

The Errors in the Use of Article in Business Letter Writing in English: A Case Study of the Business Management Students of Vavuniya Campus, Sri Lanka

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Abstract This paper investigates the errors in the use of articles in business letter writing in English. It is a case study of the Business Management Students of Vavuniya Campus, University of Jaffna in Sri Lanka. The study classifies the errors and analyzes the implications in the linguistic and discourse structures of the genre in relation to the mental schema acquired in the past. The written texts were collected from a systematic examination. The qualitative analysis dominates the methodology with some relevant quantitative data. It contributes to the explanation of the errors of Sri Lankan students.

Keywords article, error, sequence, absence, addition

Introduction

In Sri Lanka, the appropriate or acceptable use of articles in English writing or in business English writing has not been well-organized. The importance given to information has brought the importance given to language to a secondary position. Due to the gradual expansion of the corporate sector, Sri Lankan business communication is becoming more international. Depending exclusively on the use of a native language or the native languages for business communication has delimited the business opportunities and investments within the country and abroad. Realizing this inevitable need for business communication in English, all the universities in Sri Lanka conducting degree courses in Management, Commerce, Finance and Accountancy, have

incorporated English for business communication and Business English as a credit course, integral to their Degree programme. The Faculty of Business Studies of the Vavuniya Campus of the University of Jaffna also conducts English for Business Communication for the second year students of the Bachelor of Business Management programme (BBM) consecutively for two semesters allocating 30 hours per semester. Business letter writing is one of the key genres in training their business English writing skills. Therefore, a proper understanding of the language structure of business English is necessary, especially of the use of articles.

Researches by Sri Lankan scholars identified a vacuum for proper letter writing skills active in practice. The indifference towards the proper use of articles in letter writing is another drawback. This study may contribute to the ideational, textual, intertextual and interpersonal understanding of the errors under analysis. It is highly imperative to investigate the use of articles in the discourse of business communication. This paper relates the use of articles to the writing of Sri Lankan university students in improving the writing skill.

Theoretical Background

Sri Lankan students, like all other writers of English as second language, make mistakes or errors in three key aspects in the writing in English: the choice of tense and aspect, the subject and verb agreements, and the use of articles (Miller, 2005). The

use of articles has become the most problematic matter (García Mayo, 2008, cited in Isabelli-García and Slough, 2012) and the causes have been studied (Trenkic, 2007, cited in Isabelli-García and Slough, 2012). Articles are among the five most common words in the English language (Master, 2002, p.332). So the errors in this area are highly noticeable to the native speakers (Miller, 2005). According to Miller, many from Asian countries consider it as their most frequent language problem. It is really challenging to our students because this system is not available in the native languages.

The efficient use of articles in English definitely proves the mastery of the language but the native speakers may not realize the complexities of the system because of their natural acquisition and unconscious use. According to Hewson (1972, p.132, cited in Miller, 2005), the English article system is a “psychomechanism”. The errors in the use of articles do not disrupt intelligibility so many learners may feel it as a matter of secondary importance (Master, 1997, p.216). But it is not so in academic or business writing which demands the use of correct article. The poor use may give the impression to the readers that the writer is not only incompetent in the use of language but of the subject matter as well. Learners “use articles almost randomly” (Butler, 2002, p.452).

Definiteness, particularity and countability of noun determine the article use. However, there are some challenges or exceptions to the rules. In the native languages, some nouns may be made plural but not in English. In Tamil, *thahavalhal* (*informations?*) is plural. According to Quirk and Greenbaum, a noun can be made countable by using it in a classificatory sense (1973, p.61).

The native language, Tamil contains definiteness but this is not conveyed by the use of articles as it is in English, but by other determiners, pronouns and demonstratives. The definite article refers the object or person or entity as a member of a ‘shared set’ and instructs him/her to find the right set and relates the referent to it” (Hawkins, 1978, p.130). Bickerton explains definiteness as “presumed known to the listener” and “indefiniteness as presumed unknown to

the listener” (1981, p.147). The indefinite article, *a* or *an*, is slightly less problematic, determined by singular, countable nouns. They are used with nouns not been mentioned before, and with generic nouns. Master suggests that it may also be used with uncountable nouns for a “boundary-creating effect”, as in “a high-grade steel” (a kind of steel which is of good quality). Students find it difficult to identify a noun as countable and its use in a countable or uncountable sense (Master, 1997, p.218-225). At the beginning of the learning process, students may ‘overuse the definite article, even following instruction on its use, but that this will eventually be remedied (Liu and Gleason, 2002, p.16). The use of *the* may be generic or non-generic. Some functional uses of the definite article are comparatively more difficult (Master, 1995). The categorizations of the non-generic definite article are identified with the four categories: cultural, situational, structural, and textual (Isabelli-García and Slough, 2012). The latter uses are the most difficult due to their “cultural use” (ibid. p.5).

Methodology

The methodology is qualitative and quantitative. It is a textual analytical approach under applied linguistics. It analyzes a business letter writing exercise in English by the second year students of the BBM programme of the Faculty of Business Studies of Vavuniya Campus.

During a Business English test, as a part of the test, the students were asked to write “a letter of complaint to the Branch Manager of the Ceylon Electricity Board of their district regarding power cuts. As a customer and consumer of electricity power supply in their respective area, over the last three months, they have experienced severe, unscheduled, sudden and prolonged power cuts which have caused immense difficulties in managing day to day life in the area”.

The primary data were the written works of these students in response to a single question on business letter writing in English. The texts from 84 students were collected in the corpus which had been written in an examination. They were referred for authentic

structural, textual and linguistic errors on the specified issues. An error analysis of the use of articles in the discourse of business letters was conducted. The extracts have been given in their original, authentic forms with all the errors the students made.

Results and Discussions

Error Analysis

The errors in the use of articles have been listed below. There are six types identified. The codes have been assigned for each error type for the analysis. The number code given within the brackets at the end of each extracted sentence refers the student who made the error.

The error types, Article Adverb Combination Error [AACE], Definite Article Use Error [DAUE] and Article Quantifier Sequence Error [AQSE] were made by less than 5% of the students.

1) Article - Adverb Combination Error [AACE]

e.g. *In a shortly we have experienced immense difficulties in managing day to day life in the area.* (22)

In the extract (22) given above, the writer intends to synthesize or inductively conclude, in brief, the power cut has caused us immense difficulties in managing day to day life in the area. Though the analyst distinguishes only one type of error, AACE, here the errors are multiple and embedded. Strangely, in this extract, a combined sequence of preposition-article-adverb is used for the standard transition forms, for instance, a preposition-noun sequence (*in brief*) or a single adverb form (*briefly*) or a preposition-article-noun sequence, *in a few words* or an adverb-present participial combination form (*briefly speaking*). Therefore it is inferred that the student might have felt confused about the schema s/he had in the mind about the first three standard forms s/he had been exposed to in the past and came up with the error form, *in a shortly*.

2) Definite Article Use Error [DAUE]

e.g. *we meet the more difficulties.* (17)

This error is very common among the students. Sri Lankan students often make errors in the use of the definite article, *the*, generally. The native languages do not have this distinct closed grammatical word form but they make use of the other determiners and demonstratives as substitutes. However, the native languages have the substitutes for the indefinite form, *a* or *an*. In English, the formation of the noun phrases, *the difficulties* (article-noun), *more difficulties* (comparative form-noun) and *the most difficulties* (article-superlative form-noun) are possible. Therefore, again, it is inferred that the student might have felt confused about the schema s/he had in the mind about these three standard forms s/he had been exposed to in the past and came up with the error form, *the more difficulties* (article-comparative form-noun).

3) Article - Quantifier Sequence Error [AQSE]

e.g. *The situation has reduced the activities of the all people.* (07)

This error is very common among the students. Though Sri Lankan students are familiar with the noun phrase, *all the people* (quantifier or universal determiner-article-noun), there is always the possibility among the beginners of English language writing to make this type of sequence error which reveals their ambiguity in defining the functional use of the two descriptive or modifying forms in proper sequence resulting, *in the all people*.

The errors, Article Addition Error [AAE] and Indefinite Article Choice Error [IACE] were made by around 6% of the students.

4) Article Addition Error [AAE]

e.g. *Day to day, our area faces the many problems.* (24)

e.g. *please consider this situation and I think you will find out the this situation.* (36)

e.g. *We request kindly please consider the this complaint and resolve the our area problem.* (54)

In English, articles, demonstratives, and possessive determiners cannot co-occur in the same

phrase. The writer No. 24 has unnecessarily used the article, *the*, in the noun phrase, *the many problems* (article-quantifier or degree determiner or pronoun-noun). The students are familiar with *many problems* or *the problems* but the schema related to these two forms have caused the confusion to combine them as such. Perhaps the writer might have felt to assert both functions: particularity and multiplicity because No. 36 and No. 54 have also used the same pattern, *the this situation* and *the this complaint* but the former could be a careless mistake too since s/he has already written, *this situation*. However, the combination, *the our area problem* (article-possessive determiner or pronoun-noun-noun) is not acceptable.

e.g. *When we came home after the finishing our work at the work place, there was suddenly power cut.*
 (50)

This error has a different pattern in this expression, *after the finishing our work* (preposition - article-present participle verb form or gerund- possessive determiner or pronoun-noun). Generally, the *-ing* form can be used like a noun, like an adjective or like a verb. When it is used like a noun, it may or may not have an article before it. It can also be part of a 'noun phrase', *finishing our work*. In formal English, a possessive with the *-ing* form can be used. In informal English, many people do not, for example, *I'm worried about her boycotting the meeting* (preposition- possessive determiner or pronoun- present participle verb-noun phrase). As an adjective, the *-ing* form can be used before a noun and an article, *I was met by a welcoming party at the school* ((preposition -article- present participle verb-noun phrase). The *-ing* form is used after prepositions, for example, *Before leaving, you need to speak to her* but a combination of article- present participle verb-possessive determiner or pronoun-noun is not possible.

e.g. *please consider the our problems and take a best solution very soon and I kindly request to do the best solution and we hope you will create the best schedule and reduce the sudden power cuts.* (57)

Surprisingly this writer has used both the indefinite and definite articles with the superlative

adjectival forms: *a best solution*, *the best solution*, and *the best schedule*. First, it should be reminded that these expressions may not be classified as errors at all. Generally, the superlative can only accept the definite article but using it with the indefinite article is also possible and causes multiple interpretations. The noun phrase, *a best solution*, can be claimed as ungrammatical too. What this implies is that there are a number of excellent solutions of which the writer asks the reader to choose one. Sometimes this does not seem as a superlative construction but as an intensifier or as an 'absolute superlative'. One cannot say which is the most excellent; they are all in the same degree. Therefore *a* is used instead of *the*. Whereas, *the best solution*, the 'relative superlative', the usual form gives the comparative idea- the one and only, the best. The second expression, *the best schedule*, gives the same comparative idea of the relative superlative. The last expression, *the sudden power cuts*, indicates particularity.

e.g. *As a last three months, (we have experienced) electricity power supply cuts (in) our area.* (75)

This expression, *as a last three months*, intended as an adverbial modifier, has a combined sequence of preposition-indefinite article-cardinal numeral-noun. The students are familiar with *for the last three months* or *over the last three months* (preposition-definite article- cardinal numeral-noun) and at the same time, they are familiar with the expressions, *as a result*, *as a last resort*, *as a last attempt* and *over a period of three months*. These forms in their mental schema might have caused the confusion to produce this form of error. This writer has not only erred on the wrong use of preposition, as, s/he has committed the number disagreement in *a last three months* (indefinite article-plural noun).

5) Indefinite Article Choice Error [IACE]

e.g. *I hope you would consider about this letter and take a action to solving this problems.* (27)

e.g. *I have a internet café at my residence.* (60)

e.g. *Please kindly take a action for this problem.* (67)

The mother tongue structure easily makes the students ignore the distinction between *a* and *an* phonetically as well as graphically. They are very significant in the English language facilitating

consonantal and vowel sound difference in speech. Sri Lankan students who make these mistakes tend to make pause in between *a* and *action* or *internet* so that they are able to articulate *a action** or *a internet**. If they verbalize the expression at the natural pace, an action will be an easier and smooth one because the consonant, *n* facilitates a phonetically convenient verbalization between *a* and *action* or *a internet**.

e.g. *I am the consumer of (the) Ceylon Electricity Board.* (53)

e.g. *I am the consumer of Colombo 7 area of your company.* (63)

The writer introduces himself or herself as the consumer of Ceylon Electricity at the very beginning of the letter. This expression may give the impression that s/he is the only consumer of the Board. There are many customers the Ceylon Electricity Board so the writer can introduce himself or herself as a consumer or one of the consumers.

Quantitative Use

Determiners are used in front of nouns to indicate whether you are referring to something specific or something of a particular type. In other words determiners are noun-modifiers that express the reference of a noun or noun-phrase in the context. This function is performed by determiners which are: articles, demonstratives, possessive determiners or quantifiers. However, when the letters of the first 26 students were analyzed for the quantitative use of pronouns, articles, and other determiners such as demonstratives, possessive determiners or quantifiers, nobody has used the indefinite article, *an* in their letters.

It shows that the students generally do not pay serious attention to the phonetic distinction between *a* and *an* within the indefinite articles. Ten students used the indefinite definite article, *a*, 1-3 times so the use of the indefinite article is very less but the use of the definite article is comparatively higher and significant. Fourteen students used the definite article, *the*, 1-3 times. Six students used the definite article, *the*, 4-5 times. Four students used the definite article, *the*, 6-7 times whereas only one student used the definite article, *the*, 11 times. On the whole, it is

understandable that even the use of other determiners too is average or moderate. Ten students used other determiners 1-3 times. Eight students used them 4-5 times. Five students used them, 6-8 times whereas only two students used them 10 times but the use of pronoun is very high in numbers. Eleven students used them 7-9 times.

Table 1: The number of students out of 26 in total who used Determiners and Pronouns in the Letter for a number of times

Number of times	Using 'an'	Using 'a'	Using 'the'	Using other determiners	Using pronouns
1-3		10	14	10	
1-4					3
4-5			6		
6-7			4		
6-8				5	
7-9					11
10-11			1	2	
10-15					8
16-23					4

Source: Primary data

Eight students used them, 10-15 times whereas four students used them 16-23 times. Only three students used pronouns 1-4 times. The pronouns are easier to use than the determiners so the students learn to use the pronouns better and earlier than the determiners.

Suggestions and Recommendations

ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teachers need to pay more attention to the use of article and other determiners in business English sessions, especially in tackling the categorizations of the non-generic definite article identified with the four categories: cultural, situational, structural, and textual. They pose many challenges to our Sri Lankan students. They relate to social features and interactional aspects of the language and direct the learners to use the social sub-skills and pragmatic elements in their business letters.

As Fernando (n.d.) suggested, my study also suggests that 'Sri Lankans should be familiarized with the rules pertaining to the rules of the definite article: cataphoric reference, proper nouns, anaphoric reference, institutional reference, the logical use of *the*' etc. Further, she did not fail to reveal that the mechanisms used in the Sri Lankan languages versus the English language on the concept of definiteness should be investigated.

The finding can contribute to the understanding and critical and creative appraisal and judgment of the competence and performance of Sri Lankan students on the discourse construction, contribution and consumption of the genre of business letter. The output can contribute to Sri Lankan business communication discourse.

Conclusion

This paper reinforces the importance of the use of articles and other determiners in business English and the realization to instill the notion of countability, definiteness and particularity. With greater use of learners' dictionaries, students could more correctly identify when nouns are used countably or uncountably. The concept of definiteness is, however, more problematic. Nevertheless, it is possible, as Master (1997, p.216) claims, for teachers to make a positive contribution to learners' knowledge in this important area. The errors of combination, sequence, addition, omission, and choice have been analyzed and explained in detail. The teachers can plan their methodology appropriate to correct these errors and improve their writing. The main objective of this paper is to analyze and identify the linguistic and discourse processes of the error construction. It is a linguistic and discourse analysis. It does not aim to find the proper teaching methodology to tackle these errors. A research can be conducted in future to find the methodology as well.

This research creates an awareness of the linguistic and pragmatic errors in general, made by Sri Lankan students and the possibility of challenging the assumptions about the linguistic, structural and contextual norms of business letter writing in the

countries where English is the native language. It provides a consistent presentation of the levels of the performance of the students appropriate to or inappropriate to the Sri Lankan situation and suggests the ways of teaching, learning, training, evaluating and researching the discourse of business letters in English in Sri Lanka and the consequent implications and improvement in the process and product. It clarifies many misunderstandings and prejudices of both the students and teachers on the issue analyzed.

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