

Article Usage in ESL Classroom Written Texts: A Focus on Nigerian Senior Secondary Schools

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Abstract:

The use of articles or the article system is one feature of English grammar that has been reported to cause most learners enormous difficulties; particularly, of course, those whose native languages do not use articles like most Nigerian languages. In the light of this, the study investigated the type of errors in the text of these second language learners. The data used for this study were collected from eighty final year students of Demonstration Secondary, Federal College of Education (Technical), Omoku, Rivers State, Nigeria. The students were given an essay with the topic: The Places I would Like to Visit and why or The Impact of Technology in the 21st Century to write on. In all, 80 scripts were analyzed, 55 of the students wrote on the first topic while the remaining 25 wrote on the second topic. Among the 80 scripts read, 65 of them had deficiency in the use of articles. 25 sentences out of the 65 scripts were selected for analysis through a random

sampling technique. The study presents as part of its findings that most second language learners prioritize communication before or against grammaticality in the use of articles and that one cannot rule out the influence of pidgin and many of the Nigerian languages on the competence of these learners on the use of articles.

Introduction:

Language as a medium of communication in the society is either acquired as a mother tongue (first language) or learnt as a second language. If acquired as a first language or mother tongue, there are less issues of problems arising in phonology and grammatical constructions because the individual has a native speaker competence. But if it is learnt as a second language, that is, after the native language or mother tongue, there are bounds to be problems. In Nigeria, most adults learn the English language as a second language after the mother tongue. Learners of English as a Second language (ESL) in Nigeria are confronted with a wide variety of problems, ranging from semantic, syntactic, phonological, to even pragmatic problems that often affect their overall proficiency.

These problems show up in all the levels of learning in the country (Tertiary, Secondary and Primary levels) and they go a long way in creating communication problems for the learners at the various levels. According to Olateju (2006, p. 315), ‘The Nigerian learner of English is already a linguistic adult by the time they start learning English, unlike the native speaker who acquires the language as a child. Since the Nigerian learner already has a language to cater for the needs, English is therefore learned as a second language and the learner naturally transfers some features

from the mother tongue to the second language.’ Such features and structures that are transferred may hinder or facilitate the learning of the second language. Apart from this, the learner may encounter some problems as a result of lack of competence, inexperience and lack of dedication to duty of the teachers, coupled with the learner’s predisposition and attitude towards learning a second language.

The use of articles or the article system is one feature of English grammar that has been reported to cause most learners enormous difficulties; particularly, of course, those whose native languages do not use articles like most Nigerian languages. According to Hewson (1972, p. 131, qtd in Mustafa, 2014, p. 88), “the definite and the indefinite article are among the ten most frequent words of English discourse” (p.131). In the light of this, learners of English are likely to be exposed to hundreds of instances that contain a wide range of uses of articles, which will, supposedly, provide non-native speakers of English with a perceptibly increased level of accuracy. However, mastering the English article system has been reported to be one of the most difficult features of English, if not the most difficult (Master, 1990; Mizuno, 1999; Park, 2006 etc).

For an English language learner in the Nigerian Senior Secondary who has been exposed to at least nine (9) years of learning the language, there is a level of competence expected from such an individual in the use of the English language especially the use of articles which is a core component of the English language Senior Secondary School curriculum. This study examines the students’ texts after a number of years of exposure to the English language to see how far they have been able to achieve the appropriate use of articles in their written English texts. The study is aimed at examining the ways by which ESL learners have

been able to achieve the use of articles appropriately in their written texts and suggesting ways by which any form of deficiencies can be overcome.

Review of Related Literature:

Due to the importance of the English language to communication in the Nigerian society of today, understandably, a lot of scholarly attention has been accorded the problems connected with the effective teaching and learning of English in Nigeria. Some of these attempts were made by scholars like Tomori (1963), who investigated the attainment of some primary six pupils in written English composition and comprehension to be able to make suggestions for improvement in the teaching and learning of English in the country's primary schools. Afolayan (1968) worked on the linguistic problems of Yoruba learners and users of English, especially at the various linguistic levels, (grammar, phonology etc).

Olateju (2006) focused on the low level use of cohesive ties in the written text of Nigerian secondary school students. The data used for the study were drawn from seventy final year students of Ooni Girls High School in Osun State Nigeria. The elicitation technique was an essay writing exercise in which the students were given two essay questions which would enable them to demonstrate their knowledge of cohesive devices in English. After an analysis of the data Olateju's (2006) study revealed that the students lacked competence in their use of cohesive devices despite the fact that they had been exposed to intensive teaching of English for six years in the secondary school. However, according to Olateju (2006) another reason for the students' inability to use these cohesive devices may not be unconnected with Elugbe's (1995) observation that the high failure rate in English language

and poor communication skills can be blamed on the corrupting influence of Nigerian pidgin, the truth of which may not be far-fetched. Olateju's (2006) study is very similar to the present study. But the present study is focused on articles and not cohesive ties usage in the Senior Secondary level.

Outside the shores of Nigeria, other researchers have also focused on the problems ESL learners face in the course of learning the language. Lee (1997) carried out research on 49 freshmen compositions in a South Korean University to discover the occurrences of English article deletion and the reasoning behind such omissions. The study focused not only on the linguistic factors, but also the social backgrounds of the students. Lee's results suggest that deletion of articles is "systematic and sensitive to both linguistic and social variables" (p. 4). Lee (1997) hypothesized that a deletion of articles would be more prominent than an incorrect usage of them, based on the fact that the Korean students may be "influenced by their native language" (p. 44), and its lack of articles, and therefore would omit rather than keep the definite article. He also hypothesized that a higher occurrence of deletion would occur if the article was to precede a modifier and noun, rather than just a noun.

Morret (2011) focused on the Korean ESL Students' Use of English Definite Articles. The study recognizes the fact that misuse of English articles is a very common error among ESL students. If a student's first language does not contain an article, learning a second language that has an article system will prove to be very difficult. Korean is an example of a language that does not contain articles, but instead relies heavily on the context of the sentence, as well as determiners to indicate definiteness and specificity. This is not too different from most Nigerian languages as they are 'articles' and if they have, the system is not as complex and similar

like the English article system. The study concludes that ES/FL teachers need to be aware of this ongoing research on the English article system and its acquisition by Korean ESL students in order to effectively teach and prepare their students for linguistic success. Johnson (2016) focused on article use in ESL compositions with emphasis on the strategies Instructors could adopt for teaching second language learners.

The study asserts that articles have not received their due coverage in ESL instruction as they are difficult to teach, often overlooked by textbooks, and considered unnecessary to fluency by some instructors and linguists. One survey of 21 ESL texts and found that “three of the 21 books surveyed do not contain any description of the definite article” (Yoo, 2009, p.271). In that same survey, Yoo (2009) also broke down which uses of the definite article were covered by the texts. He notes that most grammars covered situational use but frequently omitted postmodification (cataphoric use). The problem with the emphasis on anaphoric use rather than cataphoric use is highlighted as Yoo notes their frequency in different registers.

Employing a tool that covers “40 million words of text,” he found that the situational use is most common in conversational registers while postmodification is most common in academic use (p.70-71). Yoo (2009) writes “cataphoric use was the most common type of definite article usage in academic prose, accounting for 40% of all instances of the” (p.274) Cataphoric article use, or postmodification, is described as definite article use that signals a specific identifying feature that comes later in the text. Looking at how important the use of articles are in the English language, Johnson (2016) is of the opinion that college level instructors should deliberately address the correct use of definite articles in their classes. Recent studies have offered some

insight as to how this difficult topic can be effectively delivered. From what we have seen above many scholars have focused on the use of articles and second language learning generally.

The English Article System:

In linguistics, an article is often defined as a word (or a determiner) used with a noun to indicate the kind of reference made by the noun. Generally, an article can be seen as a word that is used for referencing. The English article system has two major types of articles: indefinite and definite articles. The former type embraces both articles *a* and *an*. The latter type include only *the*. The indefinite article, *a/an*, is used with count nouns when the hearer/reader does not know exactly which one we are referring to: e.g., I am looking for a 14 year-old boy.

We also use *a/an* to show the person or thing is one of a group: e.g., She is a pupil at London Road School. We use *a/an* to say what someone is or what job they do: e.g., My brother is a doctor. George is a student. We use *a/an* with a singular noun to say something about all things of that kind: e.g., A young girl needs money for different things. (All young girls need money) A dog likes to eat meat. (All dogs like to eat meat). On the other hand, the definite article *the* is used when referring to what is known to the speaker and the hearer, e.g. did you watch *the* match? (the speaker and the addressee know about the match). The definite article is also used for something unique in the environment, e.g. when you get to *the* post office, please, wait for me (it means there is only one post office in the town or environment). The definite article is also used before names of languages, rivers, seas, oceans, mountains and deserts, e.g. *the* River Niger, *the* English language, *the* Red sea, *the* Everest mountain etc. Lastly, the definite article

can also be used to refer to what has been mentioned earlier in a speech, e.g I saw a book, *the* book is red in colour.

So, this study aims to examine the texts of Nigerian Senior Secondary School students to ascertain to what degree they apply the English articles especially the uses that have been stated above in their written text.

Data:

The data used for this study were collected from eighty final year students of Demonstration Secondary, Federal College of Education (Technical), Omoku, Rivers State, Nigeria. Being final year students, it is assumed that they have been exposed sufficiently to much of the English syntax especially the use of articles in the language. The researchers, therefore, examined the use of articles in the written exercises of the students, especially the continuous writing exercises. The students were given an essay with the topic: *The Places I would Like to Visit and why* or *The Impact of Technology in the 21st Century* to write.

In all, 80 scripts were analyzed, 55 of the students wrote on the first topic while the remaining 25 wrote on the second topic. The study did not focus on why a higher number of the students went for the first topic as it is not part of the scope; though it might be that children of that age like adventure and travelling which the first topic dwells on. Among the 80 scripts read, 65 of them had deficiency in the use of articles and 25 of these sentences were selected for analysis through a random sampling technique.

The school which was used for the analysis was selected because, on the average, it gives a general picture of the set-up of Secondary schools in Nigeria, in that it runs both the junior and senior secondary school programmes. The pupils are from parents from all walks of life. The school has a population of 750 students

and teaching staff strength of 78 with a ratio of 1:10 teachers to a student which is far higher than the minimum standard of 1:1/2 teachers to a class as stipulated by the government. So, in terms of standard, the school is very high and the school conducts its own entrance examinations. That is, after the candidate must have passed the Rivers State Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination. The texts analyzed in this paper are from the students' response to the essay questions given to them to write on question. Samples of the data analyzed can be found in the appendix.

Data Analysis:

In this section, we would be looking at the texts of the students to ascertain the level to which they use articles in their write ups. We analyzed a total of thirty five (35) sentences. The first section in this analysis deals with sentences extracted from the texts where the article is misused in the essay then the attention shifts to clear cases of omission of articles in the texts under analysis. We numbered the sentences for analysis One to thirty five for easy identification. Each of these sentences is presented, then analyzed.

In sentence One, the writer says: *I also will go to the exotic places and enjoy myself*. The use of the definite article *the* in the sentence above would have been appropriate if the exotic places have been mentioned earlier in the essay but that is not the case here. The definite article can be used for what has been established in earlier in the speech since the reference has been well established but for a first reference, the appropriate form should have been: *I also will like to visit exotic places and enjoy myself*. Then, the writer can go ahead and provide a list of the exotic places where he would like to visit then subsequently, using the definite article for such a reference would not be inappropriate.

Sentence Two says: *We would say that technology and the impact in the 21st century is enormous.* The first use of the definite article underlined in the sentence above, is used wrongly. The definite article does not play any role in the sentence instead, it makes the sentence ambiguous and awkward. The correct form should have been the third person possessive pronoun *its* which would make the sentence read thus: *We would say that technology and its impact in the 21st century is enormous.* With the use of *its*, in the correct form, one would not find it difficult interpreting the sentence as it is obvious that the impact being referred to is that of technology.

Sentence Three says: *The people there are an irresponsible people.* The use of the indefinite article *an* in the sentence above is wrong as it is not needed in the sentence. The object being referred to (people) in the sentence has been mentioned already and cannot be used with *an* since it is singular in reference and *people* is a plural noun. So, even in other constructions, such as *a people, an irresponsible people*, the use of *an* would still be wrongly used. The correct form for the sentence above should have been: *The people there are irresponsible*, without the *an* and the second use of the word *people* as it is redundant.

Sentence Four says: *when I get there I would like to build an house.* There is an obvious confusion here as regards the use of *an* and *a* for singular references. The indefinite article *a* is used for singular references that start with a consonant sound while the indefinite article *an* is used for singular references with a vowel sound as the first sound in the word. There are also words such as *honour, honourable, heir* etc. that start with the alphabet 'h' as the first alphabet but silent in the pronunciation. Such words can take the indefinite article *an* since a vowel is the first sound in the word.

But the word *house* does not belong to this category as the consonant /h/ is present as the first sound and as such should be *a house* not *an house*. The mistake here is similar to the one in sentence five below.

Sentence Five says: *I will always like a place where they would give you honour. A honour that I deserve.* The word honour belongs to the exceptional group we mentioned earlier where the words have the silent ‘h’ alphabet in the spelling and the indefinite article an should be used with them to read as *...an honour that I deserve.*

Sentence Six says: *A one place I want to visit is Lagos.* The article *a* in the sentence is not needed except the word *one* is deleted as they both function alike as indefinite modifiers to the word *place*. The use of *a* and *an* imply the sense of ‘one’ or singularity. So, when they are used, *one* cannot be used and when *one* is used, it is redundant to use *a* or *an* for the same reference.

Sentence Seven says: *I would want to visit river Thames it has the lovely scenario.* *A lovely scenario* is the most appropriate form that should be used here as ‘the scenario’ being referred to has not been described or stated earlier to the readers. *A lovely scenario* can be any scenario that has the quality of being lovely in the sense in which it is being used. But *the lovely scenario* has a fixed reference which must be well established prior to its use to avoid ambiguity in the communication process. This is not the case with sentence seven under scrutiny. A reader might ask which scenario? Since it is the first time of being used. This clearly shows that it is not about using articles, the place and manner in which it is used is

very important to avoid meaningless sentences or ambiguous sentences.

Sentence Eight says: *As the poet, I would like to visit good places to think.* The definite article *the* underlined in the sentence is wrongly used. In its place, the indefinite article *a* should have been used for a clear and an effective communication. Sentence eight would raise some questions such as who is the poet? Is it the writer or another person entirely? The use of the first person pronoun *I* makes it look like the poet is the speaker/writer but reading the whole sentence brings the confusion of distinguishing the poet from the person saying *I*. Using *as a poet I would like...* would give the readers the writer's or speaker's profession or job and what is suitable for such a profession which is a better interpretation than the one given by the use of *the poet*.

Sentence Nine says: *Children are brought up in a good values in their minds.* We have indeed established earlier in this analysis that the indefinite articles can only have singular reference. It is grammatically wrong for *a* and *an* to refer to plural forms like values as can be seen in the sentence above. We are not too concerned about the other grammatical errors in the sentence. Our attention is in the use of *a good values*. If the plural form was not used, the sentence would have been grammatically correct. This shows that in order to the use articles, the second language learner needs to learn the plural system of the English language to master effectively how to use the article system in the language as they are determined by number.

Sentence Ten says: *The students even go to a websites.* 'Go to' here means visit. It is grammatical for the students to visit a

website and not a websites. The student can also visit websites. If the plural form is what needs to be communicated, then there is no need to use *a* as it means one or singular as we have earlier stated. Again, the learner needs to master the English pluralization system to fully apply the right article in sentences. This is also similar to the sentence below.

Sentence Eleven says: *I would like to see a different kind of groups.* In sentence Eleven, one even gets confused as regards where to place the error or how to describe the error as there is evidence to say it is a mistake from the pluralization of nouns from the second language learner. Instead of focusing on the indefinite article *a* as wrongly used, one could focus on the noun *groups* as not well used in the plural form. The singular form would have been appropriate for the sentence with the article *a*. but if the writer wants to communicate the plural form, then, there is no need for the article as it is not helpful. The correct form should have been: *I would like to see a different kind of group* or *I would like to see different kinds of groups.* To avoid this confusion, as to what the speaker or writer is saying, the articles need to be well used with an agreement with the noun reference.

Sentence Twelve says: *I don't like it when people give me such an false hope.* This is the last sentence for the wrongly used article and it is a case of using the wrong form of the indefinite article. We have stated earlier that *an* goes with an initial vowel sound beginning a word while *a* goes with an initial consonant at the beginning of words; /f/ in *false* is a consonant and should have taken *a* and not *an*.

Now that we have examined the wrongly used articles in the texts under investigation, we now turn our attention to clear cases of

article omission. In the sentences below, articles should have been used but there were omitted by the second language learner.

Sentence Thirteen says: *I will like to go to ___University of Abuja.* Cases of omission of articles like the one in the sentence above is mostly born out of ignorance. Though it is usually taught to the second language learners at the Secondary School level in the country that the definite article *the*, should be used before names of institutions, most of the learners still omit it in sentences. Before the names of universities, the indefinite article is needed to formalize the name as a proper noun of reference. So the correct form should have been: *I will like to go to the University of Abuja.* This obviously makes it clear that we are not referring to any other university but the one known to the speaker and the listener as *the University of Abuja* and not *a university in Abuja*.

Sentence Fourteen says: *All my dreams have been to visit___ Redeemed Christian Church.* Formal names of churches are intuitional and as such should take the indefinite article *the*. Most second language learners are lazy about using the article before the name of the church they attend. This might be due to the fact that it is usually called without the article and the influence of pidgin which does not use the definite article before the names of churches. For example, if you ask an English as a second language learner/user ‘which church do you attend?’ Most of them would respond without using the definite article before the names: *Redeemed Christian Church* instead of *The Redeemed Christian Church*, *Deeper Life Bible Church* instead of *the Deeper Life Bible Church*, *Catholic Church* instead of *the Roman Catholic church*.

Sentence Fifteen says: *The place I would like to visit is _____ United States of America.* Similar to the use of the definite article before the names of institutions is its use before the names of countries especially when being referred to fully. For example: the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the United States of America, the United Kingdom etc. So, in the sentence above, the definite article *the*, has been omitted which makes it wrong.

Sentence Sixteen says: *Technology has made _____ huge impact on globalization.* The indefinite article *a* has been omitted before the word *huge* but one can also see it as a mistake in the pluralization. The word *impact* can be made plural as *impacts* and then no need for the indefinite article. But as written in the text, the indefinite article is missing.

Sentence Seventeen says: *This is _____ period that I would have time and chance to travel.* The indefinite article *the* has been omitted before the word *period* and it makes the sentence incomplete and ungrammatical.

Sentence Eighteen says: *_____ People who could not tolerate the *hold up, would trek their journey that was what I heard about Onitsha.* In the sentence above, the indefinite article has been omitted and it makes the sentence loose in the structure. *People* here as used in the sentence is not specific in reference as it can be any group but if the definite article *the* is used, it ties the reference to a specific group that perhaps has been mentioned earlier in the text.

Sentence Nineteen says: *But now in _____ 21st century, communication has been made easy.* The definite article is used

before number dates such as 1st 2nd etc in sentences such as *On the 21st of March, I will visit you.* In sentence Nineteen highlighted above, the definite article is missing and it makes the sentence awkward and loose.

Sentence Twenty says: *On ___22nd March, I intend to travel.* The omission here is similar to the one we considered earlier in sentence nineteen. Before numbered dates, it is imperative to use the definite article after the appropriate preposition. The correct form of the sentence should have been: *On the 22nd March, I intend to travel.*

Sentence Twenty One says: *___Use of mobile phones *have been found to be very helpful.* Again, the definite article is omitted in the sentence above but this time around it is not before a dated number but as an important pre-modifier in the noun phrase. Noun phrases whose structures are built around articles as the first pre-modifier are ungrammatical and awkward if the article is omitted unlike adjectives and other words in the structure that can be omitted.

Sentence Twenty Two says: *I also want to visit where they have *light. The people in Lagos have *light that is why I like that place.* In sentence Twenty one, there is a case of omission of the definite article but the position is not left empty, it is occupied by the demonstrative adjective *that*. In the text, the place being referred to has been established as Lagos. So, a subsequent reference to it as *the place* would not be inappropriate.

Sentence Twenty Three says: *If you don't believe me, you can pay me ___ visit.* The indefinite article a is missing in the sentence

and it makes it ungrammatical and awkward. Though one can understand the message in the sentence, it is ungrammatical without the article. The same thing can be found in sentences twenty four and twenty five.

Sentence Twenty Four says: *If I look around for what is ____ best for me, all I see is Europe.* There are so many options for the writer as regards where to visit but one place stands out (Europe) and it is the best for the writer. Since, the reference is definite, for a proper description in the sentence, the definite article is needed before the word *best*. So, the correct form should have been: *If I look around for what is the best for me, all I see is Europe.*

Sentence Twenty Five says: *After all __ hustle and bustle, one needs to rest.* The case of omission is not too different from the extracts we have earlier considered. Before the phrase *hustle and bustle*, the definite article has been omitted and it makes the sentence awkward and ungrammatical though the message can be understood.

Findings:

From our analysis, we present the following findings:

1. Most second language learners prioritize communication before or against grammaticality in the use of articles. The use of articles in sentences make the sentences grammatically correct, tight and balanced but the absence of articles in some cases as we have seen in some of the extracts analyzed, might not prevent readers or listeners from understanding. The main goal of these learners learning the English language is to achieve a near native

speaker competence and the proper use of articles is an essential aspect for grammaticality. So, more emphasis should be placed on grammaticality and communicability.

2. One cannot rule out the influence of pidgin and many of the Nigerian languages on the competence of these learners on the use of articles. In the Nigerian pidgin, articles are not as important as it is in the English language. In the Nigerian pidgin, articles are not used before the names of institutions, before rivers and other functions outlined for the articles in the English language.
3. Many of the English as a second language learners are confused on how and when to use the indefinite articles *a* and *an*. This is mostly evident in the texts analysed. Many of the learners did not place the indefinite articles following the sounds; *an* for vowels and *a* for consonants.

Conclusion:

What we have done in this study is to analyse the level to which the article system is used in the essay of English as a second language learners in the secondary school in Nigeria. The use of articles or the article system is one feature of English grammar that has been reported to cause most learners enormous difficulties; particularly, of course, those whose native languages do not use articles like most Nigerian languages. In the light of these, the study investigated the type of errors in the text of these second language learners. The study also highlights the correct form to these errors and suggests areas for language teachers to focus on for an enhanced performance in the text of second language learners.

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