulties underlying article choice have been interpreted as the inability, on the part of the learners, to distinguish different types of [\pm HK] referents and the countability of the noun phrases. There is a tendency among [-ART] learners to overuse \emptyset , especially at the elementary level. In case of the process of acquisition, the pattern of flooding-then-trickling was observed for \emptyset and U-shaped behavior for *the* and *a*.

As for the measure for article acquisition, TLU is considered the best accuracy measure but very few researchers have employed it in their studies. Among the few are Fen-Chuan (2001) and Wong (2007). Therefore, it is hoped that TLU will be employed in future studies on article or other morpheme studies. Also it is expected that other Pakistani researchers will take up for their studies this important area of article acquisition by [-ART] learners to fill the gap which presently exists in the research on L2 article acquisition.

The research, it is believed, will make the teachers take a sympathetic view of learners' errors in article usage. Instead of penalizing the learners for the wrong use of articles, they will seek to recognise the area where the article learning problem lie and consequently, teach the articles more effectively. This research can therefore be taken as a significant contribution in the field of article acquisition.

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