The Use of English Articles in the Writings of Emirati Students

Journal Article

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The use of the English article system poses difficulties for most learners of English. Previous research has found that Arabic learners of English seem to have certain difficulties in using the English articles, e.g. the use of the English indefinite article is believed to be particularly problematic, as the Arabic language has no indefinite article. This study aims at investigating the use of the English articles in the writings of Emirati students in particular. The findings suggest that, generally, Emirati learners of English share similar non-standard uses of English articles to those typical of Arabic learners of English. However, Emirati students seem to find the use of the zero and definite articles more problematic. This paper also briefly sketches the sociolinguistic situation in the United Arab Emirates with regard to English, and explains how English use in the Emirates is a highly interesting topic that is worth investigating.

Student Paper

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has witnessed an enormous economic development that granted the country an internationally recognized status as a trade centre and regional hub. The country attracts many expatriates looking for well-paying jobs and new opportunities. Today, expatriates outnumber Emiratis, "with the later amounting to about 10% of the total population" (Snoj 2015: n.p.). For various economic reasons, the UAE now attracts people not only from neighboring Arab and Asian countries, but also from all over the world. This provides a perfect setting for language contact on a large scale, where, in such a small country, many different languages are being used.

For many years, Arabic had served as a lingua franca in the UAE. But after the influx of significant numbers of non-Arabic speakers into the country, there was a pressing need for a lingua franca that accommodated the recent social and demographic changes. Similar to the situation in Singapore "where English has replaced Malay as the lingua franca over the last 50 years, English in Dubai is replacing Arabic" (Randall & Samimi 2010: 43). English has become *the* lingua franca in the UAE, so much so that native Arabic speakers may find it difficult to fulfil their basic daily needs without using English. In Dubai, for example, "English is required for a much greater range of social inter-actions, from shopping to receiving medical attention" (Randall & Samimi 2010: 43).

In a country where English plays such a significant role, many schools use English curricula. Most public schools, however, still use Arabic curricula for several subjects. Moreover, most universities in the UAE have adopted English as a medium of instruction. For instance, "in 2005, the UAE University, a government university and the largest university in the UAE, moved from class-room instruction in Arabic to instruction almost entirely in English" (Boyle 2012: 320). Due to the increasing importance of the English language in schools and higher education in the UAE, there was a need for an organized way of testing students' proficiency in English. Hence, as of 2006, The Common Educational Proficiency Assess-ment (CEPA) exams were employed to help facilitate students' admission into higher education (Ismail 2008: n.p.).

Given this background, the use of English in the Emirati society and the Emirati educational system is an interesting and timely topic. However, this topic is still under-researched. This study attempts to answer a particular question with regard to the use of English articles by Emirati learners of English. This feature has been mostly investigated among Arabic learners of English regardless of their regional origins in the Arab world. Hence, it is of great interest to investigate it in the English used by Emirati learners. To do so, this paper makes use of the BUiD Arab Learner Corpus (BALC)[1]. The focus will be on first year Sharjah University students' test essays and on English proficiency exam (CEPA)[2] test essays band 4 and band 6. In the texts examined, five different categories of non-standard use of English articles are found (*the* for *ø*, *ø* for *the*, *a/an* for *ø*, *ø* for *a/an*, *the* for *a/an*). These categories are based on Yacoub (2015).

This paper first briefly presents a reflection of the sociolinguistic and educa-tional realities in the UAE, which further explains how and why the investigation of English use in the Emirates is of interest. The third section offers a literature review, in which the Arabic and English article systems will be compared, along with a summary of common non-standard uses of English articles among Arabic learners. Then, the paper presents the methodology followed in this study, the results, and a discussion of the findings. Finally, the conclusion section offers a summary of the whole paper and implications for further research.

2. Background Information and Sociolinguistic Implications in the UAE

The present-day United Arab Emirates was formerly known as the Trucial States, as in March 1892 an exclusive treaty was signed between the Trucial Shaikhs[3] and the British Government wherein "[t]he shaikhs […] undertook on no account to cede, sell, mortgage or otherwise give for occupation any part of their territory save to the British Government" (Abdullah 1978: 25). It was only in July 1971 that "the seven Trucial States formed a federation, called The United Arab Emirates[4]" (Heard-Bey 2005: 357). Bordered by Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the Persian Gulf, the United Arab Emirates is located in the southeast corner of the Arabic peninsula (World atlas 2016). In 2013, the population of the UAE reached up to 9.2 million, 7.8 of which are migrants (Al Youha & Malit Jr. 2013). This grants the UAE the position of "the fifth-largest international migrant stock in the world" (Al Youha & Malit Jr. 2013: n.p.).

In the past few decades, the UAE witnessed massive changes from a country with an illiterate poor population seeking better chances in neighboring countries. "Now, the UAE faces its biggest challenges because of its extreme and sudden wealth – not poverty" (Heard-Bey 2005: 358). Oil discovery and industry, especially in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, permitted the Emirates a new outlook on development. Hence the Emirates, and in order to exploit the sudden national income, has been investing in seve-ral sectors including infrastructure, tourism industry, public health, and education.

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[1] The British University in Dubai Arab Learner Corpus: The corpus consists of 1,865 texts sourced from first year Sharjah University students and English proficiency exam tests scored and assigned from 1 to 6 (6 being the best).

[2] Common Educational Proficiency Assessment.

[3] *Shaikh* in this context denotes a tribe leader.

[4] The members of the emirates are Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras Al-Khaimah, Fujairah, Ajman and Umm al Qaywayn.

Clearly, education in the UAE has been going through rapid changes and developments that would keep up with the pace the country is generally developing at. According to the UAE ministry of education website, literacy rates have increased from 54.2% among men, and 30.3% among women in 1975 to 73.4% for men, and 77.1% for women in 1998 (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education 2016a). Those figures are expected to have significantly increased by today, as the ministry of education's plan is to have over 90% of national students enrolled in education by the year 2020. In order to meet this goal, public schools have been built all over the country in order to have education available for almost every citizen. Moreover, private schools have also mushroomed offering national and particularly expatriate students further access to education (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education 2016a). It is important to point out that the literacy figures mentioned above represent Emirati nationals only. To the best of my knowledge, no figures are available for expatriates' literacy rates yet.

With regards to higher education, three major governmental higher education institutions were eventually established, namely: UAE University, Higher Colleges of Techno-logy (HCT), and Zayed University (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Education 2016b). On the other hand, private higher education institutions have increased from 8 institutions in the year 2000 to 70 in 2011, according to the CAA[5] annual report 2011. The diverse demographic reality in the UAE is fairly reflected on all levels of education. Most private schools and higher education institutions use English curricula and have English as a medium of instruction. The need for using English emerges from the need to incorporate and include expatriate students, and to meet market demands and expectations.

Emirati students could be in favor of learning in English; a survey at Zayed University revealed that 50% of the students preferred to be taught in English. Only 22% preferred Arabic, whereas the rest opt for dual education (Findlow 2006). Students attributed their preference to the fact that they conceive English as a world language that can enable them to communicate on an international level and enhance their chances for better careers in the future (Findlow 2006: 26).

Arabic is the sole official language in the UAE. Furthermore, the government strongly emphasizes Arabic as a carrier of national identity (Salem 2010: n.p.). However, English evidently plays a vital role in education (among many other sectors) in the UAE, and a certain level of proficiency in English has become a prerequisite skill for entry to any of the three governmental higher education institutions in the country. To ensure a facilitated entry process to higher education, a proficiency exam (namely, CEPA: Common Educational Proficiency Assessment) was designed[6] that all high school graduates are obliged to take in order to be admitted to their desired study courses. CEPA was first fully implemented in 2006 (Ismail 2008: n.p.).

Based on the information presented in this section, it is clear that English use in the UAE is an interesting topic. However, this topic is still under-researched. The present study attempts to answer a very particular question with regard to the use of English articles among Emirati learners of English. Similar studies have been conducted on Arabic learners of English in general (Smith

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[5]   Commission for Academic Accreditation.

[6]   CEPA was designed with collaboration from the ministry of higher education and the three higher education institutions: Zayed University, UAE University, and HCT.

& Swan 1987). Thus, it could be highly interesting to conduct such a study on Emirati learners in particular.

3. Background

3.1 A Comparison of English and Arabic Defining Systems

3.1.1 English Articles

The English language makes use of determiners in order to "identify the head noun, or […] to ask about its identity" (Fenn 2010: 84). These determiners or "article-words" could be "definite, indefinite and zero articles, possessives, demonstratives, quantifiers, numerals and certain interrogatives" (Fenn 2010: 84). For the purpose of this paper, the focus will be on central determiners (the definite article *the* and indefinite articles *a/an*, respectively). The term 'central determiners' derives from "their position in the noun phrase" (Greenbaum & Quirk 1990: 72). The English articles *the/a* carry no lexical meaning, which mainly distinguishes them from the rest of the determiners. They "solely contribute definite or indefinite status to the nouns they determine" (Quirk et al. 1985: 253). The employment of the

English articles is a feature that shows a significant degree of variation "even in standard British and American English" (Sand 2004: 283). Hence, the necessity originates to acknowledge the different uses of the articles in their respective varieties. To avoid any confusion, the paper will provide a brief summary of English and Arabic article systems, respectively. With regard to the definite article, Quirk et al. lay out the following:

> The definite article *the* is used to mark the phrase it introduces as definite, i.e. as 'referring to something which can be identified uniquely in the contextual or general knowledge shared by speaker and hearer' (Quirk et al. 1985: 265)

They further mention eight specific or typical cases of English definite article use (Quirk et al. 1985: 266–272):

(a) Immediate situation: *The roses* are very beautiful [said in a garden]
(b) Larger Situation (general knowledge): *The last war*
(c) Direct anaphoric reference: John bought a TV and *a video recorder*, but he returned *the video recorder*.
(d) Indirect anaphoric reference: John bought *a bicycle*, but when he rode it one of *the wheels* came off.
(e) Cataphoric reference: The president of *Mexico* is to visit China.
(f) Sporadic reference: My sister goes to *the theatre* every month.
(g) 'Logical' use: When is *the first flight* to Chicago tomorrow?
(h) With reference to body parts: Mary banged herself on *the forehead*.

In addition to those cases, the definite article could be used with a generic reference (Quirk et al. 1985: 282–287). This could be with singular noun phrases (e.g., A great deal of illness originates in *the mind*), or with plural noun phrases (e.g., nationality nouns: *the Chinese*, reference to a group of people: *the rich*).

The indefinite article *a/an* is used with singular count nouns "where the conditions for the use of *the* do not obtain" (Quirk et al. 1985: 272). In other words, *a/an* is employed when a reference to an object or entity is made for the first time or when that object is still 'uniquely identifiable in the shared knowledge of speaker and hearer', a good example would be: *an intruder* has stolen a vase. *The intruder* stole *the vase* from *a locked*

case. The case was smashed open (Quirk et al. 1985: 272). Additionally, *a/an* could be used in a nonreferring manner; this can be similar to a descriptive role or a predicative adjective, as in: My daughter is training as *a* radiologist. It could as well be in cases where there is no clear reference, for example: Leonard wants to marry *a* princess (Quirk et al. 1985: 273). One more vital function of *a/an* has to do with its connection with the 'unstressed form of *one*'; in several cases, *a* can substitute *one* as a 'slightly emphatic equivalent'. For instance: *a mile or two, cf: one or two miles* (Quirk et al. 1985: 273, 274).

According to Peter Fenn (2010), *"[i]ndefinite reference* is reference to things or persons by *category* or *type*"* (Fenn 2010: 85). The indefinite article can then name 'categories of thing or person'; this branches to three possible uses (Fenn 2010: 85-86):

(1) Specific use: this is normally the case when they [entities] are introduced for the first time.
(2) Unspecific use: any representative of a category.
(3) Generic use: places an entire category in the forefront.

The zero article means that the article is not overtly present. However, "[t]he *zero article* is a rule-governed alternative to the other articles, and has its own profile of usage, i.e. it is just as consciously chosen as any other determiner" (Fenn 2010: 88). Fenn (2010: 89-95) provides several uses of the zero article:

(1) Indefinite reference with plurals and non-count nouns.
(2) Generalizations: this use would refer to "[...] categories of entity, e.g. *buses* = 'this type of vehicle'" (Fenn 2010: 89).
(3) Institutions: "Certain places, buildings organizations, and various elements of activity and procedure connected with them, are sometimes regarded as **general institutions** rather than as individual things [...] e.g. *work, home, university, parliament, bed, church*" (Fenn 2010: 91).
(4) The 'preposition + zero' pattern: e.g., *in business, out of hand, out of order, in office.*
(5) Times: proper nouns (months, weekdays, public holidays), deictic expressions (yesterday, tomorrow), and reference to clock times.

(6) Names: in the same way that proper nouns referring to times take the zero article, the same applies to most other proper nouns, too.

3.1.2 Arabic Articles

Arabic is also a language that uses an article system as one way of defining nouns. Arabic differs from English in that Arabic only overtly marks the definite article. "Arabic marks nouns as definite or indefinite by the presence or the absence of the [definite] article" (Scott & Tucker 1974: 86).

According to Clive Holes (2004), the Arabic definite article (الـ) is a proclitic article that could be prefixed. Holes (2004) provides two broad 'discoursal/semantic' functions that the Arabic definite article can serve. "On the one hand [...] it is used to *specify* an individual example of a category, and on the other to refer *generically* to a whole category" (Holes 2004: 196).

Similar to the direct anaphoric use of the English definite article, the Arabic counterpart can make a specific reference to an object or entity that has been referred to at a previous point in the respective situation or text (Holes 2004: 196). Added to that, the Arabic definite article can "denote unique

natural phenomena or particular named entities or events" (Holes 2004: 196), e.g., *the earth* or *the moon*. Furthermore, the article can be used in referring "*generically* to actions, states, or properties of all individual members of class" (Holes 2004: 196).

Ryding (2005: 158-160) points out five more specific uses of the Arabic definite article:

(1) Place names: this includes names of places in the Arab world and elsewhere, e.g., China, Morocco, Algeria.
(2) Names of the days of the week.
(3) Times of the day: referring to times of the day, the hours are specified with the definite article.
(4) With adjectives: The definite article is used with adjectives when they modify definite nouns.
(5) With cardinal numbers in definite phrases.

As has been previously mentioned, Arabic contains no particular article to mark indefiniteness, which is, therefore, simply marked by the absence of the definite article. However, there is one feature that some Arabic grammar approaches consider as an indefinite marker. This marker takes the form of a diacritical suffix (a /n/-sound), which is "not written with a regular letter /nuun/ [sic]. It is indicated by writing the final inflectional vowel on a word twice" (Ryding 2005: 42). However, indefiniteness is usually expressed by the absence of the definite article.

Definiteness and Indefiniteness in Colloquial Gulf Arabic[7]

It is crucial to point out the distinction between Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and vernacular or colloquial Arabic. Today, and almost all over the Arab world, MSA is the language used in writing, administration, and the media. On the other hand, colloquial Arabic takes over spoken communication (both formal and informal), which shows a vast degree of variation among Arabic-speaking countries to the degree that those respective varieties developed to be "mutually unintelligible" (Holes 2004: 5). In Gulf Arabic, the definite article "is **il** [الـ], and […] is placed, as in English, before its noun" (Holes 2013: 10). Gulf Arabic marks indefiniteness

with the absence of the definite article الـ. Thus, Modern Standard Arabic and colloquial Gulf Arabic are very similar with regard to defining nouns.

3.2 Common Non-Standard Uses of English Articles Among Arab Learners of English

Commanding the use of English articles is an obstacle for most learners of English, especially to those whose first language contains a different or no article system, as in the case of Arabic. Previous research on this topic already addressed the significance of this issue among Arabic learners of English. In a study that examined the English proficiency of 22 Arabic-speaking students, Scott & Tucker (1974: 86) found that "[t]he article system was the third most frequent source of error." Scott & Tucker (1974) attribute about half of those "errors" to L1 interference.

Smith & Swan (1987: 151, 152) listed several reasons for non-standard use of English articles among Arabic learners. Because Arabic has no overtly marked indefinite article (see section 3.1.2), "[t]he [English] indefinite article causes the most obvi-

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[7] Gulf Arabic refers to the general dialect spoken in the countries in the Arabian Peninsula: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.

ous problems as it is commonly omitted with singular and plural countables" (Smith & Swan 1987: 151), e.g., *this is car*. One more common issue is the overuse of the indefinite article, "wherever the definite article is not used" (Smith & Swan 1987: 151), e.g., *these are a cars*. The major and most common issue with the definite article was attributed to "interference from the Arabic genitive construction" (Smith & Swan 1987: 151). The sentence *Jack's house* would translate to Arabic as منزل جاك ('*House Jack*'), thus the difficulty arises and sentences like *This is house the Jack* would not be uncommon among Arabic speaking learners of English. Furthermore, Arabic speakers would use the definite article in special cases where it is omitted in English. For instance, "*in bed, at dawn, on Thursday, for breakfast, etc.* usually take the definite article in Arabic" (Smith & Swan 1987: 151). The same applies to "[a]ll days of the week, some months in the Muslim calendar, and many names of towns, cities and countries" (Smith & Swan 1987: 151).

Alenizi (2013: 14) provides a brief summary of the most common non-standard uses of English articles by Arabic speakers mentioned in Kharma & Hajjaj (1997). Arabic speakers may employ definite articles with generic plural nouns as in *The dogs are loyal animals*. The reason behind this is simply that generic nouns are defined in Arabic. The same applies to abstract nouns, e.g. *all humans fear the death*, and to mass nouns, e.g. *the milk is healthy*; the reason again is that Arabic employs the definite article in those cases.

3.3 Working Hypothesis

Being one of the top most attractive markets for expatriates, the UAE hosts people from various parts of the world, and with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Thus, the country has a perfect setting for language contact. However, given the contrast between the cultures in contact, some report that social life is split in the Emirates. In other words, Emiratis and Westerners have separate social activities, whether that involves sports, shopping, social clubs or events (Chaudoir 2010). Then again, this process of cultural exclusiveness is not that unexpected and, eventually, cultural or linguistic contact takes place nevertheless. Indeed, and as has been previously mentioned (see section 1), English is believed to have a vital lingua franca status in the Emirates (Randal & Samimi 2010: 43).

Additionally, English is widely used and spoken in the Emirates to the extent that one may think it is in the making to become "'UAE English', a variety perhaps, with a distinct South Asian flavour" (Boyle 2012: 321).

This wide use of English has been reflected in educational institutions (see section 2). The adoption of English curricula and having English proficiency as a prerequisite to enter higher education are both signs of the rapidly increasing necessity of English in the UAE. Added to that, university students seem to opt for education in English (see section 2). Along the same line, a report shows that students' overall score in CEPA writing exams has increased from 2.9 in 2006 to 3.2 in 2014 (Common Educational Proficiency Assessment 2012). This conforms to the increase of academic expectations; students can enter higher education institutions only with sufficient knowledge of English or they have to go through a foundation year where they receive a chance to improve their English skills.

Although the ministry of higher education has put significant effort into education development, "too many [students] still leave school with no qualifications" (Swan 2012: n.p.). Additionally, 61% of the

students who pass the CEPA exam are left "in limbo" (Swan 2012: n.p.); they are not granted immediate entry to study courses, but they would have to take preparation courses to get themselves qualified (Swan 2012: n.p.). This indicates that education in the UAE still has a long development path to go through, and that the majority of high school graduates are not qualified with a proper degree of English proficiency that allows them immediate entrance into higher education. Due to the fact that the UAE offers a perfect setting for language contact, it is very interesting to study the English that is being used in the UAE. To the best of my knowledge, there has not been any major study conducted on the English used by Emirati learners. Therefore, this paper attempts to investigate Emirati learner English. Thanks to the British University in Dubai (BUiD), free access is granted to a corpus they compiled and have available on the university website, namely: BUiD Arab Learner Corpus (BALC) Version 1. The corpus contains many learners' texts of different levels, which is very suitable for this study.

This study investigates the use of English articles in the writings of Emirati students. One of the main motivations to

investigate this feature is the fact that the use of articles in English is highly frequent and, at the same time, very complex for learners of English. Furthermore, teachers also find it hard to grasp learners' choice of articles (Butler 2002: 451, 452). Arabic learners of English are believed to share similar non-standard use of English articles (see section 3.2), which is mostly attributed to L1 interference. Thus, it is worth investigating whether Emirati learners share the same strategies in employing English articles.

This study attempts to answer the question whether Emirati learners of English make similar non-standard use of English articles to those typical of other Arab learners of English.

4. Methodology

The following section will offer a description of the corpus used in this study. After that, the data collection method followed in gathering the data will be discussed.

4.1 Data Source

As has previously been discussed (see section 3.3), this study relies on the BUiD Arab Learner Corpus (BALC) Version 1 provided for free access on the BUiD website.[8] According to the BUiD website, the corpus consists of 1.865 texts; "[i]t comprises 287,227 word tokens and 20,275 word types. The texts themselves fall into three types: texts collected by BUiD MEd students in secondary schools, retired first year university test essays, and texts sourced from retired CEPA examinations[9]" (BUiD Arab Learner Corpus (BALC) 2015). For the purpose of this study, a number of texts were selected from the corpus, namely: Sharjah first year university essays, CEPA texts band 4, and CEPA texts band 6. Students in the UAE are expected to score band 4 or higher in CEPA to enter higher education (this may vary among different institutions, especially private ones). Additionally, students are expected to receive further education in English in their first university year, and, consequently, have

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[8] http://www.buid.ac.ae/balc.
[9] The CEPA texts were assessed, scored, and then assigned to different bands form 1 to 6 (6 being the best).

a better command of the language. Hence, it is interesting to observe how students' performance changes between these two stages, and analyzing the texts mentioned may result in comparable results. The corpus does not provide further information on the first year university essays, except that they are "retired first year university test essays" (BUiD Arab Learner Corpus (BALC) 2015). However, those essays seem to have been written as part of English courses examinations. All 36 first year university texts, 22 texts from the CEPA 4, and 22 texts from the CEPA 6 were analyzed (referred to as **Sharjah**, **CEPA 4**, and **CEPA 6** texts, respectively).

4.2 Data Analysis

The present study employs a methodology already used by Yacoub (2015) in his study on the writings of advanced Arab students in Missouri State University. Yacoub's study categorizes non-standard use of English articles into six groups. I choose to use five of Yacoub's groups as I find the category 'over-avoidance' problematic in that it is hard to detect (at least in my data). The categories used for this study are shown in Table 1.

Certain difficulties were faced in detecting non-standard uses of English articles. One major difficulty was to decide whether or not to count certain instances. Example (1) *so my mum started to read a Quran on me and I became very good* illustrates such a difficulty. In this sentence, the writer used the indefinite article with *Quran*, which could count as a non-standard use. However, depending on the context, the writer meant to say 'my mum started to read a [verse] on me'. The writer seemed aware of the need of an indefinite article in this parti-cular case, especially because they used the definite article with *Quran* when needed in previous sentences in the same text. There-fore, I chose not to count this case as a non-standard use of the indefinite article; it could be a case of lexical ellipsis. Hence, this instance was disregarded. Similarly, several instances of such article usages were not included in the results, especially after dee-per analysis within context.

5. Results

With regard to the first year Sharjah University students test essays, my findings are as follows (see Figure 1): cases with **the for ø** are by far the most frequent with 74 cases. **Ø for a/an** comes second with 25 cases. **The for a/an** cases are 20. **Ø for the** drops to 12 cases, and **a/an for ø** are only five.

Analyzing CEPA 4 texts yielded the following findings (see Figure 2): **the for ø cases** are the highest with 18 occurrences. With only one case less, **a/an for ø** are 17 cases. **Ø for a/an** cases are 10. Whereas **the for a/an** and **ø for the** score 4 and 3, respectively.

Category	Example
The for ø	*In the Dubai*
Ø for the	*On other hand*
A/an for ø	*We saw a nice plants and birds*
Ø for a/an	*It's very beautiful country*
The for a/an	*Unlike the strict teacher (generic reference)*

Table 1 Categories for Non-Standard Use of English Articles

After analyzing CEPA 6 texts, the following results were found (see Figure 3): **the for ø** cases are by far the highest with 9 cases. **A/an for ø** comes second with 4 cases. **The for a/an** and **ø for the** cases are 3 each, and no occur-rence of **ø for a/an** was found.

When juxtaposing all the findings from the three different texts categories, various similari-ties could be detected (see Figure 4). **The for ø** cases seem to be the most frequent in all three texts categories, ranging from 54% in **Sharjah** texts to 34% in **CEPA 4**. **CEPA 4** and **CEPA 6** evidently share a fairly similar pattern in having **the for ø** first and **a/an for ø** second. A further note-worthy observation would be that **ø for a/an** cases hit 18% and 19% in **Sharjah** and **CEPA 4** respectively, whereas no cases of this category were detected in the **CEPA 6** texts. Furthermore, the data appears to suggest a contrast in that **a/an for ø** category scores second in **CEPA 4** and **CEPA 6**, with 32% and 21% respectively; however, it comes last in **Sharjah** texts with 3% only.

After normalizing the data (see Figure 5), one major category **the for ø** still scores highest in all three text categories, with a frequency from 94 down to 17 per 10,000 words. **A/an for ø** comes second with a frequency of 41 in **CEPA 4**. **Ø for a/an** drops from 31 in **Sharjah** to 24 in **CEPA 4**.

6.   Discussion

In this study, the question under discussion is whether Emirati learners of English employ similar non-standard uses of English articles to those typical of other Arabic speaking learners of English. Smith & Swan (1987) suggest that the category **ø for a/an** tends to occur at a high frequency or even to be the most problematic use for Arab learners of English. However, according to the evidence available from the present data, this category occurs at a much lower frequency than **the for ø**. The overuse of the definite article is the most frequent non-standard use in all three text groups. The data further imply that the overuse of the indefinite article occurs
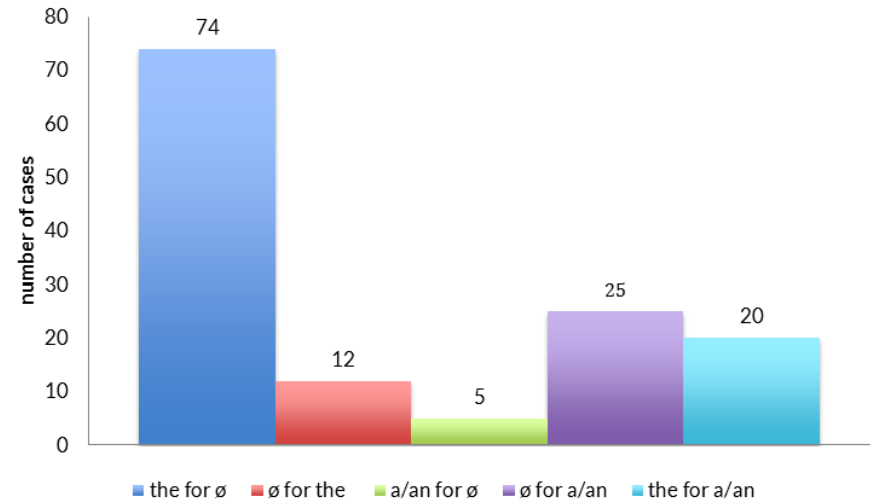

Figure 1   Results for Non-standard Use of English Articles in Sharjah Texts
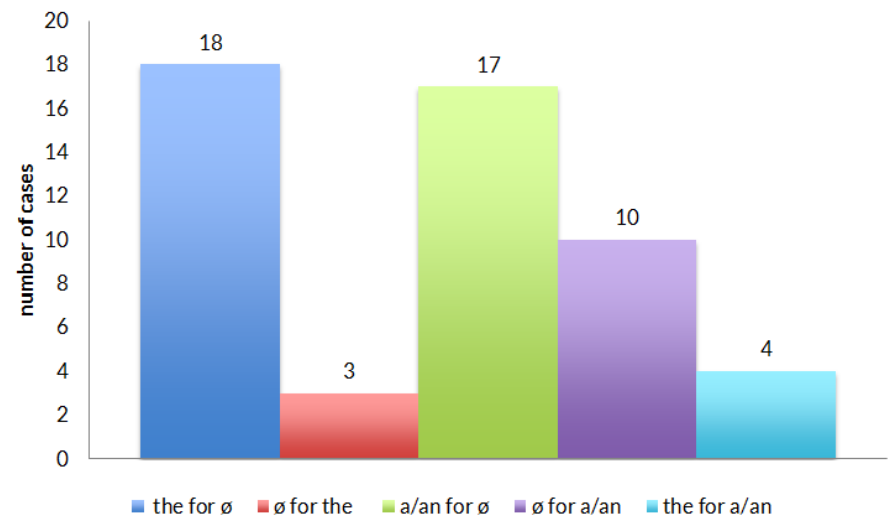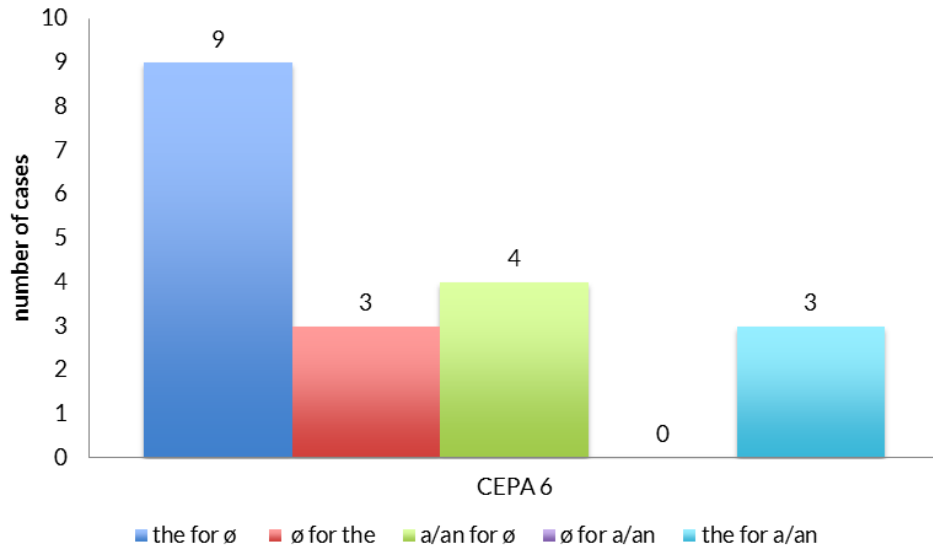

Figure 2   Results for Non-standard Use of English Articles in CEPA 4 Texts

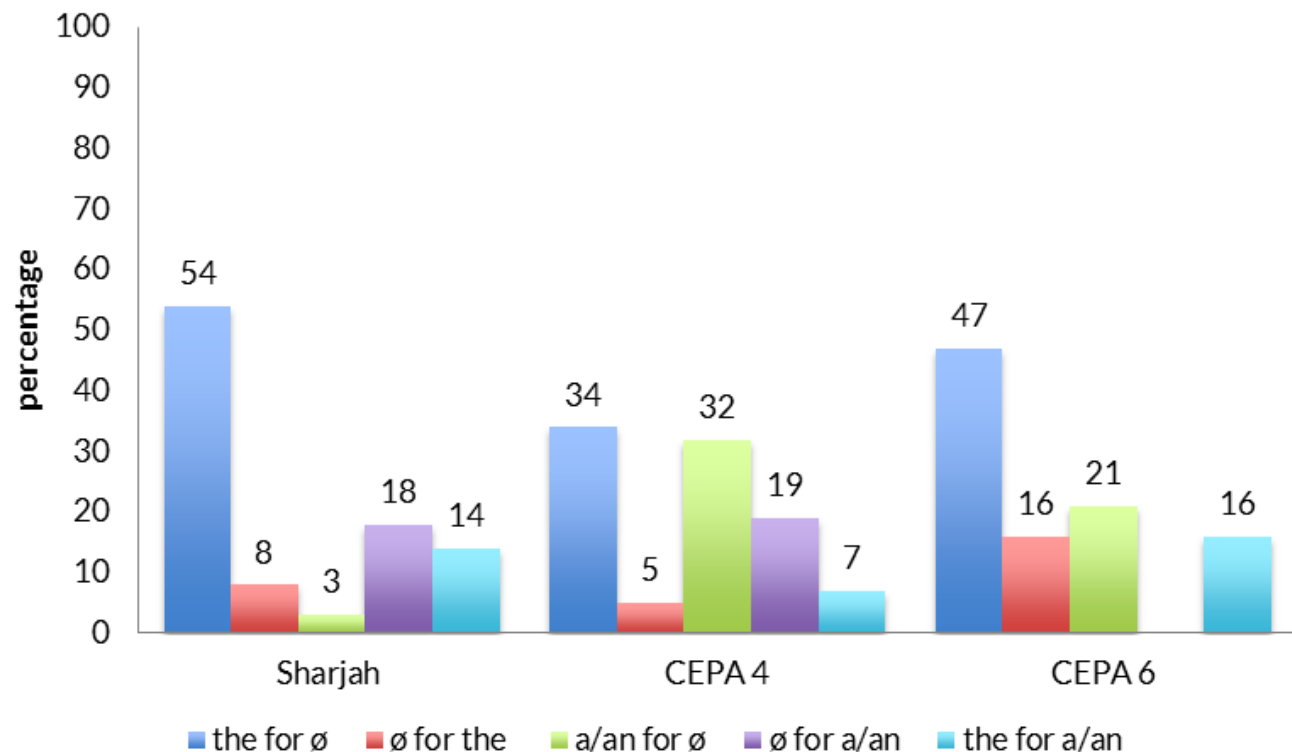**Figure 3** Results for Non-standard Use of
English Articles in CEPA 6 Texts

than with the indefinite article. At this stage of language development in the UAE, the overuse of the English definite article seems to remain promi-nent. On these grounds, one may speculate whether this overuse could become a distinct feature of the English used in the UAE.

In the remaining part of this section, a closer analysis of non-standard use of English articles is offered. A number of sentences were selected from the corpus to represent most categories discussed in this study. It is important to point out that the examples mentioned below are parts of the corpus texts and were analyzed within con-text.

Figure 4
Percentage of Cases in the
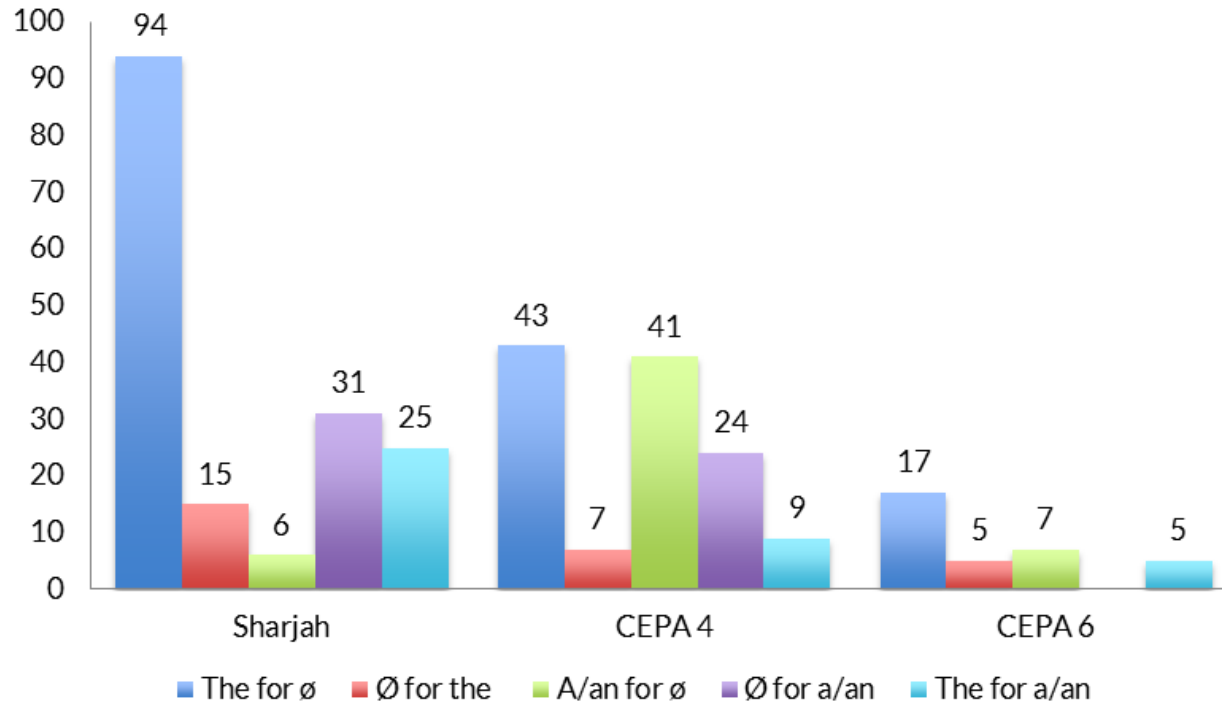Three Texts Categories Analyzed

at high levels in the data gathered from **CEPA 4** and **CEPA 6** texts. In comparison, it occurs at a very low level in **Sharjah** texts. A further interesting obser-vation is that all three text categories have a similar distribution of non-standard uses of English articles (except for the category **a/an for ø** in **Sharjah**).

In an attempt to answer the question posed in this study, the findings lend support to the claim that Emirati students generally follow similar lines of other Arab learners in their use of English articles. However, Emirati students seem to face difficulties in employing the English definite article more

(6) We had the chance to see him for last time
(7) I went to UK to spend my holiday there
(8) On other hand
(9) In other hand
(10) I did many things can help me in future

L1 interference could also be detected in examples (6) and (7). Example (6) reads as a literal translation of its Arabic equivalent, in which *last time* would not be defined. In example (7), it happens that *UK* is not defined in Arabic, and the writer possibly did the same in English. Examples (8) and (9) remain unsolved issues as the expression *on the other hand* is expressed differently in Arabic, which excludes L1 interference as an explanation in these two examples. I found this use interesting, especially because it occurs in two different texts, although the writer uses a different preposition in (9). Example (10) is possibly a case of hyper-correction; the writer could be trying to avoid defining abstract nouns.

(2) *The* people must be careful
(3) *The* male drivers like or prefer *the* fast cars
(4) The importance of *the* honesty in our lives
(5) At *the* night, I used to surf the internet

In examples (2) and (3), *people*, *male drivers*, and *fast cars* are used in a plural generic reference, which does not require the use of an overt article. A possible explanation for the use of the definite article in these cases is that generic nouns are defined in Arabic and that the respective writers carry this influence from Arabic. In example (4), *honesty* probably was defined since abstract nouns are defined in Arabic. Similarly, *night*, in example (5), was defined as times of the day are defined in Arabic. Clearly, L1 interference plays a role in the overuse of the definite article in many cases.

The third group of instances is a demonstration of the use of the English indefinite article with plural nouns instead of zero article. An L1 interference scenario cannot be excluded in these examples either.

(11) We saw *a* nice people there
(12) So he can have *a* friends there
(13) We have *a* nice and lovely days there
(14) It has a lot of shoes, dresses and *a* wonderful watches

It is likely that the writers of the previous four examples (11, 12, 13, 14) used the indefinite article instead of zero article since zero article use remains difficult for Arabic learners of English. The reason is that the Arabic equivalent of the English indefinite article is the absence of the Arabic definite article. Hence, Arabic learners of English are prone to confuse zero article and indefinite article uses. In example (14), the writer is clearly aware of the need of zero article with plural nouns in that sentence, but they fail to employ that principle with one noun in the sentence *a wonderful watches*. On these grounds, one can argue that most non-standard uses of English articles by Arabic speakers (especially Emirati) are attributed to L1 interference.

To sum up, the findings of this study suggest that Emirati learners of English share similar non-standard uses of English articles with those attributed to Arabic speaking learners of English in general. An interesting observation, however, is that the category **the for ø** scored the highest frequency in all three text categories. This could indicate that Emirati learners of English find the use of both the definite and zero articles problematic, and that the overuse of the definite article seems to be prominent.

7.   Conclusion

This study has investigated the use of English articles by Emirati learners. To do so, a brief summary of the sociolinguistic implications and educational reality has been presented. After that, a comparison of the English and Arabic article systems is provided before a summary of the most common non-standard uses of English articles by Arabic speakers is offered. This study attempts to investigate whether Emirati learners of English employ different uses of the English articles in comparison to the uses typical for Arabic learners in general. Arabic learners of English usually find it particularly difficult to use the English indefinite article. The results from this study indicate that Emirati students have similar problems; however, their most frequent non-standard use is **the for ø.**

Several articles and studies report on the spread of English use in various domains in the Emirates and some suggest the possible emergence of a distinct form of English in the UAE in the future (cf. Boyle 2012). After the analysis of the data retrieved from the BALC corpus, the findings of this study develop the claim that the overuse of the English definite article is prominent in the writings of Emirati students, and possibly more prominent than in texts written by other Arabic speaking learners of English. Thus, the hypothesis that Emirati students may show linguistic deviation in comparison to other Arabic speakers has been partly reflected in the data.

Then again, this study only scratches the surface and offers an insight into a vast research area. Very different languages are used in the Emirates, which can all influence the development of English in the country. Data could be collected from various speech

communities, which, in turn, could offer finer results that trace influences to their possible origins. Also, the UAE is well-known for the chasm between social classes, which may be reflected in linguistic behavior. Thus, further study of language production, social factors, and their connections promises interesting findings in the future.

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