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Error Analysis on the Use of Noun Article: A Case Study of a Second Language Learner in the U.S.

(Kesalahan Penggunaan Artikel Kata Benda: Studi Kasus pada Pembelajar Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Kedua di Amerika Serikat)

Sidarta Prassetyo
Department of Linguistics and Language Development, San Jose State University
One Washington Square, San Jose, California
Tel.: +01 4089241000
Surel: sidarta.prassetyo@sjsu.edu

Abstract
The present study examines error analysis of second language learner of English. It aims to describe the errors made by the learner especially in her written production and to explain the reasons why the errors occur. The focus of explaining the error is the use of article since the article has been widely known to be one error often found in the L2 learners. Cloze tests (filling in the blanks), multiple choice questions, essay writing (the participant was asked to write a 250 word essay), and in-depth interview were conducted to collect the data from the participant. In addition, observation on the learner’s performance for oral production was also conducted. The learner’s native languages are Javanese and Indonesion language. She has been exposed to English language since she was the fourth grader, but she admits that writing is difficult for her. The result of analysis found that the learner indeed made error in the use of article, and she inconsistently used the article and the nouns that follow the article. It happened because of interlingual transfer (negative transfer from L1 to L2) and intralingual transfer in which she made false analogy and misanalysis on the second language.

Keywords: article, error analysis, interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, second language learner
INTRODUCTION
Acquiring a second or third language can be a challenging task especially for an adult (Marinova-Todd, Marshall, and Snow 2000; Norton and Toohey 2001; Halpern 2001; Morita 2004). Prior L1 knowledge, motivation, and exposure to target language might be the ones that support, or even constrain, learner’s success in SLA. Learner’s success might be measured from how proficient s/he is and how many errors s/he made. In other words, his/her interlanguage will be the primary tool of identification. Selinker (1972) states that IL is a language that is uttered by a second language (L2) learner. It is a hybrid language (Gutiererez, Baquedano-Lopez, and Tejeda 1999; Yazgan and Saraclar 2004; Dong and Dong 2003) that has some of the characteristics of learner’s native language and those of the target language. But, it is not supposed to be called a target language yet because it may produce some errors that the native English of target language would not produce.

Some researches concern grammatical errors made by L2 learners especially in writing. One error that can be seen as grammatical error is inappropriate use of article. This can be found in Arabic learners of English as L2. English learners from Palestine inappropriately used article the in their short writing. Article the was used more for abstract nouns. It happens because in their first language, Arabic, the is put before abstract noun; therefore, they add the whenever they write abstract nouns (AbiSamra 2003). Not only did Palestinians make inappropriate article, but also other Arabic speakers, for example Jordanians (Bataineh 2005), Saudi Arabians (Alhaysony 2012), and Arabians in United Arab Emirates (Crompton 2011), who made inappropriate the due to the absence of definite article in Arabic language.

That the Arabic speakers as English learners often write inappropriate article is caused by interlingual transfer (Mohammed 2004) or/and intralingual transfer (Mahmoud 2011). The features of L1 (Arabic language) interfere L2 learning as in interlingual transfer. In intralingual transfer, the learners make false analogy and misanalysis on the target language (Kaweera 2013). From the previous studies, therefore, this case study will investigate the errors made by non-native speaker of English, as well as identifying the patterns of the interlanguage and formulating the interlanguage generalizations/hypotheses.

METHOD
Second language learners may produce various errors which are not the same from one to another, so a case study could be applied in the study. The writer focused on why error analysis occurred. As Yin (2012) suggested, the writer applied descriptive design in the study. Furthermore, the writer included a single unit of analysis, i.e. writing especially article use by the second language learner. He collected evidences including open-ended interviews, direct observations, and participant observation.

The participant is NA, a 30-year-old woman, married to an Indonesian man and has two daughters. Her native languages were Javanese (the traditional language) and Indonesian (the national language). Before pursuing her Doctorate program in the U.S., where she has been living for several years now, she had accomplished her Bachelor and Master’s degrees in Australia. In 1990, she was selected as an exchange
student to have one-year experience in Australia. She had learnt English since in the 4th grade of elementary school and spoken English actively since her staying in Australia. Although she was highly proficient in speaking, reading, and listening, and had no difficulties in English grammar, she admitted that writing was probably the most difficult skill. She said that it was very difficult to express what she thought.

The data of this study were collected by implementing a triangulation method (Johnson and Turner 2003; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003), namely a method used to check and establish validity in this study by analyzing a research question from multiple perspectives (Simon 2009). This study used four procedures of collecting the data. First, the participant was required to complete a cloze test taken from Longman English Grammar Practice for Intermediate Students (Alexander 1990). According to Brown (2010), a Cloze test is an assessment comprising a reading passage in which certain words have been removed and the test-taker is asked to replace the missing words. Cloze tests require the ability to understand context and vocabulary, as well as to make coherent guesses, in order to identify the correct words or type of words that fit into the blanks. Second, the participant was asked to take a test in a multiple-choice format. This is “an assessment instrument whose items offer the test-takers a choice among two or more listed options” (Brown 2010:350). The text was considered authentic, taken from http://www.siliconvalley.com/ci_6554029. For the purpose of the test, it was modified. Third, the participant was asked to write an essay consisting of minimum 250 words. The participant was given freedom to choose one topic she is comfortable with. The tests were conducted on 12 March 2012. Finally, an in-depth interview was conducted the day after in an informal setting to compare and contrast between the oral production dealing with the topic of the study, which is about the use of articles, and the written production.

The data were analyzed by identifying the errors in each procedure. The data accomplished by the participant from the first procedure were checked by looking up the answer key provided by the textbook from which the questions were taken. The data from the second procedure were compared and contrasted with the original text. The data from the third and fourth procedures were identified by “preparing a reconstruction of the sample as this would have been produced by the learner’s native speaker counterpart” (Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005:58) and, indeed, consulting The Grammar Book (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999). In sum, the errors would be collected, identified, described, explained, and evaluated to figure out factors affecting learners errors, such as learner (proficiency level, learner’s L1, language learning background), language (oral vs written), and production (planned or unplanned) (Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In the Cloze test, the participant was asked to fill the blanks with a/an or the. The result showed that 93% of the participant’s answers were correct. From this test, it seemed that the participant was able to distinguish the general cultural use of definite article the, for example in the sentence “I read recently the Times that the big American company, General Motors, has developed a vehicle that uses the power of sun instead of petrol.” It was also noticed that she knew how to identify new information by
locating indefinite article *a* in front of *vehicle*. However, her choice, the definite article *the* before the phrase *power of the sun* was rather hypothetical. Even though her answer was correct, the data could not provide an information whether she knew that the function of the definite article *the*, in this context, was supposed to be, first, given information, and, probably, express the general knowledge. However, it could be assumed that her choice was influenced by reading the title “Sunraycer” and, as a result, she might think that the power of the sun was information given by the title. However, the one and only error that she made was rather surprising, considering she has succeeded to answer more difficult questions than this. In this context, “the route of the race was from Darwin to Adelaide, an immense distance. Sunraycer covers [...] distance in 45 hours,” she selected indefinite article *a*, rather than the definite article *the* since *distance* was previously mentioned. This sentence should have been considered easy for her because the hints to decide whether distance was new or given information was obvious.

Meanwhile, in the second procedure, the participant answered 81% correctly. Based on the data obtained, all of her errors were in locating the definite article *the*. She put the article in front of the phrases that grammatically did not need any articles, as shown below:

Original texts  
1. It’s been more than *a* year since (no articles) Silicon Valley’s Joint Venture Wireless Project first announced plans to build *a* regional wireless network.  
2. While initially *the* project was lauded as *9) a* way to give *10) the* masses affordable internet, (no articles) key organizers have gently shifted *12) the* focus of *13) the* network from serving (no articles) residents, for free, to giving (no articles) businesses and (no articles) city governments wireless access.

Text given to the participants  
1. It’s been more than *1) a/the/x* year since *2) a/the/x* Silicon Valley’s Joint Venture Wireless Project first announced *3) a/the/x* plans to build *4) a/the/x* regional wireless network.  
2. While initially *8) a/the/x* project was lauded as *9) a/the/x* way to give *10) a/the/x* masses affordable internet, *11) a/the/x* key organizers have gently shifted *12) a/the/x* focus of *13) a/the/x* network from serving *14) a/the/x* residents, for free, to giving *15) a/the/x* businesses and *16) a/the/x* city governments wireless access.

Participant’s answers  
1. It’s been more than *1) a* year since *2) the(Incorrect) Silicon Valley’s Joint Venture Wireless Project first announced 3) x plans to build 4) a regional wireless network.  
2. While initially *8) the* project was lauded as *9) a* way to give *10) the* masses affordable internet, *11) the (incorrect) key organizers have gently shifted *12) the* focus of *13) the* network from serving *14) x* residents, for free, to giving *15) x* businesses and *16) the* city governments wireless access.
The data shown above had similar problems to the first one, showing that the participant failed to identify whether the phrase was new information or given information. However, her failure does not represent the generalization that she was unable to locate the definite article the since she made it right on the other sentences.

In her essay, the participant’s errors were merely in understanding the lexical classification of English common nouns into count and noncount nouns, resulting in the wrong use of articles, as shown below,

My addiction to watch Korean dramas has increased since I started living in the U.S. two years ago, specifically with an unlimited and free access to the internet. Back home in Indonesia, I enjoyed watching Korean dramas only when I bought a complete series of the drama on VCDs or DVDs because I did not like watching it on the TV while being dubbed or subtitled in Indonesian. Yes, they were not that expensive because most of them were pirated DVDs, and thus, the quality was not that good, either. But right now, with an unlimited internet access at home, I can watch Korean dramas on various websites whenever I want with minimal cost.

The participant repeated the same phrases with the same use of indefinite article an used to modify access which is classified as an uncountable noun. The wrong identification of nouns might lead to the wrong use of article since “most of the strictly form-based information about English articles depends on the English noun classification system” (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999:273). However, this hypothesis does not seem apply to all of the participant’s utterances since she also made the correct usage of articles and countable/uncountable nouns such as Korean dramas, a complete series of the drama, and the quality which refers to the quality of the dramas. In the phrase a complete series of the drama, even though she used the indefinite article a correctly to show new information about the term series and definite article the to indicate the dramas as information that was previously given, she did not pluralize drama as it was previously introduced. It was shifted from Korean dramas to the drama. Therefore, based on this analysis, the interim hypothesis is that the participant’s use of articles and nouns is somewhat inconsistent.

The final data transcript from the interview, again, show similar issues, as shown below:

I’ve got lucky enough because my parents paid me to attend an English lesson. English was not taught at all in elementary school and then so that’s why I took an English lessons outside from school.

...Since elementary school, I still kept attending the English lessons until I graduated my high schools.

...I went abroad for the first time to be an exchange student, so think that’s when I used my English actively.
Well, I only spoke English when I was in Australia, when I became the exchange students. I spoke very fluently.

So the positive about the U.S. is that the professors and the GSIs, the teaching assistants, they are very helpful. They would never, I think, say no to any questions that the student ask them and then they would always try to actually accommodate, you know like, all of the inquiries and I think that’s probably because in every courses, I mean by the end of every courses, we as a students, we need to evaluate, you know like sort of, the professor as well as the GSI and that’s probably why they actually need to, you know, perform more the best service that, you know, take and have.

My GSIs are the PhD students in their fourth or fifth so normally those GSIs were the students who already took that subject before and then again in my department they professors are the one who normally points the GSI (NA 2012).

In the first excerpt, she did not change the indefinite article a in the second sentence referring to the first one. It is supposed to be the definite article the because it is portraying information given by the previous statement. Furthermore, the noun lesson shifted to lessons, meaning that she pluralized it. This made the phrase grammatically incorrect because indefinite article a cannot modify plural nouns. In the second excerpt, she changed the indefinite article a into the definite article the. It could be assumed that she knew that she was referring it to the previous sentence. However, she kept the lessons plural. The issues of pluralization are also found in the fourth to the sixth excerpts. Yet, the interlanguage generalization was not easy to identify since, again, the correct use of pluralization was also found. Another pattern that she made is that she often used the definite article the to show new information, as follows:

I also found that people in the United States like to flock in their own group, so there is not much multicultural discussion or whatsoever. and then plus I found the US people very rude because they like to be very outspoken you know and then I found in Australia probably because they have their British culture stronger and then so people will tend to not always say what they mean in front of you know real face for example but in here I found people (unclear) outspoken especially in the customer service industry, I think US is very very bad in actually you know like giving a customer service.

In the academic life, I have been taught to be independent and I had been taught to always seek information by myself first and so for example if I cannot find anything or if I have some difficulties then would go to the designated tutor/instructor (unclear).

And then the next one I was also pretty shocked to see how, you know, like these other American students ask questions to the tutor, you know like the GSI ... GSI is the graduate student instructor, so it’s kind of the TA,
like a teaching assistant. Because they would, you know, ask a very detailed questions that I myself think they should (unclear) by themselves. That’s what I found very different.

... Yeah, maybe later in my fourth or fifth year because at the moment I could not actually work due to the Fulbright requirement.

Based on these data, the participant seemed to assume that the person that she was talking to knew what she was talking about, or, what she was referring to. In other words, she might generalize the general use of the definite article the, indicating common ground. Yet, this hypothesis cannot be used to formulate an interlanguage generalization since the patterns, as I mentioned before, are random.

The data from the entire procedures conducted to analyze participant’s errors might suggest the following interim conclusion. First, the participant’s error might be influenced by the participant’s proficiency level. Considering the participant has learned English since elementary school, been exposed to target language countries (Masangya and Lozada 2009), and admitted that grammar is not a major obstacle, she might possess solid foundation of the article systems, including the countable/uncountable nouns, yet she might process it differently, leading to overgeneralization, simplification, and avoidance. This might refer to intralingual errors, the ones made within one language, English. Another related reason is probably participant L1, which is Indonesian and/or Javanese language(s). Since the pluralization with inflectional plural affix -sand articles do not exist in both languages, the participant has a tendency to forget and/or misuse the form. The participant might find it very challenging, or difficult, to apply those linguistic phenomena properly because “they could not find corresponding words or expression in Indonesian” (Aba 2013). This might refer to interlingual error, the ones occur due to the inference between languages (Mohammed 2004). These hypotheses might explain the inconsistency that the participant has performed. The data also show that the participant’s written language (data from procedures 1, 2, and 3, which are Cloze test, multiple-choice test, and essay writing test, respectively) is slightly different form the oral one. Despite the similar characteristics, more errors were found in the oral language than they were in the written one. This might be dealing with the unplanned and planned production. The data might suggest that the discourse that is produced spontaneously tends to be able to demonstrate a certain nature of learner’s ability that may not be missed out. The first three data display fewer errors probably because the discourse might be “produced after planning or under conditions that allow for careful online planning”, confirming the argument in Ellis and Barkhuizen’s research (2005:58).

CONCLUSION

In the field of Second Language Acquisition, it can be implied that error analysis might provide convincing data portrayal about how interlanguage errors made by the participant. However, it should be noted that, first of all, some of the errors might not be observable. For example, it is not easy to explain how the participant made a grammatical error when she knows exactly the grammatical rule. I am certain that if the participant looks at the data, she will be surprised and may be arguing
about how and why she made such errors. Second, participant’s L1 may have taken some parts into the formation of her interlanguage since the complication and the inconsistency of applying the grammatical rules of article systems might occur due to the absence of grammatical rules in one of the languages, i.e., her native language. Third, the participant’s interlanguage might not represent the interlanguage of people from the same linguistic background, the same native languages, since a “learner’s interlanguage is variable” (Ellis 1990 in Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005:54). For classroom teaching practice, error analysis could provide positive washback/backwash. Teachers would be more aware of the interlanguage phenomenon and should treat errors as a process rather than a product. Teachers would be able to identify which domains the learners need to be improved.

REFERENCES


GAYA SELINGKUNG MOZAIK HUMANIORA

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