

## The Effects of Teaching Articles Based on Huebner's Model on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Use of Articles

Received : 18.01.2017  
Accepted : 08.08.2017  
Published : 30.09.2017

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### Abstract

The aim of this research was to find out the effects of using Huebner's model on intermediate EFL learners' use of article. Thirty learners from two high schools in Chaboksar (one of the city of Guilan Province) were chosen and after applying OPT test, they were divided into two groups. Both groups participated in a pretest exam. The control group was taught articles traditionally and according to their book. For the experimental group, the researcher adopted Huebner's model in four sessions. Then the post test was run. Using T-test and ANCOVA for the analyzing data, showed that Huebner's model had a positive effect on EFL learners' use of articles.

**Keywords:** The English Article system, The Article system in Persian ,Definite Article, Indefinite Article, Interlanguage

### 1. Introduction

Attaining native like proficiency is the ultimate goal of most of language learners. Most of the learners try to get mastery over the structure system of L2, but not all of them can reach this goal. Some structures seem to be mastered more easily, some seem to be troublesome for learners; one of them is article system. English article system is one of the most frequent and also confusing structures of English system (Master, 2002). As (Atay, 2010) stated in his research: "article choice in English is highly complicated, context-specific and beyond simple rules. They are unstressed function words, hence perceptually non-salient and semantically light-weight".

Most of the students even in advanced levels seem to have problem with it. This system includes the indefinite article *a(n)*, the definite article *the*, and the zero (or null) article. Researchers proved that the article system is one of the most difficult structural elements for ESL learners, causing even the most advanced non-native speakers of English (NNS) to make errors. This area has made lots of researchers to have investigations and they mentioned lots of reasons for these difficulties. As we know these articles are frequent in English system, as (Berry ,1991) mentioned, the frequency of articles that "*the/a/an* together account for one in every ten words in the average academic text". According to (Hewson, 1972, p.131), "the definite and the indefinite articles are among the tenth discourse". Sinclair (1991, cited in

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Master, 2002, p.332) listed *the* as the most frequent word and *a* as the fifth most frequent.

In Huebner's model, the use of English articles is determined by the semantic function of the NP in discourse. According to the model, English NPs are classified by two discourse features of referentiality—namely, whether a noun is a specific referent [+/-SR], and whether it is assumed as known to the hearer [+/-HK]. These two aspects of referentiality thus give rise to four basic NP contexts that determine article use. Nouns classified as Type 1, [-SR, +HK] are generics, and are marked with *a*, *the*, or *zero*. Nouns classified as Type 2, [+SR, +HK], are referential definite and are marked with *the*. Type 3, [+SR, -HK], includes first mention nouns, whose referent is identifiable to the speaker but not the listener, e.g. nouns that the speaker is introducing into the discourse for the first time. These are marked with *a* or *zero*. Type 4 nouns, classified as [-SR, -HK], are non-referential. This type includes nouns that are nonspecific for both the speaker and the hearer; *a* and *zero* are the relevant articles.

### 1.1 Background and literature review

A number of later cross-sectional morpheme studies have been carried out, including some of languages other than English. One of the best is (Pica's , 1983) who found a natural order in learners' language. In natural order that was proposed by (Krashen, 1977) he used a hierarchy in that he claimed the articles are acquired in the second level (after -ing/plural/copula) so we can expect learners to have been mastered over the first level and then they have less errors in higher proficiency levels.

In a study done by (Young , 1996) he considered the use of English articles by high and low proficiency Czech and Slovak learners of English. He found that low proficiency level learners use definite article more. Also he found that both low and high proficiency learners use form-function relation in their use of definite and indefinite articles. His learners used indefinite articles to mark information not assumed to be known by learners (-HK). The tendency to use indefinite article with this function increased with proficiency.

(Zdorenko and Paradis , 2007) study aims to determine whether child L2 acquisition is affected from L1 with respect to the articles and to investigate whether children from +ART and -ART languages follow the same acquisition sequence. In the study there were 16 participants in total; nine children from +ART L1 background, and seven children from -ART background. They were all in ESL context. The results indicated that accuracy rates with the definite article were considerably higher than the indefinite article for both groups. Just as a minor difference, -ART group had lower accuracy with the definite article than the +ART group at the very beginning. It was also stated that the acquisition order was same both for child L1 and L2 and adult L2 acquisition.

As mentioned before some studies focused on error analysis like (Barrett et al, 2011) he made a study to examine English L2 article use with Taiwanese English learners to determine the potential factors influencing English article substitution and error patterns in their academic writing. The results indicated that learners overused both the definite and indefinite articles but

underused the *zero* articles. The definite article was substituted for the indefinite article in specific environments. Although no significant difference existed between specific and non-specific semantic environments in *zero* article errors, a significant difference emerged between plural and mass/non-count nouns.

(Parish, 1987) modified Huebner's model to study a Japanese learner's acquisition of English articles over a 4-month period. The data analysis showed that the *zero* article was the first to be acquired, followed by the definite article, and finally the indefinite article. (Master, 1987) performed a pseudo-longitudinal study of article usage in spontaneous speech. His study seems to suggest the similar sequence which is found by (Parish, 1987), if one only looks at the percentage of articles correctly supplied in obligatory context.

(Master, 1995) also yielded some findings on the sequence of article acquisition. His analysis showed that the most frequent error was omission of the definite article, as cited by (Liu and Gleason, 2002). Given that the subjects were very advanced ESL students (Master's degree-level TESOL students), it would imply that *the* was perhaps acquired rather late in the ESL development of the article system. More importantly, it showed that the frequently missed *the* was largely the result of the subjects' not knowing that certain noun phrases were unique in the speech community. This finding would imply that certain uses of the definite article might be more difficult than others.

Based on Bickerton's (1981) Semantic Wheel Model, the study collected Chinese learners' performance on an article test, and then made a semantic analysis of the results. The main findings include: 1. The two features of referentiality, namely, whether or not the noun phrase has a specific referent and whether or not it is assumed known to the hearer ([±SR] and [±HK]) have a statistically significant influence on Chinese learners' article accuracy; [+SR, +HK] and [-SR, -HK] are proved to be the easiest while [-SR, +HK] is the most problematic. 2. Chinese learners tend to associate the definite article with [+HK] contexts rather than [+SR] contexts, for the overuse of the definite article in [+HK] environments is significantly higher than that in [+SR] contexts. Finally, several suggestions on English article instruction are pointed out for teachers in college.

In a study by Huebner (1979, 1983) on an adult L1 Laotian subject, it was found that *the* emerged early and the learner overgeneralized it. The indefinite article was learned late in L2.

Some Iranian researchers tried to find out a pattern in Persian learners of English use of articles; for example, Sarani (2003) conducted a study to find out the major areas of difficulties that students face in the target language, i.e. the occurrence of articles in different syntactic features. Subjects were divided into two groups with different lengths of exposure to English to see what kind of errors, if any, get automatically repaired over a period of time. He examined it and he established a hierarchy of difficulties that Persian undergraduates faced in the use of articles. His findings revealed that most of the errors the students committed were due to the nature as well as the

grammatical complexity of the articles in English, i.e. L1 independent which cannot be explained in terms of transfer from the native language.

Farahani, Roodbari, and Ghodrati (2011) conducted a study on Iranian learners identifying the kinds of errors they commit in the use of articles. All the sixty two students were asked to write on various topics and the data was collected on the basis of their written works. Sometimes one topic which was chosen by the researcher was given to the students and they were asked to write on that special topic. This data was studied with a view to find out the sources of errors committed by them. The errors were also arranged according to their probable sources like L1 transfer, Overgeneralization, False Cognate..., etc. After four assignments of this kind (error avoiding assignment), 12 learners were selected. Nine types of errors were identified, and their frequency computed. The results show that deletion of the article possess the greatest problem among the learners and this is because Persian doesn't have any equivalent for the definite article (*the*), while the equivalent for *the* in Arabic is *ال* and there may be other equivalents for *the* in other languages.

Khoshgowar(2002) had a research which is entitled English Article Production in Guided Conversation by Afghan Dari EFL Learners, analyzed patterns of use of English articles ( *a/an, the, zero* ) in guided conversations with Afghan Dari speakers who are intermediate or advanced English learners and who do have an article system in their primary language, Dari. In this research, six intermediate and six advanced learners participated by discussing similar topics (their first impressions of the USA, their life in Manhattan, their classes, and their future plans). These conversations were recorded and transcribed. The collected data were analyzed on the basis of referentiality, information status and various properties of nouns. The results indicate that the participants were most accurate in their production of the indefinite article ' *a/an* ' in referential and non-referential contexts with new information, the definite ' *the* ' in referential contexts with known information, while the *zero* was difficult for both ELP (intermediate) and Post-ELP (advanced) learners mostly in referential contexts.

Momenzade, Youhanaee, and Kassaian(2014), also tried to prove that Persian learners use fluctuation Hypothesis because Persian lacks definite article. Their study attempted to explore the acquisition of the English article system by Persian speakers. The sample taking part in their study consisted of forty-three Persian-speaking learners of English as a foreign language. Using data elicited through a grammaticality judgment test and a translation test from forty-three learners at three levels of grammatical knowledge, their study showed that learners had persistent difficulty in acquiring both definite and indefinite articles in English. Based on their study, it was only at the highly advanced level that learners showed mastery of the indefinite article but still remained non-native-like in their use of the definite article.

Ahmadi and Vahdani(2015) conducted a study on the EFL learners. They chose 45 learners from three different proficiency levels; they wanted to find out the relationship between their proficiency levels and their use of articles, also their performance in both recognition and production tests were tested. They found out that all learners had problems in their use of definite and

indefinite articles, even advanced learners failed to recognize and produce the correct articles in this research. This research proved that learners usually perform better in recognition tests than in production tests. We can say that overuse and underuse were common in all proficiency levels and misuse of articles happened not so often. The fact that learners tend to ignore using an article in a specific situation (underuse) showed that learners usually avoid using articles when they do not know how to apply them. Different types of articles seem to make different kind of burden for learners.

Ansari (1993) has an investigation with this title “non-generic use of the definite article by Persian EFL learners” in this study he chose his 49 subjects from undergraduate students of Tabriz University. They were placed in three different proficiency levels based on Cambridge placement test. Ninety-one sentences were used to test the use of *the*. Subjects were asked to put *the* where they think it’s necessary. After collecting data his results showed that by improving the proficiency level of learners, their ability in the use of article in structural and situational context improved too. But there is no difference between their proficiency level and cultural/textual use of articles. Also at intermediate level, students' over use of *the* will improve.

Thomas (1989) carried a research with 30 adult learners from 9 different L1s; German, French, Italian, Spanish and Greek (+ART languages) and Korean, Chinese, Japanese and Finnish (-ART languages). The ages of the participants ranged from 24 to 46. In order to collect data, participants were coupled within each group (-/+ ART languages). The results of the study revealed the fact that learners from the -ART languages tended to omit articles.

Atay(2010) carried a research in which he studied the article choices of learners from three different proficiency levels and effects of definiteness and specificity to their article choice were investigated. One hundred and twenty students from three groups of learners at different proficiency levels (40 elementary, 40 intermediate and 40 upper -intermediate students) were tested. The task consists of 40 short and contextualized dialogues. The target sentence in each dialogue is missing an article and learners were asked to fill the gap with an appropriate article; *a/an, the* or  $\emptyset$  on the bases of their understanding of the proceeding context. Dialogues in the task belong to four different contexts; i.e. definite/specific, definite/non-specific, indefinite/specific and indefinite/non-specific. His findings show that those L1 Turkish learners overused certain articles in certain contexts. In +definite/-specific and -definite/+specific contexts especially intermediate level learners overused the indefinite article *a* and definite article *the* respectively.

### 2.1 Objectives of the study

This study tries to find out the effects of teaching articles based on Huebner’s model on intermediate learners. The result of this study can somehow help learners and teachers to find out their difficult area in definite and indefinite articles and then teachers or learners themselves can improve that part; so knowing that teachers can teach articles in a more effective

way. The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between EFL learners' proficiency level and their use of English article system and to answer the following question:

a-Does teaching articles based on Huebner's model have any effect on intermediate EFL learners' use of articles?

### 3.1 Hypothesis

HO: Teaching articles based on the Huebner's model has no effects on learners' use of articles.

## 2. Methodology

### 1.2 Participants

The populations of this study were all the high school students in Chaboksar. Two schools were chosen randomly and according to the population of their learners, and after making sure about their levels, 30 students were chosen. The learners' ages varied from 14-16, both male and female learners were included. All the learners were in second grade of high school; in their book they had the concept of articles. All the learners were supposed to participate in this study, but as the researcher wanted a homogeneous samples he ran a proficiency test and learners who got 30-50 were involved in the test. After the test about 30 students were chosen.

### 2.2 Materials and procedure

For doing this study, thirty intermediate learners were chosen according to their performance on placement test. Then they were divided into two groups. Before the researcher started his experiment, he would run the pretest exam. It consists of 30 multiple questions which the researcher had adopted them from Modern English book 1. The tests are supposed to show learners performance on choosing articles. Thirteen tests were devoted to definite articles and 13 tests to indefinite articles 4 items were devoted to *zero* articles too. The reliability of the test is calculated about 0.65. After administrating the pre-test the researcher started the experiment. The first group which we called EX1 would receive the treatment based on Huebner's model. In each session the researcher taught one of the components of this model. In the first session he would discuss [-SR, +HK] (generics), which were marked with *a*, *the*, or *zero*. Then he would provide some examples to clarify them more, he would also ask them to say as many examples as they can. The second session, Type 2 [+SR, +HK], was taught which are referential definite and are marked with *the*. Again like the first session he provided them with some examples. Type 3, [+SR, -HK], includes first mentioned nouns, whose referent is identifiable to the speaker but not the listener, again like the previous sessions the researcher explained them to learners and ask them to mention more examples. e. Type 4 nouns, classified as [-SK, -HK] were taught in the last sessions. The second group or the control group consisted of 15 learners. They had the same proficiency level as EX group.

They had the same four sessions but they were not told anything about the classification. The researcher just explained them briefly about some special

situations in which they should use articles. To mention some he said about using articles with known nouns. They were given some examples as well.

### 3.2 Data analysis

The researcher analyzed the data obtained via calculating a t-test between the post – tests of definite and indefinite article scores of the experimental and the control groups of the study and ANCOVA between the pre – tests and post – tests of the experimental and control group of the study to see any progress happened from pre – test to the post – test or in fact during the treatment period.

### 3. Findings

The findings of this research showed that teaching articles based on Huebner’s Model had a positive effect on intermediate EFL learners’ use of articles .

Table 1

*Descriptive analysis of the data of the control group of the study*

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Er.	Std. Dev.	Variance
Preco	15	11.00	7.00	18.00	13.0000	.76842	2.97610	8.857
postco	15	9.00	9.00	18.00	15.2000	.64881	2.51282	6.314
Valid N (listwise)	15							

According to table (1), the total number of participants (N) was 15 in the pretest and posttest of the control group. The minimum score or the smallest score for pretest was 7 but the minimum score for posttest was 9 but the maximum score or the largest score for the pretest and posttest of the control group was 18. The mean score for the pretest and posttest of the control group has been shown as 13 and 15.2 respectively. The Standard Deviation has been calculated as 2.97 for the pretest and 2.51 for the posttest, that is the average deviation of all scores from the mean score of the pretest and posttest was 2.97, and 2.51 respectively. The variance for the pretest scores was 8.85 and for the posttest scores, 6.31 . The valid N has been shown as 15 which referred to the number of non-missing values of the control group, that is, all the participants in the control group participated in the research. The descriptive analysis of the pretest and the posttest of the experimental group have been shown in table (2).

Table 2

*Descriptive analysis of the data of the experimental group of the study*

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Er.	Std. Dev.	Variance
PreEx	15	10.00	7.00	17.00	11.9333	.78962	3.05817	9.352
PostEx	15	7.00	13.00	20.00	15.8000	.62640	2.42605	5.886
Valid (listwise)	N 15							

According to table (2), the total number of participants (N) has been 15 in the pretest and posttest of the experimental group. The minimum score or the smallest score for the pretest was 7 but this value was 13.00 for the posttest. Also, the maximum score for posttest was 20 while this value for pretest was 17. For the standard deviation obtained for the experimental group, there sounds to be more variability among the pretest of listening scores than the scores in the posttest of the listening. This may show that the participants' posttest scores being more homogenous after presenting the treatment of the study (Using Huebner's model). There were 15 participants and there has been no missing value which means that all participants participated in the experiment of this study.

Table 3  
*The T-test result of the study*

		t-test for Equality of Means				
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Article use	Equal variances assumed	3.004	28	.006	2.40000	.79881

According to table (3), the t-test results of the study between the posttest scores of both experimental and control groups of the study are shown. The observed t value was calculated to be 3.004. The degree of freedom (df) was 28. The level of significance (sig.2-tailed) was calculated as to be .006 which has been used in calculating the data for the rejection or support of the hypothesis of the study. The mean difference was shown as 2.4, that is, the difference between the mean scores of the post-tests of the control group and the experimental group of this study was calculated as 2.4. The next inferential analysis of data in this study was indicated to be the degree of covariance between the pretest and the posttest of using articles in both the experimental and control groups of the study.

Table 4  
*Covariance analysis of the control group of the study*

Source	Type II Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	69.750(a)	1	69.750	48.619	.000
article	20.777	1	20.777	14.483	.002
Pretestco	69.750	1	69.750	48.619	.000
Error	18.650	13	1.435		
Total	3554.000	15			
Corrected Total	88.400	14			

a R Squared = .789 (Adjusted R Squared = .773)



Table 5  
*Covariance Analysis of the Experimental Group of the Study*

Source	Type II Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	62.968(a)	1	62.968	42.126	.000
articles	49.050	1	49.050	32.815	.000
pretestEX	62.968	1	62.968	42.126	.000
Error	19.432	13	1.495		
Total	3827.000	15			
Corrected Total	82.400	14			

According to tables (4 and 5), the covariance between the two sets of pretest and posttest scores in the experimental group is 48.61 and 42.12 in the control group of the study. This means that the scores of experimental group is higher than the control group, so the experimental group has undergone a progress compared to the control group whose score is lower than the experimental group. Thus, it can be concluded that the experimental group worked better than the control group because of being treated with traditional method of teaching.

#### 4. Discussion

First of all, according to the descriptive analysis of the given data and based on the table (1), (2), the mean scores of the pretest and posttest of the control group was 13 and 15.20 and for the experimental group was 11.93 and 15.80 respectively. So, these two tables showed that there was no significant change in the mean scores of the control group, but this change was very significant in the mean scores of the experimental group and it is an evidence for rejection of the hypothesis.

In addition, the results of the T-Test in table (3) showed that the observed  $t$  value was calculated by the SPSS was 3.004 ( $t$  observed = 3.004) while the critical  $t$  value determined on the basis of considering  $df$  and the 2-tailed significance level of 0.05 ( $p=0.05$ ) was 2.048. So, the observed  $t$  value was higher than the critical  $t$  value and high enough to reject the null hypothesis of the study. Also, it was presented in the table (3), the level of significance for two-tailed value calculated by the SPSS to be .006. This value was less than 0.05 (based on the SPSS regulations) and it confirmed the rejection of the hypothesis. It could be concluded that there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the posttests of the control group and experimental group. There is no chance for calculating the difference between the means of the posttests of the study, so it shows that using Huebner's Model is so effective on using articles of Iranian intermediate EFL learners.

According to tables (4 and 5), it was shown that the rejection of the hypothesis of the study by indicating the experimental group participants' progress from pretest to the posttest of the study. The covariance value between the pretest and posttest scores in the experimental group was

higher than of the control group. This meant that using Huebner's Model has affected the Iranian intermediate EFL learners' use of articles. Also, the covariance value between the pretest to the posttest scores in the control group was lower than that of experimental group.

### 5. Conclusions

As it has been mentioned earlier in this study, articles are important for learners' native like performance, while most of the learners tend to omit or overuse articles and this make their English somehow artificial. As the findings of this research showed all learners have problems in their use of articles. Most of the course books that are taught in language schools, lack a precise guide for definite and indefinite articles, which can be another issue to address for further studies. Further researches are recommended on different learners especially in highschools that have been exposed to English more. Also it will be a good idea to have a research on different types of definite and indefinite articles separately based on different model. A short text with missing articles can be used to find out learners' production ability; designing a test in which learner can produce articles orally or write a short paragraph will be advantageous. Designing a teaching method based on these findings can be useful, also if teachers are eager to do an action research on their own classes about the use of articles for different levels, this subject is recommended.

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