Discourse contexts and article use among Malaysian school students

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Abstract

Several studies have examined the interconnection between discourse contexts and structural form. Chaudron and Parker (1990), for example, investigated the structural form used to encode the referent subject Noun Phrase in new, known, and current discourse contexts. These three contexts relate to when a new referent is used as the topic of a discourse, when a known referent is used as the topic and when there is continued reference to the topic after it has been established in the discourse. Mellow and Fuller (1995) also used the same three discourse contexts to examine article use for specific referent nouns. Investigating the interconnection between discourse contexts and structural form is significant as it provides information on the use of structural form within a context and not in isolation. This chapter will report on a study that employs the same three discourse contexts to determine the accuracy rates and patterns of use in speech and written production among school going children in Malaysia. Data compiled in the English of Malaysian School Students (EMAS) corpus were used for the purpose of the analysis in this study.

Introduction

The accurate interpretation and use of any grammatical structure require that the function of the utterance or sentence be taken into consideration. Lexical semantics or word meaning, discourse, pragmatics and even phonetics or the sound system contribute to the accurate interpretation of what is conveyed by the grammatical structures used in a sentence. In many studies of grammatical structures, however, the particular structure is isolated and examined outside of the context in which it naturally appears. Although some may argue that isolation in this manner increases the internal validity of the study by controlling for various extraneous variables, the approach lacks ecological validity because it fails to examine the grammatical structure as it is used within more natural contexts.

The English article system is especially affected by context. While articles are one of the most frequently occurring function words in English, they represent a particularly difficult language element for second language learners. Ekiert (2002) believes that part of this difficulty is due to the multiple functions expressed by the articles and learners’ tendency to “look for a one-form-one-function correspondence” between form and function (p. 1). Furthermore, articles are not the prototypical function word as besides conveying grammatical information, they act like content words by also carrying meaning. The multi-functionality of the article system, however, makes it an
interesting system to be studied as it represents a grammatical system which is well integrated with aspects of use.

The analysis of article use requires an understanding of how noun phrases (NP) are encoded. A popular model adopted in analyzing the NP and the corresponding use of articles is Huebner’s classification system for English NP environments (1983). According to this model, English NPs are classified according to two discourse features of referentiality. The first feature involves whether a NP is a specific referent or a non-specific referent NP; and the second is whether or not the NP is assumed as known to the hearer. The combination of these two aspects of referentiality gives rise to four basic NP contexts that determine article use, namely + specific referent and + known to hearer; + specific referent and – known to hearer; - specific referent and + known to hearer; and – specific referent and – known to hearer.

Other simpler models used to analyze article usage are also available. Chaudron and Parker (1990), for example, have examined the use of articles in three discourse contexts. The new discourse context is when a specific noun is mentioned the first time; the known discourse context involves second mention; and the current discourse context is when the particular noun phrase has become established as the topic of the discourse and can be replaced by a referent pronoun. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) discuss article usage in different discourse genres, arguing that while traditional narratives such as fables and folk tales employ a canonical use of the new discourse context and known discourse context principle, literary texts tend to develop their own conventions. Articles may also be used in idiomatic expressions without any reference to whether or not it involves first mention or subsequent mention as in “Beauty and the Beast” where the beast has already been established through general knowledge of the expression. It is perhaps for this reason that in her study, Ekiert (2002) has encoded a fifth NP context which involves idiomatic expressions and conventional uses of articles. Despite the different conventions of use that may be involved as seen in this brief discussion, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) conclude that it is “imperative that discussions of usage go beyond the sentence level to include discourse and context” (p. 283).

The importance of discourse in examining the use of articles is further emphasized by Pica (1983). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) cites her observation that while a and the can be interchanged at sentence level without any loss of grammaticality, communication breaks down when articles are used with reference to items that are not shared by participants in the conversation. They provide the following example as an illustration:

A: Where’s the dessert?
B: What dessert?
C: You were supposed to bring the dessert. (p. 281).

Clearly, the use of the definite article by the first speaker presupposes that the second speaker, B, is aware of the reference when in actuality, the speaker is not.
**Studying the English article system.** Studies that have been conducted in relation to the English article system seem to have emphasized either the acquisition order of the articles or simply the use of the article system in various contexts. In a study by Mellow and Fuller (1995) involving verbal retelling of popular fables, it was found that Japanese second language learners often incorrectly used bare nouns in the three discourse contexts. Master (1997) argues that on the basis of results from his study, the bare noun or zero article is acquired earlier than the definite and indefinite articles, especially among speakers whose native language lacks articles. As for the order of acquisition for the definite and indefinite articles, the indefinite article *a* is considered to be acquired earlier than the definite article *the* (Heubner, 1983; Master, 1997). Different studies involving the article system, however, do not seem to provide a clear consensus on a single acquisition order and has instead pointed to several factors that may influence the order. Ekiert’s study, for example, suggests that the bare noun or zero article is the most problematic, especially among speakers of a language that does not contain articles or [-ART] languages (Ekiert, 2004).

Studies on the article system that have focused on the contexts in which they are used have also led to some interesting findings. Currie and Beaubien (1997), for example, identify five concepts related to the article system that they claim are difficult for students. Of the five problematic issues, they argue that the use of the article system to provide reference and cohesion in written text is the most problematic to ESL learners. They describe how meaning is often not conveyed effectively as ESL learners either fail to encode referents correctly or are ambiguous in doing so. The use of the article system in different modes of language production has also been conducted. Tarone (1985) examined the different accuracy rates of 20 ESL learners on oral and written tasks and found that grammatical accuracy (including articles) was better in spontaneous oral communication than in a written grammar test.

**Methodology: Article use in discourse contexts.**

In this study, article use is categorized according to three discourse contexts, namely the new, known and current discourse contexts, much like in Chaudron and Parker (1990). This system is used as the first mention – subsequent mention principle, which is largely synonymous to the three discourse contexts, is one of the more basic principles involving the use of articles at discourse level. The following short text provides a typical illustration of the three discourse contexts:

(1) A young boy walked to school. (2) The young boy arrived early. (3) He sat and waited for his friends.

The noun phrase *a boy* in sentence (1), containing the indefinite article *a* followed by a noun phrase, represents the most common structural form involving articles and referent noun phrases in the new discourse context. In sentence (2), the noun phrase in the known discourse context for this short text contains the definite article *the* followed by the noun...
phrase young boy. Finally, a pronoun is used in sentence (3) in the current discourse context.

In addition to this more typical example of how the referent noun phrase is encoded, some other possibilities also exist for the three discourse contexts. In the new context, for example, some argue that the bare noun in plural form with zero article can be used as in (4) Young boys walk to school. As for the known context, the pronoun can be used in addition to the definite article + NP as in (5) They didn’t take the bus or (6) The boys didn’t take the bus. Similarly, the definite article + NP can generally be used in the current discourse context in addition to the pronoun as in sentence (3) earlier.

In contrast to these possibilities, inaccurate use of the article and referent noun phrase in these three discourse contexts exist and should be noted. First, in many instances, it is inaccurate to use the definite article + NP in the new discourse context. Because it involves first mention, sentence (1) would be considered inaccurate in most cases if the definite article is used as in (7) The young boy walked to school. Secondly, in many instances, except the situation described earlier by sentence (4), the use of the bare noun with zero article in the three discourse contexts is inaccurate. As such, it would not be grammatically acceptable to say (8) *Young boy walked to school in the new discourse context; (9) *Young boy arrived early in the known discourse context and (10) *Young boy waited for his friends in the current discourse context.

In this study, the accuracy rates of the respondents in the use of articles in the three discourse contexts in written and spoken production as well as the type of errors made will be determined and compared. Verbal essays based on a picture series as well as written essays on the same stimulus taken from the English of Malaysian School Student or EMAS corpus (Arshad et al., 2002) were used in this study. These essays were produced by Form 4 or 16 year old students in schools from a northern, a central and an east coast state in Malaysia. These students can be considered proficient in the English language as they had all obtained the highest letter grade in the national level standardized English Language examination the previous year. In the compilation of the EMAS corpus, students were given an hour and asked to write an essay based on a picture sequence. The ten students who wrote the longest essays in each school were then called to give a verbal essay on the same picture sequence. These verbal essays were recorded and later transcribed.

As there were a large number of essays, a workable sample size had to be obtained. Several criteria were used in order to determine the sample verbal and written essays to be used in this study. First, as some students who contributed to the corpus did not produce both the essays, only verbal essays that had a corresponding written essay were chosen. Secondly, verbal essays had to be at least 200 words in length in order to be selected. Longer texts are important in order to obtain sufficient instances of obligatory contexts for article use for analysis. In examining the verbal and written essays, only the definite, indefinite and zero articles in new, known and current discourse contexts were analysed. Pronoun use in either known or current discourse contexts was not a variable examined in the study. Other determiners such as some, a lot of and three;
as well as personal possessive pronouns such as my, his and our are excluded from the analysis unless they are incorrectly used in place of either the definite, indefinite or the zero article.

Results: Accuracy in Verbal and Written Essays.

The accuracy rates for the use of articles in the three discourse contexts for the verbal essay and the written essay tasks were obtained. In addition to this, the nature of errors made were analysed especially with respect to substitution type errors or what was used in place of the correct article. The zero article was only included in the analysis when they were inaccurately used. The accuracy rates of the two tasks for each respondent were then compared. The results of these analyses are reported as follows:

Accuracy rates in verbal essays. The frequency of use of the definite, indefinite and zero articles in the three discourse contexts as well as the number and nature of errors in spoken production are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1.
Frequency of Use and Errors of the Definite, Indefinite, and Zero Article in Spoken Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>New Substitutions</th>
<th>Known Substitutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SMHK-11</td>
<td>5 (3) the for a; the for zero; the for a</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMHK-12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15 (3) some for the; some for the; zero for the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMHK-24</td>
<td>7 (1) zero for a</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMTA-01</td>
<td>4 (1) the for a</td>
<td>5 (1) zero for the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMTA-21</td>
<td>14 (3) the for a; the for zero; a for zero the for zero; the for a</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMTA-24</td>
<td>5 (2) zero for a</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMTA-30</td>
<td>4 (1) a for zero</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMTA-14</td>
<td>4 (2) the for a; the for zero</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMSAB-10</td>
<td>5 (1) the for a</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMSAB-16</td>
<td>4 (3) the for zero; zero for a; the for a</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMSAB-23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15 (1) a for the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMSAB-26</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMART-03</td>
<td>8 (3) zero for a; this for a; the for zero zero for a; zero for a; the for a</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMART-21</td>
<td>14 (3)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMART-26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26 (1) zero for the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMART-30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAM-21</td>
<td>5 (1) the for a</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


N/B. Number in parentheses indicate the frequency of errors from the total number of occurrences

Based on the data analysed in Table 1, the respondents can be considered proficient in the use of the definite, indefinite and zero article in the three discourse contexts. Together, the respondents had a 74.74%, 96.48% and 100% accuracy rate in the new, known and current contexts respectively. Individually, many of the respondents also performed fairly well, obtaining accuracy rates of above 70%. However, it is evident that respondents had the most problems with the “new” discourse context. All accuracy rates below the 70% accuracy mark were for article use in the new discourse context.

In the 24 instances of errors committed in the new discourse context, 10 involve the incorrect substitution of the indefinite article with the definite article. Some examples of this error are as follows:

(11) *When the school reopens the principal gave the three boys the reward for bravery.
(12) *Then he saw the blue blouse.

Within this discourse context, there were also 6 instances where the definite article the was used instead of a zero article. Sentence (11) above contains an example of this error where the is used together with the noun school as in when the school reopens.

The perfect accuracy score in the current discourse context should be carefully interpreted as in this study, only the use of articles in this context was analysed. Pronoun use, which is more common in this context, was not included in the analysis.

**Accuracy rates in written essays.** The frequency of use of the definite, indefinite and zero articles in the three discourse contexts as well as the number and nature of errors in written production are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Frequency of Use and Errors of the Definite, Indefinite, and Zero Article in Written Data
Accuracy rates based on the written data are relatively high, indicating, once again student proficiency in the use of the article system across the three discourse contexts. The accuracy rates in the new, known and current discourse contexts for all the respondents are 92.31%, 97.36% and 100% respectively. Individually, there was no respondent with an accuracy rate of lower than 70%.

Comparison of article use in the spoken and written tasks. Based on the frequency of use as well as errors in the spoken and written essays in Tables 1 and 2, it is possible to make a comparison of student performance according to the two modes. Accuracy rates in terms of ratio across the two modes are presented in Table 3 as follows:

Table 3
Comparison of accuracy rates of definite, indefinite and zero articles across three discourse contexts in spoken and written production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse Context</th>
<th>New</th>
<th>Known</th>
<th>Current</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spoken Written</td>
<td>Spoken Written</td>
<td>Spoken Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMSAB-26</td>
<td>4 (1) <em>the</em> <em>for</em> <em>a</em></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMART-03</td>
<td>17 (1) <em>the</em> <em>for</em> <em>a</em></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMART-21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19 (1) <em>zero</em> <em>for</em> <em>the</em></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMART-26</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMART-30</td>
<td>10 (2) <em>the</em> <em>for</em> <em>a</em>; <em>the</em> <em>for</em> <em>a</em></td>
<td>14 (2) <em>zero</em> <em>for</em> <em>the</em>; <em>zero</em> <em>for</em> <em>the</em></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAM-21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N/B. Number in parentheses indicate the frequency of errors from the total number of occurrences.

A cursory glance at the data reveals that students make fewer errors in the written mode. The fewer number of errors in the written data is not unexpected as written tasks allow students to use a more careful and monitored style in language production. Although
there were fewer errors in the written task data, it should be noted that most of these errors occur in the new discourse context.

**Discussion: Some implications.**

Perhaps the most obvious finding of this study is the difficulty that the students face in correctly using the article system in encoding the NP in the new discourse context. In most cases, the definite article *the* is used in these contexts instead of the indefinite *a* or the zero article. The students tend to use the definite article more often than any other article including the zero article regardless of discourse context. The data also indicates that the students seldom replace the definite article with the indefinite article or the zero article. Both these observations imply that students are more comfortable with the use of *the* to encode NPs, regardless of context. The definite article certainly occurs more often in a text than the indefinite and zero articles. Whether the students consider the definite article as the prototypical article and uses it in all discourse contexts is difficult to determine. Similarly, on the basis of the available data, it is also difficult to determine whether or not the students are aware of the notion of discourse context.

The use of the definite article is certainly not as straightforward as it seems. In addition to prior mention, there are also other nongeneric use of the definite article which involves general and specific knowledge unique for members of the same family and community (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Additionally, the use of the definite article in some idiomatic and formulaic expressions are also difficult to explain. It seems that the use of the definite article may be culturally as well as psychologically bound as much as it is affected by discourse structure. The sentence *It was then they heard the shout* by one respondent (which was marked as correct) hints at the respondent’s mental representation of *the* *shout* as being one of special significance despite *the* *shout* being mentioned the first time in the essay. Other uses such as *the reward for bravery* as in sentence (11) above may also reflect a similar intention. An alternative explanation - that respondents may have learnt target language NPs as stock and fixed expressions that include the definite article and have subsequently used them in the same manner regardless of discourse context – seems unlikely as the learners are proficient in the target language.

The influence of the native or first language also seems to be a factor in trying to understand students’ difficulty with indefiniteness in the new discourse context. The Malay language is a [-ART] language. The sentences (1), (2), and (3) presented earlier would be translated as such.

(1A) Seorang budak muda berjalan kaki ke sekolah. (2A) Budak muda itu/tersebut sampai awal ke sekolah. (3A) Dia duduk dan menunggu kawan kawannya.

In all three sentences above, determiners are used in order to encode referent NPs. In the first sentence, the determiner *seorang* which encodes the NP *budak muda* (young boy) in a new discourse context can more accurately be translated into a quantity – one person rather than the indefinite article *a*. Similarly, the determiner *itu* and *tersebut* in the
known discourse context best refers to the English determiner *that* and *person* or *object concerned* respectively. In the current discourse context, the pronoun *dia* is used. As in the English language the complete NP *Budak muda itu* that the pronoun refers to could have also been accurately used. Hence, perhaps due to a general unfamiliarity with the need to encode definiteness and indefiniteness through articles, some of the students in this study may have failed to understand the roles of the definite and indefinite articles for this purpose.

Not only does the Malay language differ from the English language by not encoding definiteness and indefiniteness through a function word like an article, there are also situations where there is no corresponding equivalent for English NPs encoded for indefiniteness. The following Malay sentences and the closest corresponding English translation illustrates this particular aspect related to indefinite NPs.

(12) *Budak itu ditemani kawan* The boy was accompanied by a friend
(13) *Budak itu ditemani seorang kawan* The boy was accompanied by a friend
(14) *Budak itu ditemani dua orang kawan* The boy was accompanied by two friends
(15) *Budak itu ditemani kawan kawan* The boy was accompanied by friends

Unlike in the English language, indefiniteness in the Malay language can be expressed through the use of a zero morpheme as in (12) where the indefinite NP *kawan* is not preceded by any word. The corresponding translation into English, however, requires the indefinite article *a*. The use of a determiner *seorang* in (13) may be more to indicate quantity – as in (14) - rather than a discoursal device to reflect first mention and indefiniteness. This sentence, however, is translated into the same English sentence as in (12). Indefiniteness of plural NPs such as *kawan-kawan* in (15), however, is encoded in a similar manner as in English as indicated by the corresponding English sentence with a zero morpheme or a zero article as in the case of the English sentence.

**Conclusion**

This study has examined the use of the article system in three discourse contexts. Its main finding is that the respondents have the most difficulty with the new discourse context and tend to replace the indefinite article with the definite article in this context. Some potential explanations for this observation have also been provided, including the tendency to overuse the definite article due to greater familiarity with this article in relation to the indefinite and zero articles as well as the influence of the first or native language. The findings imply that teachers need to draw students’ attention to the different contexts in which the definite article and indefinite articles are used. It may also require teachers to introduce the notions of definiteness and indefiniteness and create tasks in which students manipulate the use of articles within such environments. Further studies on the use of the article system in discourse contexts should consider examining the order of acquisition of articles as this study dealt with relatively proficient learners of the English language as a second language. Longitudinal studies as well as studies that
compare the performance of students from different age groups could be more revealing as to how the article system is acquired especially in different discourse contexts.

**References.**


