

ENHANCING THE COMPETENCE IN USING ARTICLES FOR ENGLISH MAJORS THROUGH READING BBC NEWS

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to enhance the competence in using English articles for English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education through reading English news. Forty students were chosen randomly; 20 of them were assigned to the experimental group and the others were put into the control group. The authors studied and analyzed sixty essays written by 60 forth-year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education in the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020 in order to identify and categorize article errors. Besides, the experimental group were asked to read one piece of news a day and at the same time identify the articles used in the texts, and then they had to decide the use of each article in its contexts. After that, the experimental group had to make their own e-mindmaps about the article usage and give 5 specific examples extracted from the news and their own examples for each usage. The findings of the research indicated that the number of article errors made by the experimental group decreased significantly while in the control group, the number of article errors decreased unremarkably. This demonstrates that reading BBC news has a positive impact on improving English majors' competence in using articles.

Keywords: English grammar; article; article errors; competence; BBC news

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NÂNG CAO KHẢ NĂNG SỬ DỤNG MẠO TỪ CHO SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH THÔNG QUA ĐỌC BẢN TIN BBC

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TÓM TẮT

Mục tiêu của nghiên cứu là nâng cao khả năng sử dụng mạo từ tiếng Anh của sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh năm thứ tư tại trường Đại học Sư phạm – Đại học Thái Nguyên thông qua việc đọc tin tức tiếng Anh. Bốn mươi sinh viên được chọn ngẫu nhiên, 20 trong số đó được đặt vào nhóm thực nghiệm và 20 sinh viên nằm trong nhóm đối chứng. Nhà nghiên cứu phân tích sáu mươi bài luận được viết bởi 60 sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh trong học kỳ 1 năm học 2019-2020 để xác định và phân loại các lỗi mạo từ. Ngoài ra, nhóm thực nghiệm được yêu cầu đọc một mẫu tin mỗi ngày, xác định các mạo từ được sử dụng trong bản tin, và sau đó xác định cách sử dụng của mạo từ trong ngữ cảnh. Sau đó, nhóm thực nghiệm tạo ra một sơ đồ tư duy điện tử về mạo từ và đưa ra 5 ví dụ được trích xuất từ tin tức và ví dụ do sinh viên tự viết cho mỗi cách sử dụng. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy số lượng lỗi mạo từ của nhóm thực nghiệm giảm đáng kể trong khi ở nhóm đối chứng, số lỗi giảm không đáng kể. Điều này chứng minh rằng việc đọc tin tức tiếng Anh có tác động tích cực đến khả năng sử dụng mạo từ của sinh viên.

Từ khóa: ngữ pháp tiếng Anh; mạo từ; lỗi mạo từ; năng lực; tin tức BBC

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1. Introduction

1.1. The importance of learning English articles

Nowadays, learning English has become more and more popular for many people because English is an international language spoken in many countries in the world. According to Subasini and Kokilavani [1], English is the overly most common language all over the world; it is the language of higher administration, superior judiciary, advanced education, and diplomacy. However, learning English presents a series of challenges, especially in learning English grammar. Students often face many difficulties in many aspects of English grammar, including article usage. An article is a word used before a noun that indicates if the reference is to a specific entity or entities or an unspecific one. There are four articles in the English language, which are *a*, *an*, *the* and *zero article*, but the rules and the exceptions to the rules that define correct article usage are numerous and complex. Therefore, many students make mistakes when using articles. Kim and Lakshmanan [2] have indicated that in the process of acquiring English, it usually takes learners longer time to acquire articles than other forms of English grammar. The misuse of articles may not affect the sentence's meaning; however, the omission of an article or the use of the wrong article may cause some ambiguity for the reader, especially when the writer wants to identify a noun anaphorically/cataphorically or assume reader/writer familiarity.

1.2. Benefits of learning English through English news

Recently, English news has been regarded as a new method for learners to improve not only vocabulary, reading, listening but also grammatical features. English news can be in different forms like written, oral, video and live TV news both online and offline. English news is worth being integrated in students'

learning plans because it uses standard English. English news can be easier for learners to understand as it has a clear context and presentation. In addition, when learning English through the news, learners have the chance to discover what is happening all around the world, which may enhance their motivation to learn English.

1.3. Related studies

Analysing grammatical errors in general and article errors, in particular, is a familiar issue for many researchers. Some recent studies [3, 4] have identified common article errors committed by students and their implications for instruction. Specifically, several studies focused on article errors made in writing. For example, Nopjirapong [5] analysed and described article errors in Thai University students' English composition. The results revealed the need for the development of teaching techniques and materials to reduce common errors related to article usage. Crompton [6] also studied the article errors committed in writing by Arabic learners as well as the causes of the errors.

Regarding the use of BBC news in learning English, many researchers chose news or newspapers as materials for students to improve their vocabulary, listening, and reading. For instance, Teng [7] investigated the impact of reading BBC news on students' vocabulary development while Ahmmed [8] investigated how reading English newspapers improves vocabulary and reading skills of the students at Dhaka University.

Although research on article errors and English news is abundant, there seem to be few research works on using English news to improve students' competence in English grammar in general and using English articles in particular. For this reason, we conducted this study which aimed at enhancing the competence in using English articles for English majors at Thai Nguyen

University of Education through reading English news. The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- i. What is the current situation of using articles among fourth-year English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education?
- ii. To what extent does reading BBC news have impacts on the competence in using articles of fourth-year English majors at TNUE?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

The experimental research design was employed to examine the impacts of reading BBC News on the competence in using articles of fourth-year English majors at TNUE. The experiment was conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020. In the treatment process, the researchers chose several interesting pieces of BBC news on different topics and posted them on Edmodo and then asked the students in the experimental group to read the news. These students read seven pieces of news a week to identify the articles used in the texts at the same time, and then they had to explore the use of each article in its contexts. The researchers also designed some exercises based on the BBC news and posted them on Edmodo and asked the participants to do these exercises.

After that, the experimental group had to make e-mindmaps about the article usage and gave 5 specific examples extracted from the news and their own examples for each usage. The researchers guided the students in the experimental group to design their e-mind maps using MindMaster application which is free and easy for them to draw their mind maps.

2.2. The participants

Forty fourth-year English majors at TUE were randomly asked to take part in the research. The researchers put 20 students into the experimental group and 20 in the control group.

2.3. Data collection instruments

2.3.1. Pre-test and post-test

Tests were used to help the researchers assess the improvement of the participants in the experimental group after taking part in the experiment. There were two tests that students have to take: one was pre-test and the other was post-test. All the tests were designed based on the IELTS writing task 1, which is describing charts and taken from Cambridge IELTS with standard academic writing tests. The reason for choosing a writing test was that assessing the competence in using articles through grammar exercises can just evaluate the students' capability of recognizing articles; however, through a writing test, the researchers can judge the competence in using articles of the students.

The pre-test was used to exploit the common article errors made by fourth-year English majors and the post-test helped assess the progress of the experimental group after taking part in the experiment of using BBC news regarding their competence in using articles. The pre-test and post-test had the same level of difficulty so that the researchers could obtain an exact result.

After the treatment, the researchers asked the 20 participants in the experimental group to do the post-test. The other 20 participants in the control group did the test, too. Then, the researchers collected, analysed students' essays and compared the results of the pre-test with the post-test. The results of the experimental group were also compared with those of the control group to check their progress.

2.3.2. Feedback questionnaire

The researchers constructed the feedback questionnaire for the experimental group to collect their feedback on the new method of learning English articles. Ten questions were designed for the feedback questionnaire. This questionnaire was used to collect the experimental group's opinions and feelings

after reading BBC news. In the design of the questions, the researchers combined two types of question items: open-ended questions and close-ended questions to exploit more information from the respondents.

The questionnaire was then posted on the online class on EDMODO for the students who took part in the experiment. The researchers asked them to respond to the questionnaire with their exact information.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. The current situation of using articles among fourth-year English majors at TNUE

To investigate the common article errors made by fourth-year English majors at TNUE, the researchers asked the participants to write an essay of IELTS writing task 1 which is describing charts. After the students finished their essays, the researchers collected and analysed these essays to study the common article errors made by these students

Table 1. *Students' common article errors*

Common errors	No.	%
Omission of 'the' before the decades	15	21
Omission of 'the' before superlatives	5	5
'the' used in stead of Ø before plural nouns	13	18
Omission of 'the' before a defining relative clause	6	7
Omission of 'the' before nouns made particular in context	9	15

Table 1 presents the students' common article errors. It can be seen that fourth-year English majors at TNUE have some misunderstanding while using articles. The table shows two kinds of article errors: omissions and substitutions of articles. The data indicates that the omission of articles was the most frequent error. Eleven students omitted article 'the' before the decades and this error was repeated 21 times in their essays. The number of students omitting 'the' before superlatives comparison is eight. In addition, the omission of 'the' before nouns made particular in

context was made by six students and the frequency of the error is 9 times in students' essays. Five students forgot using 'the' before a defining relative clause. For the substitution of articles, the article error made by the biggest number of the students is that they use 'the' instead of 'Ø' before plural nouns. The frequency of this error is 25 times.

3.2. The impacts of reading BBC News on the competence in using articles of fourth-year English majors at TNUE

To assess the impact of reading BBC news on enhancing the competence in using articles, the researchers analyzed the students' essays to identify the number of article errors made by the experimental group and control group in the pre-test and post-test, and compared the results as well as the progress of these students.

Table 2 presents the number of article errors made by the students in the experimental and control group in the pre-test and post-test. As can be seen in the table, in the pre-test, it is clear that all the students in the experimental and control group made article errors in their essays. Moreover, seven students in the control group and seven students in the experimental group made more than 2 article errors in their essays. The total number of article errors made by the experimental group and the control group is 46 and 45, respectively.

In the post-test, it can be seen that most of the students in the experimental group made under 2 article errors in their essays. Furthermore, four of them did not make any article errors in their writing test. There was only one student making 3 article errors in the essay. The total number of errors made by the experimental group is 24. Meanwhile, in the control group, it is clear that all the students made article errors in their essays. Moreover, the number of student making more than 2 article errors in their essays is 6. The total number of article errors is 41.

Table 2. The number of article errors made by the students in the experimental and control group in the pre-test and post-test

Pre-test results				Post-test results			
P	No.	P	No.	P	No.	P	No.
E1	2	C1	2	E1	1	C1	2
E2	2	C2	3	E2	1	C2	1
E3	3	C3	1	E3	2	C3	2
E4	2	C4	3	E4	0	C4	1
E5	3	C5	2	E5	2	C5	2
E6	3	C6	2	E6	3	C6	1
E7	1	C7	3	E7	1	C7	3
E8	2	C8	2	E8	2	C8	2
E9	2	C9	4	E9	1	C9	3
E10	1	C10	3	E10	2	C10	2
E11	3	C11	1	E11	0	C11	3
E12	1	C12	4	E12	1	C12	2
E13	2	C13	2	E13	2	C13	1
E14	3	C14	2	E14	1	C14	3
E15	3	C15	1	E15	2	C15	2
E16	2	C16	2	E16	0	C16	2
E17	4	C17	2	E17	1	C17	1
E18	2	C18	1	E18	2	C18	2
E19	3	C19	3	E19	0	C19	3
E20	2	C20	2	E20	2	C20	3
Total	46		45		24		41

P: Participants in the research

E: Student in the experimental group

C: Student in the control group

No.: Number of articles errors

To conclude, it can be seen that both the experimental group and control group have made remarkable progress during the semester since there are noticeable differences between the pre-test and the post-test results. However, the statistics related to the test results of the two groups are noticeably different in many aspects. Specifically:

- In the pre-test, all of the students in the experimental and control group made at least one article error in their essays, and the total number of article errors made by the experimental group is almost the same as the control group (45 and 46 errors, respectively). It means that the competence in using articles of both groups was quite similar.
- In the post-test, the total number of article errors made by the students in the experimental group is 24; however, the figure

for the control group is 41 although the competence in using articles of the students in both groups is almost similar in the pre-test.

To sum up, there is a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results of the participants in the experimental group (46 compared with 24 errors) while there is an unremarkable gap between pre-test and post-test results of 20 students in the control group (45 compared with 41 errors). The number of article errors made by the experimental group has decreased significantly after experiencing the new method. In the control group, the improvement in the ways they use articles seems not to be remarkable. This demonstrates that reading BBC news and analyzing the articles used in the news has a positive impact on the learners' competence in using articles.

3.3. Students' feedback on reading BBC news to improve the competence in using articles

In the feedback questionnaire, the researchers asked the participants in the experimental group for their feedback on using BBC news to improve their competence in using articles. All of the students indicated that they find their competence in using articles improved. None of the participants claimed that they have no development after the experiment. This means that reading BBC news has a positive effect on students' competence in using articles.

Regarding the advantages of reading BBC news, seven students claimed that reading BBC news is a fun method for learners to practice using articles. The next advantage of reading BBC news stated by 55% of the students was that the new method is also useful for learners to improve their reading skills. In addition, 70% of the students indicated that reading BBC news not only helps learners improve their competence in using articles but also helps them broaden their vocabulary.

Additionally, after experiencing using e-mind maps to learn and memorize article usages, the researchers asked the students about the advantages of using e-mind maps. According to the data attained from the questionnaire, most of the students (80%) indicated that e-mind maps help them remember the use of articles more easily and longer. Besides, eleven students answered that using e-mind maps helped them increase their creativity when generating ideas for writing. 45% of the students claimed that they can improve their memory and retention by using e-mind maps. In addition, 30% of the students responded that using e-mind maps helped increase their interest because of its numerous models and colors.

4. Pedagogical implications

4.1. Pedagogical implications for students

The findings from the present study imply that reading BBC news and analysing the articles used in the news at the same time has a positive impact on the learners' competence in using articles. To make the most of BBC news in enhancing the competence in using articles for students, the researchers would like to suggest the process of reading the news and master the articles used in the news effectively.

- Firstly, choose your favourite topics from some academic sources of news (E.g. BBC News; VOA news; CNN news...)
- Read the news, identify and underline the articles used in the texts at the same time, and then decide the use of each article in its contexts.

- After that, note down the use of the articles with some examples extracted from the news.

- Finally, make your examples of articles so that you can remember the article usages longer.

One of the most effective ways to learn and remember the use of articles is using e-mindmaps. E-mindmaps are an active learning strategy that is useful for enhancing memory, generating ideas, and

organizing information. In this way, learners can read, retrieve information, and connect concepts through lines or arrows that represent the relation of concepts by words or phrases written on the lines connecting the two concepts. Moreover, e-mindmaps use lines, symbols, words, colors and images which can raise learners' interest and inspiration.

Some useful and effective applications of e-mindmaps suggested by the researchers are MindMaster, SimpleMind, Edraw Mind Map, Open Mind, etc.

4.2. Pedagogical implications for teachers

There is a danger of putting students off reading newspapers if articles are used in the same way as course books, with tedious comprehension activities. If used in a more inspiring way, newspapers can help students to develop not only reading skills but also writing, grammar, vocabulary and speaking skills. Below are some tips and activities which the researchers believe can help.

- Integrate English news reading section into the lesson plans and use English news to design learning activities and exercises.
- Utilize different sources of English news like BBC News, VOA news, and CNN news to satisfy the students' tastes.
- Choose articles and topics which are appealing and relevant to the students.
- Motivate students to read English news not only inside but also outside the classroom.
- Discuss with the students about the benefits of reading English news. It may be also helpful to share reading strategies with them. For instance, teachers can hold class discussions on how to use a dictionary effectively, what kind of dictionary to use when reading English news online and offline, how to take notes, what piece of information to take note of, and what reading strategies to employ.

5. Conclusion

The results of the study can be summarized as follows:

Firstly, for the first research question, it is clear that a large number of students make article errors while writing and one of the commonest article errors made by the fourth-year English majors is the omission of articles.

As for the second research question, it is clear that there is a big difference between the pre-test and post-test results of the participants in the experimental group; however, there is an unremarkable gap between pre-test and post-test results of the 20 students in the control group although the competence in using articles of the two groups is almost similar in the pre-test. This is to say, the number of article errors made by the students in the experimental group has decreased significantly after experiencing the new method. In the control group, the improvement in the ways they use articles seems not to be remarkable. The number of article errors made by the participants in the control group decreased unremarkably. This demonstrates that reading BBC news and analysing the articles used in the news at the same time has a positive impact on the learners' competence in using articles.

Finally, by analysing the questionnaire responses gathered, the researchers realised that the new method helped raise students' interest and desire to develop the competence in using articles. In other words, they still keep a positive attitude and will continue to use the new method as a helpful tool to master articles usages.

Additionally, the participants after experiencing using e-mind maps to learn and memorise the use of articles expressed positive attitudes toward the new method. They found that using e-mind maps not only helps them remember the use of articles more easily and longer but also helps them increase their creativity when

brainstorming new ideas for their essays. Furthermore, using e-mind maps helps students develop their memory and retention as well as increase their interests with its numerous models and colors.

In conclusion, the researchers have made some efficient suggestions on ways to develop the competence in using articles. Hopefully, the study might be useful for students to master the use of articles and use them correctly.

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