

## **Difficulties in Using English Articles among EFL Students: A Case Study of Second-Year Students at the Department of English, College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the difficulties Iraqi EFL students encounter in using English articles.(a, an, the). The study was done among second-year students of the Department of English in the College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, in the 2025–2026 academic year. The study adopts a descriptive–analytical research design. and data collected through two tools that include a short writing task and questionnaire that has been given to fifty students. The examination of the writing made by the students has shown that the most common type of error was omission, and addition, substitution, and problems with the zero article were less frequent. These issues continue to occur, and they appear to be connected with the impact of the Arabic language, the tendency to enforce the rules too broadly, and the lack of understanding of how the articles operate in the real–life situations. The results of the questionnaires also revealed that many students believe that using articles is difficult and they require more detail and experience. The study indicates that the problems are caused by both language factors and the approaches to the classroom where the students are taught to

pay more attention to illustrative examples and emphasize the main differences between Arabic and English.

**Keywords: English articles, EFL learners, grammatical errors, Iraqi students.**

صعوبات استخدام أدوات التعريف والتنكير في اللغة الإنجليزية لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية  
دراسة حالة لطالبات المرحلة الثانية في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية: كلغة أجنبية  
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### الملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى توضيح الصعوبات التي تواجه طالبات اللغة الإنكليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية في استخدام أدوات التعريف والتنكير (a، an، the). وقد أجريت الدراسة على طالبات المرحلة الثانية في قسم اللغة الإنكليزية بكلية التربية للبنات، جامعة بغداد، للعام الدراسي 2025-2026، واعتمدت المنهج الوصفي-التحليلي عبر مهمة كتابية واستبانة شملت خمسين طالبة، أظهرت النتائج أن أخطاء الحذف كانت الأكثر شيوعاً، تليها أخطاء الإضافة والاستبدال وسوء استخدام الأداة الصفيرية. وترتبط هذه الأخطاء بتأثير اللغة الأم، والمبالغة في تطبيق القواعد، وضعف الوعي بوظيفة الأدوات في السياق. كما أوضحت الاستبانة أن معظم الطالبات يعددن الأدوات من أكثر الموضوعات النحوية صعوبة، ويحتجن إلى تدريب أوضح وأمثلة سياقية، تخلص الدراسة إلى أن مشكلات استخدام الأدوات تعود إلى عوامل لغوية وتعليمية، وتوصي بطرائق تدريس تعتمد على التطبيق السياقي والمقارنة بين العربية والإنكليزية. الكلمات المفتاحية: أدوات التعريف والتنكير، متعلمات اللغة الإنكليزية، الأخطاء النحوية، الطلاب العراقيين

## 1. Introduction

Correct use of grammar is an important aspect of effective academic writing. Articles (a، an، and the) are one of the most difficult fields in the English language among various other grammatical elements of English that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners face. Even though articles are tiny words that are extensively used، their proper use is not possible without the knowledge of some complex concepts of language including definiteness، specificity، and shared knowledge among

participants. The learners whose first language lacks an equivalent system of articles often have a hard time trying to tell these differences. Within natural language acquisition, the usage of articles is normally acquired by constant exposure and communication by the native speakers. Conversely, EFL learners tend to rely on explicit grammatical teaching and learning by means of rules. Nevertheless, the awareness of the rules of using articles is not a surety to use them correctly in the real communicative situation. This means that most learners still have problems in making decisions on what to do to an article; whether to use it, leave it, or substitute it with another form. The challenges are especially apparent in the academic writing, where students have to be able to exhibit a high standard of grammatical correctness. This is more so the case as the learners end up leaving out required articles, adding unequal articles or replacing one article with the other. These mistakes can make the written texts less clear, coherent, and grammatical of students. It is particularly evident in the case of Arabic-speaking English learners. Arabic and English are quite different in terms of how the latter is expressed in terms of definiteness and indefiniteness. Whereas in English it is possible to use both definite and indefinite articles, in Arabic the definite article is denoted by prefix al- and the indefinite article is not used. This linguistic difference tends to make the learners transfer patterns written in their native language to English. Even after years of studying English, there are still a number of Iraqi college students that have problems with the correct usage of English articles. Thus, exploring these challenges may help to comprehend the essence of learners mistakes and discover the linguistic and pedagogical elements that leading to it. The present research will explore the nature of errors related to articles that Iraqi EFL students commit and discuss the potential causes of such mistakes. Moreover, the research aims at determining the perception of students towards the challenges linked to

the use of articles and recommending pedagogical solutions that can be used to enhance grammatical accuracy of learners in academic writing.

### **1.2 Background of the Study**

Although the English articles a, an and the do not appear to be much, they are very fundamental in learning English. Those who read a lot or even chat a lot see them a lot, yet lots of individuals are still having difficulties utilizing them properly. The native speakers learn to use articles with time by being exposed to it whereas EFL learners often require specific instructions, particularly when their native language lacks such a system. An example can be the case of Arabic where definiteness is marked differently and does not require the use of a word to denote indefiniteness. This difference renders it more difficult to the individuals learning English to detect when they require an article. It is a greater problem with academic writing. Years of English study do not solve problems with the use of articles to a large part of Iraqi college students. They usually omit the, misuse a/an or add an article where there is none required. These weaknesses render their work less understandable and less precise in general.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

Small words have a lot of power; their importance is immense in terms of grammar and meaning. Learning how to use them properly remains a challenge to the Iraqi EFL students. The writing of the students tends to show the fact that they are not sure what they should say, they use articles differently, or they do not use them. The variables that might have led to these errors include the native language of the learners, lack of direct instruction, or lack of an open opportunity to apply the English language in real life situations. This study aims at establishing the problems of the Iraqi learners, as well as analyzing the main causes behind their mistakes.

### **1.4 Objective of the Research**

This paper will look into issues facing second-year students at the English Department at the College of Education for Women vis-a vis the use of English articles. It tries to categorize the various types of the article related errors in their writing, examine the linguistic and pedagogical causes of such errors, and suggest the methods of teaching to develop the accuracy of students and increase their general writing competence.

### **1.5 Questions for Research**

The following are the main questions explored in the research:

1. What are the problems of the Iraqi EFL students in the process of using the English articles (a, an and the)?
2. What are the most common blunders that they make in writing?
3. What are some of the instructional strategies that can be used to address such issues and make them less severe?

### **1.6 Objectives of the Research**

The study aims at fulfilling a number of goals. First, it is interested in revealing and collecting the main problems that EFL learners have when using English articles. It also discusses the mistakes, which students do frequently commit as they write. Another aspect that is also examined in the study is the language and teaching factors which may be contributing to the occurrence of these blunders.

### **1.7 Importance of the Research**

The results of this study should be useful to the teachers and students. In the case of teachers, they can know which aspects of using articles are the most difficult and they can plan their lessons in a better way. The students can be more conscious and write better because they will know why they constantly make mistakes. The research paper contributes to the few studies conducted regarding the article use by

Iraqi EFL learners. It will assist in the future research related to the same circumstances.

### **1.8 The Research's Scope and Limitations**

This paper only examines the challenges that EFL students experience in using the English articles. The research will be restricted to the Department of English second-year students of the College of Education for Women at the University of Baghdad in the academic year 2025–2026. In order to ensure homogeneity in language proficiency, the participants have the same academic qualification. The review is restricted to the mistakes in written work of students and does not consider other grammatical errors which are tense, prepositions, subject–verb agreement etc. The sample is insufficient, therefore, the findings may not hold on all EFL Iraqi students. However, they may still be applied in other research which are similar.

### **1.9 Definition of Key Terms**

**Articles:** These are words that precede nouns to indicate that they are definite, general or specific.

**EFL Students:** Students who learn English as a foreign language at a situation where it is not the mother tongue like in Iraq. **Mistakes:** Common violations of the standard English grammar that are manifested in the text of students.

**Difficulties:** The hardships that the learners encounter in their efforts to comprehend and handle the grammatical rules competently.

**Interlanguage:** This is the emerging system of language that develops as learners learn a second language, which is influenced by their first language, and their experiences of learning.

## **2.Theoretical Framework**

This part will describe the theoretical basis of the study by stating the key concepts of linguistics connected with the use of English articles, as well as discussing the most critical problems of the article acquisition by

EFL students. It dwells on the topics of definiteness, specificity, and reference, as well as the categorization of the English articles and the challenges that are usually faced by learners when trying to use them correctly. The argument relies on the available literature on linguistics and applied linguistics that point out how complicated the English system of articles is, and how difficult it is to learn by people whose native language is not English.

### **2.1 The concept and Usage of Articles.**

Articles are the grammatical elements placed in the front of the nouns and they demonstrate whether the noun is specific, general, or referenced. They are of vital importance in determining the meaning interpretation in discourse. Swan (2005:76) reunites that articles assist the speaker to express whether the reference is particular or general, familiar or unfamiliar and whether the noun in question describes countable and uncountable things. Corpus linguistics researches have also revealed that one of the most common words of English is articles. Biber and others (1999) note that the article is a regular element in both spoken and written discourse hence it is an essential element in English grammar. They are however not necessarily easy to learn because they are of high frequency. Quite contrary, the use of the article frequently causes problems to learners, as it depends not only on the semantic, but also on the pragmatic considerations, but not on the purely grammar rules. The sentence I saw a dog will present a new object to the discussion, and the sentence I saw the dog will bring an already known or recognisable object to the discussion (Leech and Svartvik, 2002:198). These differences show that the use of articles implies grammatical composition and discourse analysis. According to Celce–Murcia and Larsen–Freeman (1999:275), the choice of the correct article needs not only information about the grammatical principles, but also about what a listener is supposed to know. Thus, the articles

operate at the discourse and grammatical level indicating the new information, its sharing, and previously mentioned information in the communication. English articles are classified into three groups: narrative articles, ritual articles, and instructional articles. The English articles are categorized into three primary categories namely the definite article, indefinite articles and the zero article (Leech and Svartvik, 2002:273). All types have varied functions in bringing out reference and meaning in discourse.

## **2.2 Classification of English Articles**

The definite article the is adopted to discuss the nouns which the speaker and the audience are aware or discussing. An example is that the sun rises in the east is a unique object whereas the book on the table is a specific object (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999: 275). The definite article may also be applied to superlatives (the best), ordinal numerals (the first), and well defined nouns.

The Vowels Articles: a and an.

Using the indefinite articles in the beginning of a sentence before a single countable noun, you are referring to an ambiguous or unspecified or newly introduced thing. An precedes the vowel sounds (such as an apple) and a precedes the consonant sounds (such as an car). They introduce facts to the discussion (Swan, 2005: 88).

### **2.2.1 The Definite Article**

The definite article the is applied when the referent is recognizable or one which is already known to both parties, the speaker and listener. It can be something special, already discussed or evident in a specific circumstance. As an instance, in the sentence, the sun rises in the east, the noun denotes a special object. On the same note, the book on the table is an object that can be identified in the circumstance (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999:275).

The definite article is another such usage that is mostly applicable to the use of superlative adjectives, ordinal numbers as well as the nouns that have already been defined within the discourse.

### **2.2.2 The Indefinite Articles**

Articles a and an are indefinite and precede singular countable nouns when they refer to non-specific objects, or objects that are new. The a form is used before sounds of consonants, and the an form is used before the sounds of vowels (Swan, 2005:88). These are the articles that generally present new information into an argument or a text and indicate the referent that has not been brought up before.

### **2.2.3 The Zero Article**

The zero article is those cases when there is no article in front of a noun. It is frequently used when the plural nouns and the uncountable nouns are used in general sense. As an example, the sentences like Books are expensive or Water is essential to life include the use of the zero article in general reference. The zero article also is used with proper nouns, and some fixed phrases like going to school, at home, or in university (Huddleston and Pullum, 2005:114).

## **2.3 Articles and their role in English Communication.**

Articles are very important in helping to elucidate minute nuances in meaning and reference in the process of communication. Proper use of the article can be used to show the presence of a known, unknown, or non-replicated item. Articles can be used out of context and cause confusion or ambiguity even when other parts of the sentence are grammatically correct (Master, 1997:218). An example would be the sentence I went to school generally means that one went to school as a student, and the sentence I went to the school means that one went into a specific building. These differences depict the effect of article usage in determining the meaning of a discourse. Moreover, the correct use of articles shows grammatical and pragmatic competence of a

learner. According to Butler, the choice of the right article by the learners is to a great extent based on their metalinguistic comprehension of the concepts of definiteness and specificity (2002:468). Learners should, therefore, acquire not only the knowledge of grammatical rules, but also an insight of how meaning is communicated within the context of communication.

#### **2.4 Learning English Articles challenges among EFL Students.**

It has also been demonstrated that the use of articles is one of the hardest areas of English grammar among EFL learners. Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004: 5) say that learners often have problems since article choice involves the knowledge of abstract semantic differences which can not exist in their native language. The errors concerning articles are common even among advanced learners implying that the article system is not acquired rapidly and it is hardly ever accurate to the native level (Master, 1997:216). Structural difference between English and most other languages is one of the main causes of this challenge. Such languages as Arabic, Chinese, and Russian do not have the system of articles that English possesses. Therefore, students with these language backgrounds are forced to learn new semantic differences that they do not have in the first language like definiteness and indefiniteness (Swan, 2005:87). To explain this phenomenon, Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004:10) put forward Fluctuation Hypothesis. The hypothesis is based on the fact that learners in whose first language there are no articles can switch between two meanings when choosing articles: definiteness and specificity. Consequently, the learners might occasionally turn to semantic knowledge like familiarity as opposed to the grammatical rules of using articles in the English language. The first language interference has also been deemed as one of the most critical contributors to misuse of the articles. Arabic also uses the prefix al- when defining the nouns but does not use a similar form to show the indefinite articles. This

contrast usually makes Arabic speaking learners drop either a or an where they should have been used in English (Kharma. 1981:15). It has already been demonstrated through earlier research that the most frequent kinds of article errors that occur among learners speaking the Arabic language are the omission and substitution errors (Celce–Murcia and Larsen–Freeman. 1999:274).Kharma (1981:19) also writes that the omission of indefinite articles is more common than the omission of definite article. Besides language, the pedagogical practices can also be a source of these challenges. In most educational settings, grammar teaching is usually focused on memorization of rules as opposed to contextual application of language. According to Huddleston and Pullum (2005:117), introducing article rules alone can deter a learner to acquire the semantic and pragmatic rules that guide the application of the rules. Therefore, students can acquire fragmented or uneven metalinguistic information on the use of articles (Butler, 2002:468).Due to grammatical form and the common knowledge held by both parties, article selection is not only done based on grammatical form but also based on shared knowledge by the speaker and the listener and therefore such rules may prove hard to apply accurately in actual communicative context (Leech and Svartvik, 2002:64). Lastly, the continuation of article errors could be interpreted in the context of Interlanguage Hypothesis. Selinker (1972:210) says that the second language learners acquire a dynamic linguistic system which is determined by the mother tongue as well as exposure to the target language. In this sense, article errors are not accidental but they are process steps towards the growth of interlanguage of learners.

### **2.5 Previous Studies**

A lot of studies have explored the issues facing EFL learners in English articles in various contexts. The majority of these studies indicate that articles are one of the most difficult aspects of the English grammar.

Early studies pointed out the effect of the first language of the learners especially in the language lacking an article system like English like the Arabic language. This tends to create a skip of a/an and inconsistent application of the Later research, where Ionin, Ko, and Wexler proposed the Fluctuation Hypothesis, which states that the selection of articles may be based on either definiteness or specificity depending on how the noun phras is interpreted, the MAster's research also showed that even advanced learners remain fact-finding with articles, which indicates that explicit and context-based teaching should be given.

There is also an indication that article misuse is prevalent among EFL learners as identical patterns of errors are being reported by speakers of Japanese, Chinese, and other non-article languages. These findings have been repeated by more recent studies in Iraq. Altogether, the problem of article misuse is caused by linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical reasons, and further research in the context of Iraqi EFL should be considered.

## **2.6Recent Studies on Article Acquisition in EFL Contexts**

The current studies on the second language acquisition have constantly affirmed that the application of the English articles is still a difficult aspect when considering the English learners whose mother tongue has no similar system of articles. Research on EFL EFL situations suggests that errors in doing articles still occur even with higher learners especially in academic writing. As an example, Ionin and Montrul observe that the most common method of choosing articles is the application of semantic interpretation (instead of grammatical definiteness), and thus there is always a variation in the use of articles (Ionin and Montrul, 2019:214). There has also been empirical research on the nature of errors that are made by university students in articles. Diez-Bedmar and Perez-Paredes discovered that the omission and substitution errors are common in written texts written by EFL learners.

particularly in the situations that involve the use of generic reference and abstract nouns (Diez–Bedmar and Perez–Paredes, 2020:97). Based on their findings, they propose that even having learners grasp the rules of articles in theory, they seem to have a problem in applying it in real writing circumstances. Other more recent researches point to the contribution of the instructional practices in enhancing the usage of the articles. Garcia Mayo and Hawkins claim that explicit training in grammar and communicative practice may help learners to use articles correctly during discourse to a great extent (Garcia Mayo and Hawkins, 2022:163). This indicates that instructions involving a combination of grammatical elucidation and contextualizing the application of language can help to minimize errors in articles.

### **2.7 Analytical Framework to be used in the study.**

The current research uses an analytical construct whose major framework revolves around error analysis so as to determine and classify the challenges that Iraqi EFL learners face when utilizing English articles. The error analysis enables the researcher to study the nature, occurrence and cause of errors made by the learners and offers a clue into the stages through which second language learning occurs. Moreover, the research will use the questionnaire data to answer the question about how learners perceive challenges in using the articles and what could be the instructional causes of such mistakes.

### **3. Methodology**

This section explains the research design, participants, research tools and data analysis processes adopted in the study. This methodology aims at examining the challenges facing the Iraqi EFL students in their written production with the use of English articles and the perceptions of these students about them.

### **3.1 Research Design**

The present study takes the descriptive–analytical research design to investigate the challenges experienced by the Iraqi EFL learners when using English articles (a, an and the). This design was chosen as it will enable the researcher to determine the kind of errors that arise in the process of students writing productions and also be able to interpret the potential reasons behind such errors. This research is a combination of a quantitative and qualitative study. The quantitative element aims at determining the number of times and the percentage of errors that the students make relating to the articles. The qualitative component will seek to explain the nature of such mistakes, and the linguistic and pedagogical influences that might lead to occurrence of such mistake. The data were collected using two research instruments. The initial tool was a brief writing task that aimed at receiving the genuine written samples among the participants. The second tool was a questionnaire that was to be used to investigate the perceptions of the students about the challenges they face when using English articles.

### **3.2 Population and Sample**

The sample size in the research is the students of the Department of English, College of Education of Women, University of Baghdad. The sample consisted of 50 students in their second year of studies in the academic year 2025–2026. The sample chosen was based on the same level of education to provide a relatively similar sample in regards to the level of language proficiency and English grammar classes exposure. This homogeneity assisted in minimizing the possible variation of the data that could have occurred due to the level of academic difference. The written papers by the students were accounted to detect and categorize the errors connected with the usage of English articles. Data received were put into Microsoft excel and were discussed with the help of descriptive statistical methods. The

frequencies and percentages of each types of error were calculated to demonstrate which patterns of article misuse were the most common in the writing of the students.

### **3.3 Research Instruments**

This study involved two instruments.

- Writing Task

The initial tool was a writing activity which involved the students to come up with a short writing on the English language. This assignment was aimed at motivating students to write in informal language and to present the real-life examples of their written work. The articles were then examined to determine the mistakes that were made on the application of English articles.

- Questionnaire

The second tool was a questionnaire which was applied to the same students. The questionnaire was to be used in the research of the perception of the students on the challenges they face during the use of English articles. It comprised a number of statements concerning the usage of articles and the students were requested to respond to them on a five-point Likert scale where Strongly Agree (5) was the highest and Strongly Disagree (1) the lowest.

### **3.4 Questionnaire Validity and Reliability.**

The questionnaire items were revised by the professionals in the English language teaching and applied linguistics to guarantee the validity of the questionnaire. Their responses were used to improve the wording of the statements and ensure that the questionnaire questions were suitable in gauging the perception of students regarding the challenges facing the use of English articles.

Cronbach Alpha coefficient was used to test the reliability of the questionnaire. The statistical analysis software was used and the value obtained was good enough to show that there is acceptable internal

consistency. This implies that the items of the questionnaire were reliable enough to indicate the perceptions students have towards difficulties in using the articles.

The effects of first language interference on the usage of articles are also supported by studies that were performed in Arabic speaking EFL settings. According to Alhaysony, students often fail to use indefinite articles and excessively use the definite one because Arabic and English are structurally different in this aspect (Alhaysony, 2018:35). These results qualify the perception that cross lingual variations are significant in defining inter language systems of learners.

Combined, these studies reveal that troubles of using the articles are still a serious problem of second language learning. Although much has been done in this field, more studies are yet to be done in certain educational settings. Specifically, the attention has been paid to the Iraqi university learners and their written production relatively sparsely. Thus, the current paper will research the nature and the occurrence rates of article-related errors among Iraqi EFL students and discuss the reasons behind such challenges.

#### **۳.۴ Writing Task Design**

The writing assignment was meant to bring out natural written output in the students so that the variations in the use of the English articles could be observed. Participants were requested to compose a short piece about a familiar subject that could be related to the daily lives e.g. describing their university life or life day in day out. The reason behind choosing the topic is that it can make the students create descriptive sentences that would automatically involve using articles.

Students were asked to write around 120–150 words in a restricted classroom time. The instructions outlined that the students need to write without the use of dictionaries and other external aids. This was done in

an attempt to get spontaneous language production, which is indicative of the actual grammatical competence of the learners.

### **۳.۵ Identification and Analysis of errors.**

Written works provided by the learners were critically examined to identify the errors that mention the usage of English articles. All the texts were hand-checked in a bid to identify the erroneous instances of definite article (the), the indefinite articles (a, an), and the zero article.

The four broadly accepted categories employed in the research concerning error analysis were used to find out the errors. The amount of errors that were made by each group was added up post classification to establish the trends of most prevalent patterns of the article misuse among the participants.

### **۳.۶ Statistical Analysis**

The descriptive statistical methods were used in the data analysis. Each of the types of errors was determined frequency and percentage to get the distribution of errors of writing by the students regarding articles.

In the example of the questionnaire data, the descriptive statistics including the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) were calculated in the attempt to measure the level of agreement with reference to the students in respect to each statement. The statistical calculation was conducted in Microsoft excel.

### **3.7 Coding and Error Analysis Processes.**

Once the written compositions were gathered, each of the texts was thoroughly reviewed and coded in relation to article related errors. All errors that had been identified were put on a list and put into the classification system as outlined above.

The technique of the coding was to check each sentence of the compositions to establish whether the article usage was right or wrong according to the typical grammatical rules. The total number of errors in each category was computed after the coding stage had been done.

The rate and proportion of each of the types of errors were then calculated to establish the major trends in the misuse of articles in the writing of the students.

### 3.8 Accuracy of the Analysis of Error.

The coding of the errors in the articles was checked by another expert in English linguistics to increase the validity of the analysis. Each of the two evaluators analysed a sample of the compositions of the students separately to ascertain the correctness of the error identification and classification.

The two assessments compared revealed a great degree of consensus in the process of detecting and classifying errors of the articles which proves the stability of the evaluation steps.

## 4. Results and Discussion

This part includes the findings of the analysis of the written compositions of the students and the questionnaire answers. The findings are introduced in a quantitative approach by classifying the errors associated with the articles and then the findings are interpreted in comparison to those of the past research and theoretical explanations.

### 4.1 Distribution of Article Errors

The written compositions analyzed showed that there was a total of 326 errors related to the article. These mistakes were categorized into four groups namely omission, addition, substitution and misuse of the zero article. Table 1 provides the frequency and percentage of the all types of errors used.

***Table 1 Distribution of Article Errors among Iraqi EFL Students***

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Omission	142	43.6%
Addition	78	23.9%
Substitution	63	19.3%
Zero Article Misuse	43	13.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>326</b>	<b>100%</b>

The omission errors constitute the highest percentage of article related errors (43.6%), as indicated in Table 1. This shows that students often leave out articles in situations where they should be present especially the indefinite articles a and an. 23.9 percent of the total errors occurs because of addition errors as some learners can add articles when it is not necessary. Substitution errors show 19.3% which is the confusion of definite and indefinite reference. The use of the zero article is less common (13.2%), yet it also suggests that it is not easy to determine the cases when no article is to be used.

#### **4.2. Interpretation of Patterns of Error.**

The analysis of writing process data proves the fact that Iraqi EFL students still suffer significant limitations in their accuracy in using English articles. The use of omission errors is mostly as a result of the first language of the learners. Arabic has a form of definiteness by using the prefix al- and lacks a grammatical form of the indefinite a and an. As a result, the learners tend to carry along the patterns in Arabic to English and as a result, they forget to use the articles where necessary. These findings are in line with other studies that have been conducted on Arabic as speaking learners. Research has revealed that omission and substitution are some of the most prevalent errors in articles committed by this category of learners especially those that involve indefinite articles (Kharma, 1981; Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Along with the influence of first language, the findings also indicate that there are cases when learners tend to overgeneralize grammatical rules. The fact that students make addition errors shows that they believe that most nouns have to precede the articles. This could be attributed to the fact that they have been taught the rules of using the article without adequately providing the semantic and pragmatic requirements that apply when using it. Substitution errors also prove that students can know the fundamental purpose of articles but do

not know how to use them in different situations. The observation confirms the Fluctuation Hypothesis advances by Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004), which argues that learners whose mother tongue does not have an article system can switch between every interpretation of definiteness and specificity in the choice of articles.

### 4.3 Questionnaire Results

To streamline the analysis of the writing task, the questionnaire was also conducted on the same group of students so as to investigate their perceptions in relation to using English articles. Calculations of descriptive statistics, such as the mean and the standard deviation, were applied in the analysis of the responses. The questionnaire results are given in table 2.

**Table 2 Students' Perceptions of Difficulties in Using English Articles**

	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Using English articles correctly is difficult.	4.32	0.71
The difference between <i>a/an</i> and <i>the</i> is sometimes confusing.	4.08	0.76
Arabic affects my use of English articles.	4.15	0.69
I need more practice in using English articles.	4.58	0.62
The explanation of articles in class is sufficient.	2.94	0.83
I feel confident using articles in writing.	2.66	0.88

According to Table 2, articles written in English represent a challenging grammar field to most students. The statements connected with the necessity of getting additional practice and the impact of the first language showed high mean scores. Conversely, the mean scores were lower regarding the items on the confidence of the students in the use of the articles and the adequacy of classroom instruction. These findings correspond to the results of the writing analysis, which showed that the mistakes in using the articles were frequent.

#### **4.4 Discussion**

Combining the findings of the writing analysis with the answers to the questions provided in the questionnaire one can suggest that the misuse of articles in the case of Iraqi EFL learners is caused by a set of linguistic and pedagogical factors. Structural differences which exist between Arabic and English languages contribute significantly to the formation of mistakes among learners, linguistically speaking. Given that Arabic lacks indefinite articles, a learner can forget about a and an where these articles are needed in English. Pedagogically, the results imply that conventional grammar teaching might be insufficient in terms of covering contextual and discourse-related issues of articles use. Students can be taught grammatical rules in theory, but still fail to use them in real-life writing scenarios. These findings are also in line with the Interlanguage Hypothesis which was proposed by Selinker (1972) and it is said that second language learners build up an evolving linguistic system which is basically affected by the first language that they are offered in addition to the target language that they are exposed to. In this context, the error in the articles can be considered as a part of the development process of the learners and not as random errors. In general, the findings demonstrate the necessity of instructional methods that combine grammatical description and an activity-based language practice based on the context. These kinds of strategies can assist the learners in gaining a better appreciation of how the articles work in actual communication.

#### **5. Conclusions**

The paper has explored the challenges faced by Iraqi EFL students in the use of English articles with specific reference to the second-year learners in the Department of English, College of Education for Women, the University of Baghdad. The written compositions of students exposed through the analysis showed that mistakes made in the use of

articles are still prevalent even when considering learners of university level.

The results show that the most common form of error in articles is the omission errors. This trend is an indication of the high level of influence of the first language of the learners, as Arabic does not use grammatical equivalents of the indefinite articles a and an. This has led to students not including such forms where they are mandatory in English.

Their writing also had addition and substitution errors. These mistakes indicate that learners have incomplete information about the English system of articles but they still have a problem when it comes to drawing the line between definite and indefinite reference. This type of patterns signifies that the misuse of the articles is not accidental but has a developmental nature of the interlanguage learners.

The findings of this questionnaire also indicated that students know of their problems using English articles. It was stated that most of the participants found it difficult to use the articles and needed better explanations and additional practice. Simultaneously, the answers indicate that the existing teaching methods might not be effective enough to focus on the contextualized use of language.

In sum, the results indicate that the problems in using articles among the Iraqi EFL students are caused by the linguistic and pedagogical factors. To overcome these challenges, there is a need to apply the teaching method, which will combine grammatical explanation with meaningful language use in real communicative situations.

## **6. Recommendations**

In accordance with the results of the research, it is possible to suggest a few recommendations that would enhance the process of teaching and learning English articles among EFL students. The use of English articles should be more clearly taught by English teachers, and the

contextual and discourse-based explanations should be used instead of the isolated grammar rules.

1. To begin with, educators need to be more contextualized in providing instructions to English articles. Article rules should be presented not as isolated but they should be integrated with real-world examples and communicational tasks that demonstrate the role of articles in real speech.

2. comparison of the Arabic and English can assist the learners to realize the structural differences of the two languages. The emphasis on these differences will diminish negative transfer between the first language and raise the awareness of the learners on the usage of articles. An activity like regular writing assignments in the classroom should be undertaken which will enable students to use articles in their contexts.

3. more writing activities that require the students to use the rules of the articles in contextual use should be introduced in the classroom. Feedback on mistakes made in the articles can assist the students in slowly becoming more accurate in the production of the written works.

4. Lastly, the teachers ought to pay attention not to grammatical but also to the semantic and pragmatic sides of the articles usage. Assistance of learners in understanding the concepts of definiteness, specificity, and shared knowledge can help them to choose the right article in various communicative contexts.

### **8. Suggestions for Future Studies**

The future research can consider the following directions:

1. Repeat such studies using bigger samples in various Iraqi universities to give the best generalization to the results.

2. Compare the challenges in using the articles in various academic levels i.e. first-year and fourth-year students.

3. Explore the efficacy of certain teaching methods that can be used to enhance the use of articles among EFL students.
4. Investigate the use of articles in other language skills, e.g. speaking, reading, not writing.
5. Determine how technology-assisted language learning tools can enhance the accuracy of students when using English articles

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### **Appendix (A):**

Student Survey on their Problems in the use of English Articles.

This questionnaire will attempt to determine the thoughts of the students regarding the issues they experience when they use English articles (a, an and the). The information you provide will be applied only to academic research. Please read each of the statements and check the statement that best defines your feelings.

Instructions: To indicate the extent of agreeing or disagreeing with the statements, please indicate each of the statements by checking the corresponding box. ( ) the corresponding box.

Scale:

Strongly Agree 2 Agree 3 = Neutral 4 = Disagree 5 = Strongly Disagree.

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	The use of a, an, or the is something I struggle to resolve.					
2	I usually fail to use an article when I write in English.					
3	I am in puzzlement with a/an and the sometimes.					
4	I know the rules of using the articles, but I am not able to use them properly in written form.					
5	To me the distinction between definite and indefinite articles is evident.					
6	The language that I use in the English articles is influenced by my first language (Arabic).					
7	I will have accumulated sufficient training and practice in articles, during my grammar courses.					
8	I believe that correct use of articles is relevant in good writing.					
9	I should have more workouts and practices of using articles.					
10	I would feel more confident when using articles when my teacher provides feedback on the article.					