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An Analysis of English Article Usage by ESL Students: A Case Study of Malaysian Students

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Abstract

English articles are well known as one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar, especially for L2 learners. Also, those who do not have an article system in their first language (L1) have trouble using the English article appropriately. In Malaysia that Bahasa Malasia is a first language, and English has been formally learned as a second language, problems with using English articles have been found among Malaysian students. Therefore, this research was to study Malaysian ESL students' English article usage in 5 types of noun phrase contexts. The purposes of the research were to explore what extent Malaysian ESL students' use of English articles accuracy is and to examine which types of English articles are most frequently used accurately and inaccurately by Malaysian ESL students. The participants, who were selected by random sampling, included 40 second-year students studying in the academic year 2017 at the Faculty of Engineering, University of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The research instrument was a forty-item English article test which is composed of five different contexts of noun phrases. As for the findings of the research, based on a criterion of the Malaysian grading system, the students' accuracy of using English articles was at a fairly good level with the mean scores of 60.83%. In addition, the result demonstrated that, among 5 types of noun phrase contexts, type 2 (+ Specific Referent; + Hearer Knowledge) which requires 'the' as a correct article was used most accurately. On the other hand, another finding performed that, in type 1 (Generic) which requires 'a', 'an', or 'no article', most of the students was found to use English article most inaccurately.

Keywords: ESL, English Articles, Malaysian Students

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Introduction

Rationale for the Study

As having been known so far, the role of English has been really crucial as the device of connecting to other people all around the world. According to the necessity of the English language usage in worldwide communication, especially in non-native English countries, teaching and learning English are required for non-native English speakers for improving and raising their skills and achieving their academic goals. A number of English skills are learned by L2 students, especially the grammatical skill which is considered to be the center of other areas in the language, and the grammar is also considered by a great number of sophisticated linguists that it is possibly the easiest aspect of language because of its explicit system (Cook, 2001). However, it is demonstrated that some part of the grammar, especially the English article system is well known that it is placed in the most confusing area that most of them have been difficultly used to teach and learn for L2 learners in any kinds of learning situations (Butler, 2002; Robinson, 2010). It is interesting that the L2 learners whose L1 have no function equal to the English articles have learned English for a long time, but they have not perceived proper usage of the English articles. For example, it was clearly stated that difficulties in using English articles by Thai EFL students were found, especially article 'the' usage, and mother tongue language (L1) would be one of the obstacles in perceiving and using English articles (Suniphan, 2015). In addition, according to, problems of using English articles were most frequently found among students from Asian countries, who use English as a second language and were studying in a university in Australia, which has the English language as its native language. Therefore, it was interesting that both ESL and EFL students had the same problems of using the articles. ESL students have learned more lessons of grammar in the formal classroom than other aspects of the language (Singh, C. K. S., Singh, A. K. J., Razak, N. Q. A., & Ravinthar, T., 2017), and they would possibly have more perception of using the articles like a native speaker. It would be beneficial for academic areas to explore and to investigate in-depth problematic difficulties of using the article by ESL students and to compare with the EFL students' article usage. All of these are the reasons why the English articles are selected to investigate on this study.

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Statement of the Problem

English articles are considered a significant part to express the meaning of the speech or written materials both implicitly and explicitly, and they are rather frequently used in the English language, which is necessary for both EFL and ESL learners to achieve this competence. Malaysian students, as ESL learners, use English for communicating in university and in their daily lives. Nevertheless, it was found that Malaysian ESL students have had main problems of using English, especially grammatical skills since they were in secondary school (Ghabool, Mariadass, & Kashef, 2012; Singh, Singh, Razak, & Ravinthar, 2017). According to Yahya, Ishak, Zainal, Faghat, & Yahaya (2012), in their research, the usage of English articles in writing tasks among Malaysian university students was found as the second most common errors. In addition, importantly, it is found that, as well as the Thai language, there is no definite and indefinite article system in their L1, Malaysian Malay, which might lead to difficulties in acquiring the English article system (Wong & Quek, 2007). Although a great number of researchers have investigated or analyzed the usage of English articles by ESL learners, especially in Malaysia, a few research comparing between errors conducted by ESL and EFL have been found. In this study, the university students were selected as participants because they have been studying English in formal classes since they were very young. Also, all of them were studying at a private university, where the English language is fully compulsory both inside and outside a classroom. Therefore, it was assumed that most of them would have a better perception of English article usage than EFL students. According to these points, it is very interesting in investigating and analyzing the in-depth usage of English articles in ESL countries, which have no article system.

Research Questions

1. To what extent is Malaysian ESL students' use of English articles accuracy?

2. Which types of English articles are most frequently used accurately and inaccurately by Malaysian ESL students, comparing to Thai EFL students?

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Objectives

To analyze Malaysian university students' usage of English articles divided into five contexts of noun phrases (NP), which are classified by specific referent (SR) and hearer knowledge (HK), 1) generics [-SR; + HK], 2) referential definite [+ SR; + HK], 3) referential indefinites [+ SR; -HK], 4) non-referential indefinites [+ SR; -HK], and 5) idiomatic and conventional uses of articles. Additionally, it was to explore and compare English article use between Malaysian ESL students and Thai EFL students.

Significance

The result of this study will provide information about how Malaysian students use English articles in each NP context, how the students tend to make a mistake in each NP context, and what extent the students acquire English articles. This information will be an advantage for instructors, who are teaching English in both ESL or EFL countries and seeking ways to adjust their teaching method about English articles and to develop their teaching materials and appropriate lessons.

Literature Review

1. Theoretical Framework

Five Types of Noun Phrase Contexts for Using English Articles

As the rules of grammar in English, articles have to be placed in front of noun phrases in any context. Noun phrases could be followed with or without different articles (*a, an, the*, or *no article*), depending on different contexts. According to Huebner (1983), he developed the model of English article usage in different contexts. The model is composed of 4 types of noun phrase context, which all are classified by two notions of referentiality. That is, the first feature is that noun phrases are with or without specific referentiality (+/- SR), and the second one is that noun phrases could be known or unknown by the hearer (+ /- HK). The 4 types of semantic wheel are demonstrated below.
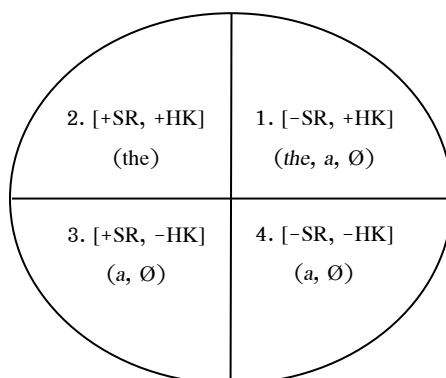
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Figure 1 Huebner's Semantic Wheel (from Huebner, 1983 as cited in Lu, 2001: 45)

The last one as type 5 for using English articles is idiomatic and conventional uses. This type is an exception to the rules of English article usage. In the other words, using the English articles in this type does not depend on any types of four noun phrase contexts. The articles are fixed with their own noun phrases as idioms. The examples of all five types of English article usage extracted from the English article test (Suniphan, 2015) are displayed below.

Type 1: - Specific Referent and +Hearer Knowledge [-SR, +HK] or Generic

 Ø Crocodiles are predators.

 An insect can cause problems for a farmer.

 A house is a necessary thing for human beings.

Type 2: + Specific Referent and +Hearer Knowledge [+SR, +HK]

 Pass me *the* salt, please.

 Julia sold *the* ring her husband gave her as a wedding present.

 The idea of visiting Malaysia next month was a very fantastic one.

Type 3: + Specific Referent and -Hearer Knowledge [+SR, -HK]

 I saw *a* fat man sleeping in your bedroom.

 I am reading *Ø* books for a final examination.

 I went to *a* farewell party yesterday.

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Type 4: - Specific Referent and -Hearer Knowledge [-SR, -HK]

I am seeking information from many sources for buying $\underline{a}$ new car.

Have you ever seen $\underline{\varnothing}$ sharks in the sea?

We do not have $\underline{a}$ speed boat.

Type 5: Idiomatic and Conventional Uses

Peter and Ann have been fired from $\underline{\varnothing}$ work.

My friend was in $\underline{the}$ mood to drink orange juice.

Please, keep $\underline{an}$ eye on your children.

2. Problems of Using English Articles by Malaysian ESL Students

To point out the importance of using English articles by not only native speakers but also ESL or EFL learners, Sinclair (1991) demonstrated that English articles were found at the fifth rank in his corpus of words commonly used in the English language. As commonly known, difficulties in using English articles have been found among non-native speakers of the English language. Moreover, it is emphasized that its complexity has obstructed learners' learning processes in the area of English article, particularly those whose first language has no equivalent system as English articles (Miller, 2005).

In Malaysia, English was introduced as an official language under the British colony. Until the present time, English has also been encouraged to use nationwide, especially in the education system. According to a great number of researches concerning Malaysian students using English as a second language, even though English has been learned for years from primary schools to higher levels of education, problems of using English in the area of articles have been frequently found.

According to Maros, Hua, & Salehuddin (2007), English articles were claimed as one of the most three grammatical errors found among Malaysian students in secondary school. Moreover, Ghabool et al. (2012) demonstrated in the findings of their research that misuse of English articles was three most frequently found in the Malaysian students' writing. In researches conducted with ESL learner in Malaysia, Errors of English article use were considered as common misuse in the top-ten ranking

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of English grammatical errors (Singh et al. , 2017; Yahya et al. , 2012; Darus & Subramaniam, 2009)

3. Related Researches

English as a Second Language in Malaysia

According to Darus & Subramaniam (2009), in Malaysia, English was initiatively introduced during colonization by Britain. Even though English was declared as the language of administration in 1957, it was slowly and gradually implemented to " National Language and National Educational Policy" for primary and secondary school. However, at present, English as a second language has also been widely used for education, science, global business and economy, advanced technology, and international politics.

English has nationwide been considered the most important language mostly used in Malaysia, especially in the educational system (Yunus, Sulaiman, Kamarulzaman, & Ishak, 2013). Moreover, Singh, et al. (2017) emphasized that as the importance of the second language, English has been intensively learned and widely used as the medium of instruction in primary schools, secondary schools, and even higher education. However, it was stated that Malaysian students' performance and competence of English language was in great concern of educational issues, especially problems of grammatical error (Mukundan, bin Saadullah, binti Ismail, & binti Jusoh Zasenawi, 2013; Yahya, et al., 2012; Ghabool et al., 2012; Singh, et al., 2017; Miller, 2005).

4. Research conceptual framework

The conceptual framework in this study was set to explore the Malaysian ESL students' performance and types of errors in using the English articles in different noun phrase contexts. The ESL students participating in this study were an independent variable, which were set up to find out what extent their perception and acquisition of the English language as their second language affects their usage of the English articles. The English article test, which are composed of 5 types of noun phrase context: generic, referential definite, referential indefinite, non referential, and idiomatic and conventional uses, was used as a research tool to measure the ESL students' performance and to explore what types of articles are used most accurately and

inaccurately. As described, the conceptual framework of the study is demonstrated in Figure 2.
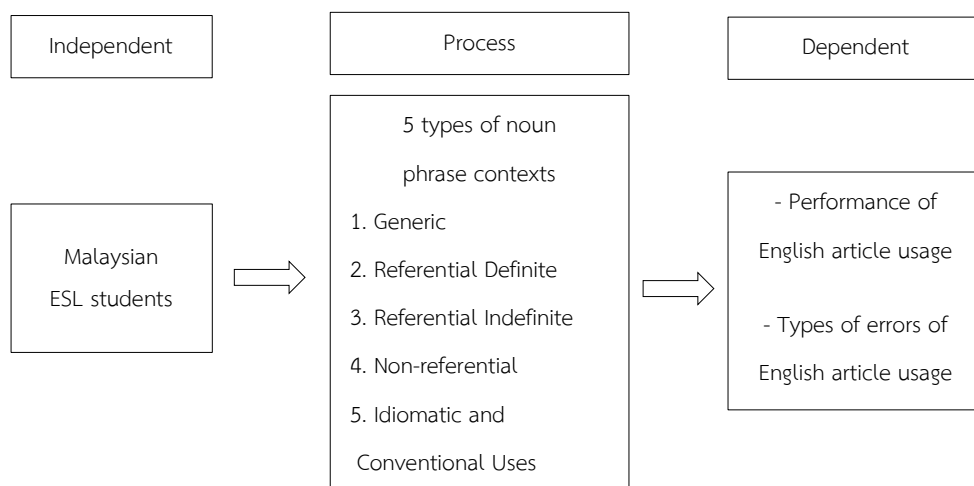

Figure 2 Conceptual Framework of the Study

Method and Materials

1. Participants

According to the analysis on using English articles by ESL learners, the students who always speak English with lecturers and friends both in their classroom and in their real-life situations were focused in this study. Among ASEAN countries, therefore, Malaysia which uses English as a second language nationwide was considered suitable for conducting the research and was then selected as an area for collecting data. In this study, the data was possibly collected from any students studying in any majors because all of them in the university were used English as their second language. Any section of students in any majors was randomly selected as a group of the participants. Therefore, the section of Electronics major with all 40 second-year students studying in the Faculty of Engineering, in 2017, at the University of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, was chosen for the study.

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2. Research Instruments

2.1 The English Article Test

This English Article Test was adopted from Ekiert (2004), Lu (2001), Isarankura (2008), Onen (2007), and Butler (2002). The test was designed to have the students select appropriate English articles with noun phrases in different contexts. Therefore, the student's performance in using the English articles would be demonstrated after completing the test. The test is composed of forty items, which each one has required a collect English article. As stated, the forty-item English article test is composed of five different contexts of noun phrases: 1) –Specific Referent + Hearer Knowledge, 2) + Specific Referent + Hearer Knowledge, 3) + Specific Referent –Hearer Knowledge, 4) + Specific Referent –Hearer Knowledge, and 5) Idiomatic and Conventional Use. Eight items of each type of five different noun phrase contexts are included in this English article test.

3. Data Collection

The students who were studying in the faculty of Engineering, University of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia was requested to participate as a part of this study, and data was collected. The 40 participants were required to take the fill-in English article test, which adopted from Ekiert (2004), Lu (2001), Isarankura (2008), Onen (2007), and Butler (2002), for examining their English article usage in different types of noun phrase contexts. The duration of the test was 1 hour that was provided for them to complete the task, and using any kinds of dictionaries was prohibited in this task. After completed, the test of each one was marked so as to statistically calculate for description.

4. Data analysis

After the English article tests were completed by the participants, marking for a total score and a score of using the English articles in each type of noun phrase contexts was conducted. The data were statistically analyzed for mean (X), standard deviation (S.D.), frequency, and percentage (%).

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Results

Finding 1:

The research question was to explore what extent ESL university students in Malaysia are able to use the English articles appropriately and correctly. Additionally, the overall performance of using the English articles in each type of noun phrase context would be demonstrated with a percentage of accuracy and error.

Table 1 Total Scores of English Article Test

Subjects	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Percentage
40	24.33	5.46029	60.83%

As demonstrated in Table 1, the data performed total subjects, a mean score, a standard deviation score, and a percentage. According to the numbers of the scores presented in the table, the total number of students who were purposively selected to participate in this study and to take the English article test was 40. According to the total scores of all students, the mean score of using English articles was 24.33; meanwhile, the percentage of the mean score was 60.83%. In addition, the number of standard deviation was at 5.46029.

Moreover, according to the students' total score of the English article tests, they would be classified into groups of their own proficiency level of using the articles. A criterion for dividing the students into each level was adopted from the undergraduate grading system of the University of Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. Both the number and percentage of the students in each proficiency level would be demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Number of the Students in Each Proficiency Level of English Articles

Score	Remark	Number of the students	Percentage
80 - 100%	Excellent	4	10%
75 - 79%	Extremely Good	4	10%
70 - 74%	Very Good	5	12.5%

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65 - 69%	Good	5	12.5%
60 - 64%	Fairly Good	1	2.5%
55 - 59%	Satisfactory	6	15%
50 - 54%	Quite Satisfactory	6	15%
45 - 49%	Poor	7	17.5%
40 - 44%	Very Poor	1	2.5%
0 - 39%	Failed	1	2.5%
Total		40	100%

Finding 2:

      According to research question 2, this finding would demonstrate what types of English articles ESL students in Malaysia most frequently use both correctly and incorrectly among different 5 types of noun phrase contexts. Therefore, the student's total score, mean score, including standard deviation score, in each type of 5 English article contexts would be elaborately presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Rank and Number of Correctness in Each Type of English Articles

Rank	Type of Noun Phrase Contexts	Total Number of Correctness (320 items)	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Percentage of Total Number
1	Type 2: + Specific Referent + Hearer Knowledge [+SR, +HK] (8 items x 40 students)	257 out of 320	6.43	1.1522	80.31%
2	Type 4: - Specific Referent - Hearer Knowledge [-SR, -HK]	227 out of 320	5.68	1.1183	70.94%

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Rank	Type of Noun Phrase Contexts	Total Number of Correctness (320 items)	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Percentage of Total Number
	(8 items x 40 students)				
3	Type 3: + Specific Referent - Hearer Knowledge [+SR, -HK] (8 items x 40 students)	195 out of 320	4.88	1.1365	60.94%
4	Type 5: Idiomatic and Conventional Uses (8 items x 40 students)	183 out of 320	4.58	1.6469	57.19%
5	Type 1: Generic - Specific Referent + Hearer Knowledge [-SR, +HK] (8 items x 40 students)	111 out of 320	2.78	2.3587	34.69%
Overall Performance (40 items x 40 students)		973 out of 1,600	24.33	5.46029	60.81%

Discussion

As for the research question 1, it was to explore what extent Malaysian ESL students' use of English articles accuracy is. According to finding 1 shown in Table 1, it was founded that, in terms of the mean of all total scores, the proficiency of correctly

and appropriately using English articles of the students, who have English as their second language, was at 24.33 out of 40. That could be presented as a percentage of 63.83. As for the average total scores of all students, it could be interpreted that the proficiency of English article usage was at "Fairy Good" level, according to the criterion of Malaysian grading system.

To compare with EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Thai students' English article usage in Suniphan's thesis (2015), the mean score was at 23.38 out of 40 or 58.45%. Although the performance of ESL students was higher than the EFL ones, the gap between the two numbers was a little bit slightly different: 63.83% and 58.45%. It could be stated that interference of mother language (L1), both Bahasa and Thai, had influenced to a process of students' English literacy of the area of grammar, especially English articles (Maros, et al., 2007; Isarankura, 2008).

As for research question 2, it was to explore which types of English articles are most frequently used accurately and inaccurately by Malaysian ESL students, comparing with Thai EFL students. The results of the data collection, that is, rank and number of correctness in using five types of English articles were demonstrated in Table 3. It was found that, among five types of noun phrase contexts, type 2 (+Specific Referent; + Hearer Knowledge) was used most accurately with a total score of correctness at 80.21%. However, the result was not in accordance with Suniphan's thesis (2015) since article 'the' for definiteness in type 2 was found the third most correct use among EFL Thai students. In this noun phrase context, 'the' is appropriately used to identify the definiteness of nouns. This might be claimed that ESL Malaysian students have a perception in the notion of definiteness. Nevertheless, 'the' is also used with both countable and uncountable nouns; therefore, this might lead the students to use 'the' with any nouns in other types of noun phrase context. According to this condition, both correct uses of 'the' and overuse of 'the' might have happened simultaneously. This assumption was possibly verified after finding the most incorrect use of English articles by ESL students.

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As for another finding of the research, on the other hand, type 1 (-Specific Referent; +Hearer Knowledge) was found as the most inaccurate use with an overall score of 34.69%. This result is in line (Suniphan, 2015). That is, English article errors in type 1(Generic) were found the most among the 5 types of noun phrase contexts. Therefore, it could be indicated that English article in type 1 was used most inaccurately among both ESL Malaysian students and EFL Thai students.

Conclusion

To find out any insight by conducting this research, the conceptual framework was created as a research process. ESL students were focused as a group of an independent variable. The English article test was used as a research tool to measure the ESL students' proficiency of English article usage and to explore what types of errors they mostly employ.

Based on the discussion, it could possibly be concluded that overuse of 'the' led to the students' high scores of performance of using 'the' correctly for type 2; whereas, this would cause most English article errors in type 1, which needs 'a', 'an', or 'no article'. Moreover, researching using English articles by EFL students in Thailand, the researcher could really agree with a great number of Malaysian educators and researchers that have pointed out the mother tongue interference as obstacles that impede learning English articles in ESL and EFL contexts, especially mother tongue languages, like Bahasa, Thai, and so on, which have no equality to English article system (Singh, et al., 2017; Yahya et al., 2012; Yunus, et al., 2013; Musa, Lie, & Azman, 2012).

To conclude, it could be stated that, according to the findings in this study, both ESL and EFL students have troubles in using the English articles. To be clear, the evidence had been found in this study, comparing with the findings in (Suniphan, 2015). That is, English major students as EFL students received a less average score of English article usage than ESL students who were non English major, participating in this study. Therefore, it could be possibly concluded that it does not matter what major ESL students are, they have higher proficiency and more accuracy of using English articles than EFL students, even English major students.

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Recommendation

This study was conducted with a little group of ESL students in Malaysia; therefore, the results of the study could not be generalized for all ESL students. Moreover, studying the students' performance of using English articles is insufficient. To explore further the ESL students' competence with in-depth study on perception and notion of English article system is also required. Additionally, as for future research, more participants who are ESL students from different majors, faculties, and universities, are required for more profound database. However, hopefully, the results would be significantly beneficial to educators, researchers, or teachers who have an important role in planning or teaching the English language for both ESL and EFL learners. Also, these results could be applied to teaching and learning strategies or educational policies to assist students to achieve their academic goals and to apply grammatical concepts to use English articles accurately.

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