



The Non-Native Speakers Errors in the Use of the Arabic Definite Article

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Abstract

This paper attempts to investigate the nature of errors by non-native speaker learners in the use of the Arabic definite article, and to find the causes of these errors, such as L1 interference, the student's previous study, the concept he has developed about the target language, and the learning and teaching environment represented by the teacher, the curriculum, the media and the community.

Key words: Arabic definite article; Error analysis; Malay Language, Second language learning

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INTRODUCTION

The definite article in Arabic, and in many languages is one of the most frequent articles used, and the errors by students learning another language in using the definite article are quite obvious for the native speaker as well as the researcher or the teacher.

This paper attempts to investigate the nature of errors by non-native speaker learners in the use of the Arabic definite article, and to find the causes of these errors, such as L1 interference, the student's previous study, the concept he has developed about the target language, and the learning and teaching environment represented by the teacher, the curriculum, the media and the community.

1. THE SAMPLE OF THE STUDY

The sample used in this study is represented by samples of writing by Malaysian students studying at the department of Arabic at Al-bayt university. The most feature of these students is that they have studied Arabic in their country for several years, and have already spent at least one semester at Al-bayt university Language Center, and they are now in their third year at the Department of Arabic at Al-bayt university. The mother tongue of these students is the Malay Language (Bahasa Malay), the language spoke in Peninsula Malay, southern Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, East Sumatra, Riau, and in some coastal parts of Borneo. It is the official language of Malaysia, Brunei, and Singapore. The number of Malay-speaking people is 20-30 million.¹

The Malay language is a branch of Austronesian languages (Karin et al., 1993). The most important characteristics of the Malay language are that it is not inflectional, and it is an ordinal language (subject-verb-object). In terms of sex it is limited to the natural sex like "Mohammed" and "Fatima". There are no signs that differentiate between feminine and masculine whether in the verb, the noun and the adjective. As for number, the Malay language does not have dual like Arabic. With regard to tenses, there is no past or present tenses, but to indicate the past tense, the morpheme "telah" is added to the verb. In terms of agreement between the adjective and the described noun, the subject and the predicate, the accusative (Accusative) and its referent. The Malay language is characterized by repetition, and this occurs by repeating the same word to give the plural, as in "rumah-rumah" (houses).

There is only one relative pronoun in Malay, (yang), and it is used for the singular, the plural, the masculine

¹ http://www.indonesia.go.id/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=112&Itemid=1722

and the feminine its form stays the same in all inflectional cases. (Karim et al.,1997)

Since Arabic and Malay language belong to different language categories, the differences between them are clear whether in phonology, vocabulary, structure, sentences, grammar and syntax systems. In this brief study, the researcher seeks to shed light on the language of both Arabic and Malay constructions, aiming to investigate the differences between them regarding the use of the definite article. This study might benefit all instructors, program designers and students. Through this modest paper, the researcher also seeks to introduce some results that benefit all people in the field of teaching Arabic and learning for and by non-native speakers, especially for Malaysians whose mother tongue is Mala.

To some extent, the medium of instruction used is English, although Malaysian students are not fluent in it, which does not help them use their experience in learning English to compare the unfamiliar constructions confronting them that have no equivalence in their mother tongue.

2. OBSTACLES TO THE STUDY

The most important problem facing the researcher is that he cannot come up with accurate results that can be disseminated. These obstacles include the following:

A. Lack of knowledge of the researcher in Malay language, so it is difficult to give judgment regarding L1 interference. Therefore, the researcher opts to use writing samples by students whose mother tongue is not Malay language for the purpose of compassion. Using these samples is considered as an indication of L1 inference.

B. It is difficult to find a control sample who have not learnt Arabic before to determine the role of pre-learning impact on the frequency of errors and their fossilized status. The researcher is aware of the role of previous education, but it is not easy for him to prove this in a scientific way that determines the responsibility of the teacher in the first stage of education.

C. The researcher was unable to monitor students' oral expression patterns in normal situations. It is known that the student in oral expression situation starts talking naturally, using his knowledge background and his special culture.

Presumably, when talking about a noun, he will be obliged to express what the addressee is familiar with by using the definite and/ or unfamiliar with by using the indefinite. Moreover, shunning (beating around the bush) and refraining among Malaysian students are the most problematic issues that make the teacher unable to know student's language repertoire.

D. The absence of a comprehensive strategy and methods that can be generalized to all teachers to convey the idea of the definite and indefinite. This is related

to many reasons, the most important of which might be the lack of clarity of the philosophy of definite and the indefinite in many situations, and the absence of a clear- style methodology that has standardized training procedure with a clear aim.

3. DEFINING THE PROBLEM

The problem of definite article among learners of Arabic is represented by two matters. The first matter relates to phonology, and epigraphy, that is the ability to distinct between what is called the Solar and the lunar definite article. The former term is given to the definite article ("al") where the sound "L" is not uttered but written, and the first consonant of the noun defined by the article is stressed. This occurs when the definite article "al" (the) precedes words starting with a set of consonants.²

The later is given to the definite article "al" (the) that precedes words starting with the rest of consonants. The observer of students' writings does not feel that this problem exists since the problem is related to reading and dictation practice. The remedy of this problem might be rather easy since the absence of the "Lam" sound in the solar definite article is related to harmonic movements of the tongue when moving from uttering "lam" to uttering the letter/consonant that follows. The phonological causes of articulation in general are justified for students, and the rules of which can be applied after assimilation of phonological habits of the target language native speakers. The teacher can also mention the sounds where the "lam" is not articulated, which are 13 sounds, and he/she can train the students on this; after that, the problem is finished.

The second matter is an indicative and constructive one related to definite and indefinite function in Arabic, which is the core of this paper.

Students' constructive errors, which learn a second language, can be seen falling into three patterns: errors with increase, errors with decrease, substitution errors. As for the substitution errors, they do not exist in students' writings since Arabic does not have any another article the student can use instead of the definite article, which can be equivocal with the definite article as in English.

The errors observed can be summarized as follows³:

A. Using the definite article with the additive or genitive or using the indefinite article where the contrary is meant. Example of this as in the following:

a) المفتاح الدار (the key the car)*

المفتاح السيارة* — مفتاح السيارة

(a key the car) *- the key of the car

b) (the key a door)*

² Sibawayh mentioned them and he did not mentioned (Lam) between them. *Sibawayh, Alkitab*, 457(4).

³ I wrote the examples as they are without correction, some examples contain other errors are not important to this study.

المفتاح باب* ————— مفتاح الباب

(the door a key) *- the key of the door
c) (for a period the week) *

لمدة الأسبوع* ————— لمدة أسبوع

For a week period
(for a period a week) *

For a week

d) an office the director the center) *

مكتب المدير المركز* ————— مكتب مدير المركز

(an office a director the center) *

The center director's office

e) (the university Al- albayt) *

الجامعة آل البيت* ————— جامعة آل البيت

(a university Al bayt) *

Al-Albayt university

B. There is no agreement between the described noun and the adjective in the definite and indefinite function as in the following examples:

كُتبت ورقة البحثية ————— كتبت الورقة البحثية

In the example “katabtu warqat albahthia” I wrote a paper the research*

It is clear that the text producer does not differentiate between the additive structure and the descriptive one, or he/she uses the adjective preceding a definite noun as indefinite; the sentence producer would say:

الجامعة إسلامية* ————— الجامعة الإسلامية

(the university Islamic) instead of “Aljamiaa alislamia”
(the Islamic the university) * The Islamic university.

C. Making subject or the predicate indefinite or definite where the opposite is required.

درس صعب* ————— الدرس صعب

(a lesson a difficult) * the lesson is difficult.

a). (I am the student Malysian) *- I am a Malysian student

أنا الطالب ماليزي* ————— طالب ماليزي

b). (I was the sick yesterday) *- I was sick yesterday

كنت المريض أمس* ————— كنت مريضا أمس

D. Lack of understanding of the issue of the definite article with proper noun; it is (al) preceding a noun to indicate the category of the proper noun; the student would say:

أين يعيش جمل؟* ————— أين يعيش الجمل؟

(where lives a camel?) *

(where lives the camel) *- where does the camel live?

E. making the relative pronoun referent indefinite; the student would say:

درس الذي قرأت أمس صعب* ————— الدرس الذي قرأته أمس صعب

(a lesson that I read yesterday difficult) *

The lesson I read yesterday was difficult.

F. Using the definite article or not using it with some names, which are never preceded by the definite article in Arabic as in the utterance

العمان مدينة جميلة* ————— عمان مدينة جميلة

(the Amman beautiful a city) * - Amman is a beautiful city, or in:

ذهبت إلى مفرق والإربد* ————— ذهبت إلى المفرق وإربد

(I went to Mafraq and the Irbid) * - I went to Mafraq and Irbid.

Proper nouns are irregular, that is, they do not follow the same rule the student can realize. There is no doubt that this phenomenon has reasons among native speakers; Why, for example, China, Japan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Pravda (the Russian newspaper) ..., have been made definite whereas other nouns have been made indefinite.

However, the general rule that must be taught to students is that the proper noun should not be preceded by the definite article except those the Arabs use with the definite article. These nouns can be included in a list of places and persons that come with the definite article.

G. Deletion of the definite article preceding an indefinite noun that has been repeated again in the context where as the opposite is right in Arabic as in a student's utterance:

اشترت كتابا وكان ثمن كتاب دينارين * ————— اشترت كتابا وكان ثمن الكتاب دينارين

(I bought a book and price of a book was two dinar) *

I bought a book and the price of the book was two dinar.

4. ANALYSIS OF THE ERRORS

Perhaps, the most important remark that attracts the researcher's attention is that students use the definite article randomly, which indicates that there are no hypothetical and transitory rules, indicating a system the learner develops, a stage between the mother tongue and the target language⁴. This phase is characterized by excessive generalization either from the mother tongue or the target language. Perhaps, this is related to two reasons:

First, the absence of a specific definite article in Malay language that can be equivalent to that in Arabic. So, the learner does not realize the concept and function of this article preceding public names in Arabic.

The researcher is not certain that there are not equivalent intellectual structures similar to those in Arabic and other languages regarding the definite and indefinite, specification and generalization. In this regard, Douglas Brown says “in general the foreign language learner needs not to learn how to think, once again when learning a foreign language, but to master a second language, eventually, means thinking in the foreign language”⁵. However, the learner's previous experiences in the mother tongue truly pave the way to thinking in the foreign language. “Earlier in his book, Brown raised doubts about the presence of universal deep structure

⁴ H.Douglas Broun, Principles of Language Learning and Teaching, p.201.

⁵ نفسه: ص 168

common among all languages. So, the closest concept to accept is that meanings and ideas are completely built according to culture exactly like surface structures.”⁶

I have talked this issue based on my experience with two students whose mother tongue are different and they do not have a distinctive definite article. Their utterances were different; the first, a Russian student said:

قابلت الرجل فدلني على المسجد

I met the man, then he guided me to the mosque* .

When I asked him “which man ?” he said:

*واحد رجل

(one man)*- a man. The Malaysian student , on the other hand, insisted on the same utterance and was not surprised by my question.

The second reason is perhaps due to the absence of specific rules that have been taught to students in different schooling stages. The strange thing is that Arabic curricula for non-native speakers do not take this aspect into consideration, although the learner of a second language like English finds out that the concept of definite and indefinite function is taught in the first stages of study.

The causes of this phenomenon can be divided into two dimensions:

The first dimension includes reasons outside the scope of the language related to:

- the student’s study in his country
- the student was not guided in the right manner
- the student’s feels that he knows all the points he is studying
- the nature of the Malaysian student who is always reluctant to use Arabic in real contexts, and to interact with speakers of Arabic.

The second dimension, in turn, includes two sides that will be focused upon in this study.

The first aspect is related to teaching process, that is the rules of the definite article “al” usage have not been controlled functionally in the curriculum and grammar books, so grammar books in this area introduce how to differentiate between the types of the definite article “al”, whether preceding a proper , the one that go with a definite noun or an indefinite noun repeated in the context , an additional article that has no definite function, and as a relative pronoun⁷. It is worth it to take notice of this despite Ibn Jeni’s opinion regarding the reason behind writing Arabic grammar. “A non –native speaker of Arabic should catch up with native speakers in eloquence; he should speak it though he is not an Arab, and if someone is odd to it, he should be corrected through this grammar”⁸ , who reads grammar books does not find a rule, categorization, or classification addressing non-native

speakers. The aim of writing Arabic grammar was not all about for teaching purposes except the accentuations placed on the end of words, representing parsing rules.

As a result of the above mentioned concepts, the practical exercises that aim to clarify the use of a definite article in its right contexts have not been taken into account in Arabic teaching curricula for non- native speakers, so the teacher uses his/her discretion based on his experience and expertise. Consequently, this leads to the lack of sustained rule, which drives the student to apply wrong analogy.

The second aspect includes reasons related to the nature of language itself and a second language learning process, such as the mother tongue interference mentioned earlier. The Malay language follows a different method regarding definite and indefinite function. Intervention seems clear in composition of additive, the ejective and the described noun. Studying students’ errors shows overlap between the descriptive composition (the described + adjective) and additive composition.

(1st Particle of the Genitive construction, 2nd Particle of the Genitive construction) (noun + noun). Perhaps this is due to the fact that the Malay language disconnects 1st Particle of the Genitive construction from 2nd Particle of the Genitive construction by adding the word (yang) which may correspond to the phrase “related to” or “bita->” in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, which disconnect 1st Particle of the Genitive construction from 2nd Particle of the Genitive construction, or by the word “relating to” if the relationship between 1st Particle of the Genitive construction and 2nd Particle of the Genitive construction is an ownership relation. As for the construction (the described + adjective), the Malay language disconnects them by using the word “sifatoho” (described as). However, in addition to using these words as relatedness articles, it seems that they are used for more than one functions.

The Arab curricula do not clearly focus on these constructions in order to differentiate them. Likewise, the differences between them are sometimes so subtle that the student and the teacher sometimes cannot differentiate between

(طالب ماليزي) و(طالب ماليزيا)

(a student Malaysian)*- A Malaysian student, and (a student Malaysia)*- a student of Malaysia.

5. HOW TO OVERCOME THESE OBSTACLES?

The researcher argues that overcome the problem of Malaysian students’ usage of the definite article “al”, the concept of definite and indefinite function in Arabic must be conveyed to the student by the curriculum and the teacher.

⁶ 78 نفسه ص: ينظر

⁷ Ibn Hisham’s Mughni al-Labib. 71- 78

⁸ 1\35. ابن جنّي , الخصائص

Arabic has only one definite article “al”, and it is used to define what is called public nouns, whereas names are definite by themselves according to social norms, and that the linguistic norms has agreed on giving the term “defined noun” to every noun form preceded by this definite article, and the term “indefinite noun” is given to nouns not preceded by the definite article. Usually, the form preceded with “al” (the) includes a long list of defined words: Pronouns, public names, Demonstrative Pronouns, Relative Pronouns, and any 1nd Particle of the Genitive construction added to any these patterns and indefinite noun preceded by a definite article for the vocative purpose⁹. Except those defined by “al” (the) and 1st Particle of the Genitive construction, defining these patterns is based upon speciation, generalization and social norm,¹⁰ where the generalization concept is expressed by the indefinite noun and the specification by the definite noun. Here, we are concerned of words preceded by “al”(the), where “al” (the) functions as a definer regardless the names where “al” (the) has lost its major function as a definite article like that preceding some proper nouns.

Using certain syntactic constructions is determined by a given context from the perspective of discourse linguistics. It's necessary to know specific disciplinary steps when using this form or another one. The first person (the sender) mainly stems from the idea he/she wants to express, so he should know who the addressee is before selecting the form templates bearing this idea, whether he has prior knowledge about the topic of conversation or not. Then he/she uses the indefinite noun form in situation where he expects that the addressee has no information available on the topic (the noun), and uses the definite noun form in opposite cases. The memory function in the first case is bound to receiving and storing information, using the indefinite form familiar to the concerned party. In the second case, however, memory is activated to recall the information stored and use it as a common basis in communication process.

Accordingly, we can define the definite article “al” (the) in Arabic as the one preceding a noun familiar to the text receiver /the addressee as in the statement

(الفتاة تقطف الزهر و كانت رأيت فتاة)

(I saw a girl and the girl was picking the flowers), or in a real situation (examples with demonstrative pronouns) as in:

أعطني هذا الكتاب

(give me this book), or when the noun is familiar because of the defining clause following which is common to the communicators, where the referent of the relative pronoun is attached to the verb of the relative clause

رأيت الطالب الذي قابلناه في المسجد

(I saw the student who we met at the Mosque),

Or in common and public noun where “al” (the) is called “al” (the) indicating collective noun . It comes in the context of expressing facts characterizing all types of nouns under the main category, as in the sentence :

النوم مفيد

(the sleep is useful)*- Sleep is useful

النحاس يتمدد بالحرارة

(The copper expands by heat) *(Copper expands by heat).

Here, the concept of the definite article “al” (the), its indication and its relationship primarily with the addressee are clear. So, there is no difference between “al” (the) preceding the pre-known noun and the one indicating the collective noun. Every public noun can be preceded by “al” (the)

You do not say

رأيت السيارة

(I saw the car) except when the addressee knows in advance which car you are talking about.

If your estimate of the receiver's knowledge regarding what you are taking and giving information about is ambiguous, the receiver will interrupt you saying: (which car? Or (which student?).

The concept of the definite and indefinite noun in this way is similar to that in many respects with that in English, but Arabic is simpler and has less rules in this field since English has a definite article (the) and indefinite articles (a, an) to express singularity, and English also has many functions for the definite article (the).¹¹ So, we do not find great difficulty in teaching students whose mother tongue is English, except their use of “wahed” (one) before the name to express which is indefinite, as in

“تكلت مع واحد دكتور في الجامعة وقال لي”

(I spoke with one doctor in the university and he said to me)*I spoke with a doctor at the university and he told me. This method corresponds to what we find in the Iraqi dialect where they use “fad” which means “fard” (an individual/one). In this case, we have many ways to teach the student how to use the word “ma” (some one) which indicates the indefinite noun after the name.

The concept of the definite and indefinite noun and the standards governing the use of “al” (the) has been previously mentioned in this paper. However, there are standard constructions requiring that “al” (the) preceding certain nouns be deleted or added.

These standards can be summarized in grammarians' words: Two definite articles never come with a single

⁹ 135، ص: 'بد الحميد الأقطش والاستعمال (أل) الزائدة في أبنية الأسماء بين النظرية

¹⁰ 5\20: ينظر: سيويه، الكتاب

¹¹ Abbott, B. Definite and indefinite. <https://www.msu.edu/~abbottb/def&inde.pdf>

noun. Thus, the categories of names mentioned by grammarians can not be preceded by “al” (the). What is important here is the errors made by students when preceding these nouns with “al” (the). It has been observed that persons’ nouns do not constitute an obstacle, but the errors occur mostly in the names of places, cities and countries. The majority of these names are subject to social norms by adding “al” (the). The names of cities and countries preceded by “al” (the) can be listed since the rule states otherwise.

The rest of constructions can be restricted in the following:

A. The absence of the definite article in 1st Particle of the Genitive construction since the purpose of the Genitive construction is specification and elimination of confusion, so the definite noun needs no Genitive construction, but it is specified by description or substitution, while the 2nd Particle of the Genitive construction is subject to the text receiver’s knowledge of the subject as in the utterance

هذه سيارة الرئيس

(this is a car the president)*- This is the president’s car.

When the utterance is :

هذه سيارة رئيس

(this is a car a president) * - This is a president’s car.

B. Agreement between the adjective and the described noun. In Arabic, the adjective agrees with the modified noun, in four of ten cases, namely the definite and indefinite cases, parsing, feminization and the masculinization, and in number (singular, dual, plural).

As for the causative adjective patterns “ the girl beautiful the face”*- the girl has a beautiful face, where the adjective in this construction does not have a definite article, and it agrees with the described noun to which it relates in parsing and number. We can consider this construction as the one where the adjective precedes the described noun as the noun described as beautiful is the face in the meaning of the deep structure.

C. The subject is often a defined noun, and it is not recommended that students be taught the cases where the subject is an indefinite noun. As for the predicate, in Arabic, an indefinite. In student’s writings, there are sentences where the student does not realize the error in it like:

“ اجتهاد علي ” (Diligence of Ali) * - Ali’s diligence.

“ خالد الماليزي ” (Khaled the Malaysian)*

- the Malaysian Khaled.

This is because there is confusion between supportive construction (subject +predicate), the descriptive construction (described noun + adjective) , and the Genitive Construction (1st particle of the Genitive Construction, 2nd particle of the Genitive Construction). To overcome this problem, it is necessary to specify the forms by which declarative statement is formed. So, whatever is eligible to be a predicate can also be eligible

as an adjective. The derivatives constructions that can be adjectives in Arabic are: the adjectives. In the beginning, the adjectives recommended to be taught is the one following to the form “fa>il” as in “jamil” (beautiful) because it is the very frequent form used in modern Arabic, and the attributive adjective passive particle, comparative and superlative adjectives, -form adjective; all these forms can be eligible for declarative statement.

The genitive construction includes (name + name) where the relationship between them either possessive relationship or a part -to - whole relationship with regard to the preposition, “lam” (L) (or “men” (from), this is the most frequently used.

D. In Arabic, the accusative of specification and comparison and measurement, the accusative, the cognate accusative (The Absolute Object), the causative object, are always indefinite, although some contexts allow the absolute object to be preceded by the definite article “al” (the).

E. In Arabic, the referent of the relative pronoun is always definite since it is familiar to the addressee based on its relatedness, and as stated in grammar books at a large scale, the relative pronoun can be used in order to describe the definite nouns by sentences.15

F. It is pointed that “al” (the) is sometimes acts on behalf of the additive as in (I went to the library)

ذهبت إلى المكتبة ; it means the university library, or:

” نظرت إلى الخارج ”

it means: I looked outside the place where I am .

G. However, we need not to go into details since the addressee’s knowledge about the library you are talking about or the word “outside” in the statement above determines the definite or in indefinite case.

It is good to recommend what grammarians called the relative “al” (the) which is the one preceding the active participles and passive participles as in

المكرم ضيفه

(the one honoring his neighbor)*, it means (the one who honors his neighbor), or:

ولا الضالين

(and not the astray)* -nor of those who went astray.

However, “al” (the) in these forms is the ordinary definite article preceding nouns, in general. So, we need not and we need not to go into further details and talk about the function and sub-types of “al” (the).

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