

**OVER USE OF “THE” DEFINITE ARTICLE AMONG SPEAKERS
OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN SRI LANKA;
REASONS AND SOLUTIONS**

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Introduction

English has become the lingua franca in the world, which connects all the multi ethnic communities making the world a global village. English language has become a major subject studied by non-English speakers for the purpose of communication. Sri Lankan speakers of English as a second language have been studying English as a second language since grade three at school.

In English language, definite and indefinite articles play a vital role where the definite article "the" generally gives the notion that the speaker and listener both know the subject they are talking about. Thus, the speaker should be aware of the correct usage of the definite article for the purpose of errorless communication.

However, the Sri Lankan speakers of English as a second language seem not to have a thorough understanding about the situations the definite article is used and consequently they overuse the definite article, which changes the meaning they want to convey through their utterances. Most of the Sri Lankan speakers of English as a second language think in Sinhalese before translating their utterances into English and the definite article in Sinhalese is translated into English without focusing on the particular use of the definite article in English language context. Thus, this study in particular attempts to identify the reasons for the over usage of the definite article among the speakers of English as a second language in Sri Lankan and suggest solutions to overcome the issue.

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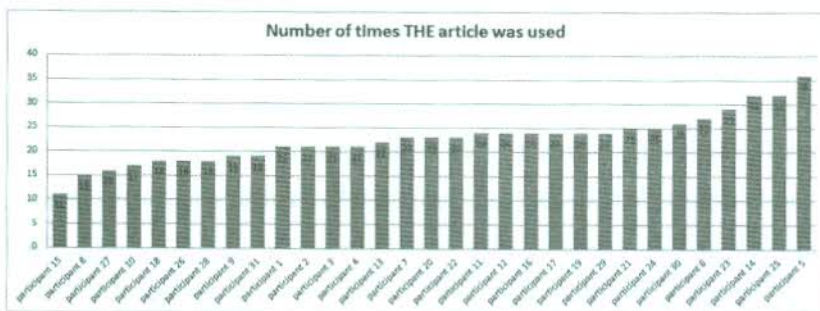
Methodology

The sample of thirty-one speakers of English as a second language were chosen from the faculty of Humanities, and they were given a passage with both the definite and indefinite articles removed to be filled. In the meantime, they were given a list of twenty situations to mark the situations where the definite article is used. Further, they were given an open-ended question to comment on the situations where they generally use the definite article and the doubts they face when using it.

In addition, Essential, Intermediate and Advanced English Grammar books published by Cambridge University Press, prescribed for English language proficiency examinations conducted by the University of Cambridge, United kingdom and Practical English Usage (2005) by Michel Swan published by Oxford University Press were referred to identify the situations where the definite article is used.

Findings and Discussion

The first question to fill in the blanks with suitable article originally had twenty-one definite articles; however, none of the participants could correctly fill all the situations where the definite article is used.



1.1 Number definite articles used by each participant in ascending order

The majority of 58% have used the definite article more than 21 times meanwhile the minority of 29% have under used the definite article. Majority of 68% have used the definite article before "Floridians" and "Alabama" which are related to the states of America. According to Swan (2005), no article is used when referring to counties. Similarly, 45% of the

participants have used an / the before 'Atlantic', which is incorrect because according to Swan (2005), no article is used before the names of oceans. Meanwhile, 92% of the majority have correctly used the definite article with 'most' and superlative adjectives in the passage.

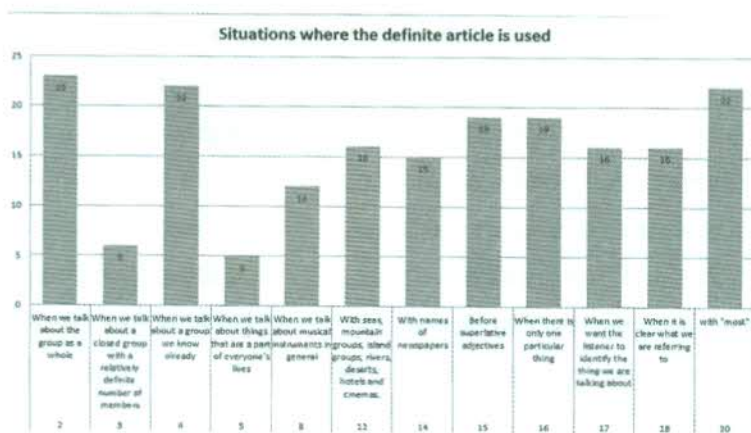
In the second question, when the participants were given to mark the situations where they use the definite article, the majority (70%) have managed to identify the general situations where the definite article is used, for situations, no. 2, 5, 16, 17, and 21. The majority of 74% have identified that the definite article is used when we talk about the group as a whole. 70% each have identified that the definite article is used when we talk about things that are part of everyone's lives and with *most*. (Swan, M. 2005). 61% each of the participants have identified that the definite article is used when there is only one particular object and when we want the listener to identify the object we are talking about (Hewings, M. 1999).

No	Situation	Yes / No
1	When you generalize about members of a group	N
2	When we talk about the group as a whole	Y
3	When we talk about a closed group with a relatively definite number of members	Y
4	When we talk about a group we know already	Y
5	When we talk about things that are a part of everyone's lives	Y
6	With possessive nouns	N
7	With "both" and "all"	N
8	When we talk about musical instruments in general	Y
9	When we talk about Jazz, Pop and Classical music	N
10	With words like "Queen Elizabeth" and "President Lincoln"	N
11	With illnesses and parts of someone's body	N
12	With seas, mountain groups, island groups, rivers, deserts, hotels and cinemas.	Y
13	With continents, countries, states, counties, departments, towns, streets, lakes	N
14	With names of newspapers	Y
15	Before superlative adjectives	Y
16	When there is only one particular thing	Y
17	When we want the listener to identify the thing we are talking about	Y
18	When it is clear what we are referring to	Y
19	When we talk about things in general (e.g.- Books)	N
20	with "most"	Y

1.2 The Correct usage of the definite article

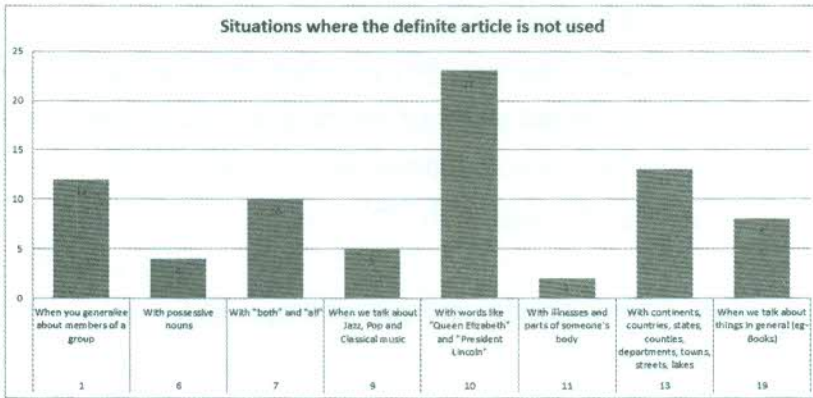
However, minority of the participants have managed to identify the special occasions such as situation no. 4 and 6 where the definite article is used. A minority of 19% (six Participants) have identified that the definite article is used when we talk about a closed group with a relatively definite number of members. According to Swans (2005), example, 'French painters' are a large group with indefinite number of members while 'The Impressionist' is a particular artistic movement, in which the number of members can be recorded, thus, the definite article is used. Meanwhile, a minority of 16% (five participants) know that the definite

article is used when we talk about things that are part of everyone's lives, such as "the bus", or "the hairdresser" (situation 6). In this case "the bus" does not mean "the bus you know about" we use the definite article to suggest that taking a bus is a common experience that we all share. (Swan, M. 2005)



1.3 Situations where the definite article is used

On the contrary, several participants could not understand the situations where the definite article is not used. The most prominent situations are words such as *Queen Elizabeth*, *President Lincoln* (Situation 11), which was marked positive by 74% (twenty three participants), however, the definite article is not used on such occasions (Swan, M. 2005). In addition, 42% (13 participants) have marked positive for using the definite article with continents, countries, states, counties, departments, towns, streets, lakes (Situation 14), which is inaccurate (Swan, M. 2005). Significantly, this situation can be related to the first question where, majority of 68 using the definite article for "Floridians" and "Alabama", and 45 using the definite article for "Atlantic" in the passage given. Similarly, 39% (12 participants) have mentioned that the definite article is used when you generalize about members of a group (Situation 1), whereas it is not used (Swan, M. 2005).



1.4 Situations where the definite article is not used

In the final question, where they were asked about the doubts when using the definite article in English, the majority have stated that they do not exactly know the usage of it. Most of the participants are using the definite article with practice and they do not have a clear understanding about using it in different contexts. Significantly, the majority has learnt the use of the definite article at school and it seems that only the general usage of the definite article had been taught. In addition, the majority have stated that they tend to use the definite article to make their utterances weightier (63%). Further, a majority have mentioned that they think of the meaning of the particular sentence in Sinhalese and decide what article they are going to use (72%). Thus, the usage of the definite article in English becomes confusing.

Conclusions

As far as the above-analyzed data are concerned, speakers of English as a second language in Sri Lanka are aware of the basic usage of the definite article in English, however, they do not have a comprehensive understanding about the exceptions, and special situations where the definite article is used which might be the reason for over usage. Moreover, some individuals tend to use the definite article by practice and they think about the meaning of the sentence in Sinhalese before adding an article. Thus, the usage of the definite article happens to depend on the Sinhalese

meaning perceived by the user, which makes the speaker over use the definite article. Therefore, it can be recommended to give more comprehensive knowledge of the usage of the definite article with specific reference to Cambridge English Language Books, along with practical example while comparing the usage with Sinhalese.

Keywords: English, definite article, errors, over usage, ESL

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