

A Research on the Use of Articles in Writings of English Major Students in China

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Abstract: The misuse of articles has long been a subject that has attracted the attention of many researchers from the field of pedagogy. Although articles play a significant part in English learning, the related researches in China are not thorough enough. By means of tests and case analysis, this study confirms the existence of the misuse of articles among third-year English major students in China and investigates the most common type of their mistakes. The result shows that the causes of students' misuse of English articles can be summarized into these three categories: redundancy, numerical consistency, and confusion. Among them, redundancy is the most common mistake made by all levels of students, while numerical inconsistency is more frequently seen among students from high score group. It is also proved that there is a correlation between recognizing the right articles in tests and using articles correctly in writings, which sets higher requirements for teachers in their article-related class.

Keywords: articles, English major students, writings

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the research

The misuse of articles is a commonplace among English majors. According to Peter Master, "the English article system is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for nonnative speakers and one of the latest to be fully acquired[1]." According to Na-rae Han, Martin Chodorow and Claudia Leacock, the misuse of articles can be divided into two parts: the underuse of articles and the overuse of articles[2]. When learners acquire English articles, they tend to construct an interlanguage system which cannot achieve the goal of the target language. Also, even for people who have a good command of English grammar, they still make some mistakes in the use of English articles. Many researches indicate that learners' misuse of English articles result from their abuse of definite article, their poor mastery of English phrases and limited English proficiency.

1.2. Significance of the research

This paper aims at analyzing the use of English articles by third-year English major students in China in detail and bringing inspiration to English education in the future. According to Zhao Yongping, the rate of utilization of articles in English language is about 8.5%[3]. Although there are only three

articles in total, the use of these three articles is one of the most difficult parts of English grammar. As a result, finding out the causes of the misuse of English articles and providing an effective solution will benefit English majors a lot in practice.

1.3. Research Questions

It is anticipated that this research can give answers to the following questions: Firstly, is there any confusion between definite article (the) and indefinite articles (a/an) in English major students' tests? Secondly, is there any confusion between definite article and indefinite articles in English major students' writings? Thirdly, what is the relationship between the above two points? (e.g., do students who gain high test scores necessarily make fewer mistakes on the usage of articles in their writings?)

2. Literature Review

Researches related to the misuse of English articles are as follows.

According to Peter Master, the English article system can be taught as a binary division between classification and identification[1]. He presented this idea in order to provide an understandable pedagogical tool for non-native speakers of English so that they may feel it easier to learn English articles, which is the most difficult part in English grammar.

Then, the work of Na-rae Han, Martin Chodorow and Claudia Leacock provoked more thoughts about the usage of English articles[4]. In this research paper, it is also mentioned that "one of the most difficult challenges faced by non-native speakers of English is mastering the system of English articles." By making use of the classifier, the authors detected article errors in the TOEFL essays of native speakers of Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. Finally, they found out that the combination of a maximum entropy classifier and a very large training corpus of heterogeneous documents led to a better result.

In 2008, Tania Ionin, Maria Luisa Zubizarreta and Salvador Bautista Maldonado wrote a research paper, which examines three sources of knowledge in the acquisition of English articles by second language (L2) learners: L1-transfer, L2-input and Universal Grammar (UG)[5]. Early findings are also embodied in this paper. The conclusion is that L1-transfer, access to semantic universals through UG, and input triggers are shown to be relevant for the acquisition of English articles.

According to Wen Su and Xin Wang, the misuse of English articles can be viewed as a matter of mastery of English[6]. This means that if a student has a good command of English, he/she will also find it easy to learn English articles. According to Jiangang Shi, the misuse of English articles among English major students can be divided into two categories: first language transfer and NP semantic function[7].

In 2013, Adrian Wallwork wrote *English for Academic Research: Grammar Exercises*, which is an exercise book for students who are studying English grammar[8]. In chapter 3, the exercise is about indefinite articles, definite article and zero article. Some of the exercise here will be selected into the test prepared for English major students in this study.

According to *A New English Grammar Coursebook* published in 2017, articles can be divided into two types: indefinite articles and definite article[9]. Indefinite articles (a/an) are used before a singular noun to indicate "one" of a certain class of people or things, but they do not represent the concept of number. "A" comes before a consonant, while "an" comes before a vowel. Definite article (the) refers to "one" or "some" of a certain class of people or things. "The" can be used before all kinds of nouns, whether they are singular or plural, countable or uncountable.

The review of literature in this chapter has concentrated largely on the categories of the misuse as well as the theoretical basis of this research. All the above researches will prove to be valuable and enlightening in the further research.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research design

The study intended to find out whether there is confusion between definite article and indefinite articles in English major students' writings. If the answer is "yes", the study will continue to investigate the most common type of mistake made by English major students in China. The author's hypothesis is that most mistakes are caused by redundancy.

3.2. Subject description

20 third-year English majors, who were from the same class of the same university, were required to take a test on the use of English articles. The subjects are chosen for the following two reasons. For one thing, the English proficiency of English majors is generally higher than that of students from other majors. For another, junior students have received systematic training for more than two years. In other words, the mistakes they make are more likely to be the typical problems of advanced English learners. As a result, the misuse of English articles among this group of people is worth of further investigation.

3.3. Instruments

There are mainly two instruments: tests and four compositions of argumentation in case analysis.

3.3.1. test

1. This gives *a / an / Ø* really useful information.
2. We used *a / an / Ø* particular software in our calculations.
3. We are doing *a / an / Ø* research into rats.
4. In *an / the* examination room students are only allowed *a / the* monolingual dictionary.
5. In the 1950s *a / the* television changed the way advertising was done.
6. All the patients had been operated either on *the / Ø* eyes or on *the / Ø* nose.
7. *The / Ø* aim of this paper is to review all *the / Ø* relevant works in *the / Ø* literature.
8. This paper investigates *the / Ø* effect of *the / Ø* removal of gas, vapor, dust and aerosol from *the / Ø* atmosphere.
9. *The / An* examination of *the / Ø* samples showed significant variability in terms of *the / Ø* weight in *the / Ø* presence of high values of FT3.
10. *The / Ø* values observed are influenced by many factors such as *the / Ø* pre-heating of the oil media before use, *the / Ø* age of the paint, *the / Ø* conservation environment, and *the / Ø* effects of radical reactions initiated by *the / Ø* pigments.

3.3.2. four compositions of argumentation

Four compositions of argumentation written by four English major students are chosen as the instrument of this research for the purpose of analyzing their usage of articles. According to the data of the test, it can be seen that there are lots of problems in students' mastery of articles and at the same time, the difference between students is also enormous. Of the total 24 blanks for students to fill in (suppose that each blank equals to one point), the highest score is 17, while the lowest score is 6. As a result, two students are chosen from high score group, and another two students are chosen from low score group. Their compositions are selected to examine whether there is a relation between their performance on the test and their performance on their writing.

3.4. Procedures

The study intended to find out whether there is any misuse in English major students' writings and the difference between recognizing the right articles and using articles correctly in writing. The study was held for two weeks consecutively. The detailed procedures are as follows.

Step 1: Select 20 third-year English majors from the same university and the same class.

Step 2: Organize a test on the use of English articles.

Step 3: Rank their scores and choose four students among all the participants (two students respectively from high score group and low score group).

Step 4: Collect the compositions of these four students. Make sure the students do not know the intention of this research so that they will not make any change in their compositions.

Step 5: Text analysis on the samples.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Data Collection & Data Presentation

Table 1: Test scores and ranks

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4
Scores	17/24	17/24	10/24	9/24
Ranks	1/19	1/19	14/19	18/19
Groups	High score group	High score group	Low score group	Low score group
Average score	12.63/24			

It can be seen from Table 1 that these four students are typical participants who can represent the two extremes. Generally speaking, the result of the test is not satisfying, because the average score is only half of the total score. It suggests that students do not have a good command of English articles, and all of them make mistakes more or less. Meanwhile, the disparity of scores cannot be neglected. The highest score is 17, while the lowest score is only 6. Although students have studied in the same class for three years, they are highly polarized.

Table 2: The number of occurrences of articles

	Student 1	Student 2	Student 3	Student 4	Average
Words	245	306	286	378	304
A	4	3	7	8	6
An	2	0	0	1	0.8
The	14	17	18	28	19

It can be seen from Table 2 that "the" is the most commonly used article. The average occurrence of "the" in their compositions is nineteen. "A" and "an" are used infrequently, and the former is even not used at all in some students' writings. Therefore, it can be concluded that definite article is used more frequently than indefinite articles do.

Table 3: The misuse of articles

Students	Example sentences
Student 1	The government thinks this issue will threaten the quality of <u>a</u> British university degree and have a bad impact on students' future.
Student 2	They are lazy to use their mind gradually and become <u>a</u> thoughtless and stupid person which seriously damages their future career prospect. When more and more students buy essays and get high compliment and score, <u>the</u> university students become cheap and the degree becomes worthless.
Student 3	The authorities in universities are pretty support the policy, they believe <u>the</u> plagiarism is unacceptable. Not only become lazy in doing their homework by themselves, but also become lazy in thinking and getting the credit in <u>a</u> honest way. Once a student cheat without being punished, he will find <u>a</u> easy way to get his own success.
Student 4	And also, <u>the</u> new guidelines are welcomed by the universities for their students' future career. People will blame <u>the</u> incompetence instructors in those universities on breaching of duties for the reason that they don't monitor students' academic performance intensively as well.

(Note: The sentences below are taken from the original works without any revision, so there are some grammatical mistakes.)

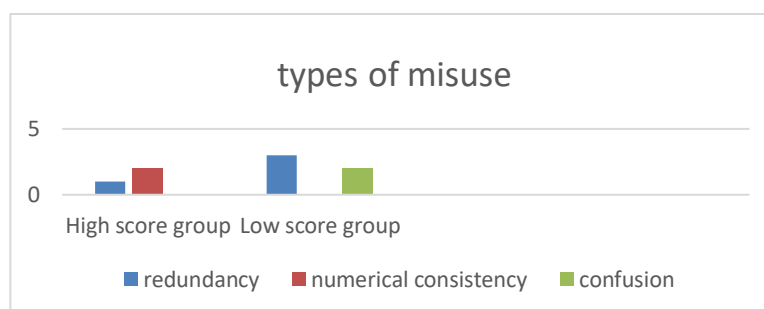


Figure 1: A summary of the misuse

To sum up, the causes of misuse can be summarized into the following three categories: redundancy, numerical consistency, and confusion.

- (1) Redundancy: students use articles when they do not need to do so.
- (2) Numerical consistency: Students do not wrongly use articles. However, the articles they use do not agree with the rest of the sentence.
- (3) Confusion: students mistake “an” for “a”, which is an avoidable mistake.

In this case, Table 3 can be further polished, as it is shown below:

Table 4: The misuse of articles and causes of mistakes

Students	Example sentences
Student 1	The government thinks this issue will threaten the quality of <u>a</u> British university degree and have a bad impact on students' future. <i>Numerical inconsistency</i>

Table 4: (continued)

Student 2	They are lazy to use their mind gradually and become <u>a</u> thoughtless and stupid person which seriously damages their future career prospect. Numerical inconsistency
	When more and more students buy essays and get high compliment and score, <u>the</u> university students become cheap and the degree becomes worthless. Redundancy
Student 3	The authorities in universities are pretty support the policy, they believe <u>the</u> plagiarism is unacceptable. Redundancy
	Not only become lazy in doing their homework by themselves, but also become lazy in thinking and getting the credit in <u>a</u> honest way. Confusion
	Once a student cheat without being punished, he will find <u>a</u> easy way to get his own success. Confusion
Student 4	And also, <u>the</u> new guidelines are welcomed by the universities for their students' future career. Redundancy
	People will blame <u>the</u> incompetence instructors in those universities on breaching of duties for the reason that they don't monitor students' academic performance intensively as well. Redundancy

As it is stated above, redundancy is the mistake students of all levels make. However, there are also some differences in terms of the other two elements. Students from high score group are prone to make mistakes out of numerical inconsistency, while students from low score group have the tendency to make mistakes out of sheer confusion between “a” and “an”. This means that they have trouble recognizing words beginning with a vowel sound.

4.2. Results & Analysis

The purpose of this research is to find out whether there is any misuse in English major students' writings and the correlation between recognizing the right articles and using articles correctly in writing. The findings of this research give answers to the above questions. It is suggested that students who do well in tests on articles also perform better when they do their own writings. In other words, if they are able to recognize the right articles in tests, they are more likely to use them correctly in their writings. Although they make some mistakes, their mistakes are the mistakes made by advanced learners, such as numerical inconsistency and redundancy. Generally speaking, this study has taken a step in the direction of investigating the misuse of articles among English major students in China. Also, the perspective is relatively original. The combination of test results and students' writing is used in this research, providing a brand-new way to look at this problem.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Major findings

During the past several years, considerable research has been devoted to the misuse of articles by English major students in China. However, few researches have been conducted concerning the relationship between recognizing the right articles in tests and using articles correctly in writings. In the tests, students do not perform as well as expected. The polarization is obvious, and the score gap reaches up to 11 points (the highest score: 17 points; the lowest score: 6 points). In the compositions of four English major students from the same class of the same university, they seldom employ “a” or “an”, and the article “the” is of the highest frequency of their writings. From the distinction of students from high score group and those who are from low score group, it can be concluded that students with high test scores do better in their own writings as well. Moreover, they tend to make less and smaller mistakes than other students do.

These findings clearly show that there are many problems on the use of articles among English major students in China. The misuse of articles has become a common problem. Almost all students make mistakes on the usage of articles, while students who scored high on the article test tend to make fewer and smaller mistakes when they complete their own writings. Therefore, the hypothesis of this research is demonstrated that there is a positive connection between students’ ability to recognize the most appropriate articles and their ability to use articles correctly in their writings.

5.2. Implications

Based on previous studies and this research, there are some practical implications that deserve English teachers’ and students’ attention and reference.

For teachers, it is beneficial for them to have a rough idea about students’ competence in using the articles, which can also be a reflection of students’ ability in their comprehensive ability in learning English. Due to the importance of articles in English learning, there is an urgent need for more effective teaching methods, which should be considered by all English teachers.

For students, this research will help them deepen the understanding of three English articles (a, an, the) so as to use them appropriately in their writings. What’s more, it raises students’ awareness of the most common type of mistake and the correlation between recognizing the appropriate articles and using them correctly, which prompts them to learn more carefully to use articles in order to make fewer mistakes in their writings and improve their overall performance in learning English.

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