Original Article   Open Access

Teaching the English Definite Article through Reading Comprehension: A Pertinent Context in a Foreign Language Classroom

Ezzeldin M.T. Ali
Dept. of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Arts & Humanity Sciences –University of Gadarif –SUDAN
Email: ezzeldin333@yahoo.com

Saeed Abdallah Alzahrani *
Dept. of English Language, Faculty of Sciences and Arts, Albaha University, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Email: samaeed@bu.edu.sa

How to Cite

Ezzeldin, M.T. Ali. and Saeed, Abdallah. Alzahrani. (2023). Teaching the English Definite Article through Reading Comprehension: A Pertinent Context in a Foreign Language Classroom. *Sumerianz Journal of Education, Linguistics and Literature,* 6(3): 54-61.

Abstract

This study reports on the use of the English definite article, which forms a problem for EFL learners in formal writing. Specifically, the study attempts to measure the teaching of English definite article through reading comprehension tasks which are assumed to be suitable tactic in a Sudanese EFL classroom. In this concern, the study also intends to pinpoint the errors of the English definite article that emerge in the writings of Sudanese students of English. The study used descriptive-analytic and experimental methods for data collection. Data collection took place before and after training on the use of the definite article of English. Training continued for four weeks after which students took a posttest. Importantly, three native speakers (Americans) also took the test as a control group. Analysis revealed that as Arabic-speaking students of English, students tend to omit the English definite article before post-modified nouns, while they confuse '*the'* in generic and specific contexts. Students also tend to add definite articles in contexts where no articles are required. In the light of the results obtained, teaching English definite article through reading comprehension tasks proved to be effective in improving the students' performance.
Keywords: Definite article; Omit; Syntactic properties; Error; Reading comprehension.

1. Introduction

The use of the English definite article represents one of the most common problems that EFL learners experience. Arguably, the analysis of the written discourse of such learners includes different types of errors regarding the use of *the*. These errors suggest that learners do not understand the use of the English definite article. One of the causes of the incorrect use of the English definite article is probably the linguistic differences that exist between English and the native language of the learners. Broadly speaking, in contrast to English, definite articles are totally absent from many African languages and some Slavic languages (Kałuża, 1963). Therefore, speakers of such languages may find it difficult to use the English definite article since they are unfamiliar with it (Lyons, 1999). On the other hand, other languages such as Arabic, French, Dutch, and Spanish, etc., have definite articles, albeit each of these languages follows different rules employing definite articles. In Arabic, for example, a prefix *al* precedes nouns, gerunds, and adjective to indicate definiteness. In Dutch, the definite articles *de/het* functions similarly to English in that they only modify nouns; however, Dutch definite articles differ by gender (common vs. neuter). In French, definite articles (*la*, *le*, *l'*, and *les*) require gender and number concord. Similar to the French system of definiteness, Spanish requires number and gender concord, while in English, Dutch, and Arabic, number and gender terms are irrelevant for the choice of definite article (Mumba and Mkandawire, 2019). Interestingly, an account of the uses of definite articles across languages shows that Dutch and English and German are broadly similar concerning the concept of definiteness (Vincent and Constantijn, 2017). However, each language possesses

specific syntactic properties in terms of distribution and arrangement of definite article (appendix 1). Thus, both the presence and absence of definite articles in a language results in learning and teaching problems (Zdorenko and Johanne, 2008). Therefore, research in this area forms an important issue which requires much effort from those who are interested in language teaching and language learning.

Specifically, this paper attempts to measure the teaching of English definite articles through reading comprehension tasks to Sudanese learners of English who speak Arabic as their first language. It is presumed that the use of reading comprehension tasks in teaching definite articles provides a pertinent context for EFL classroom. The paper also attempts to establish the types of errors that students make using the English definite article in their formal writing. Moreover, the teaching of the English definite article through reading comprehension tasks gives learners an opportunity to view and negotiate language on their own terms.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Definite Articles

In cross-linguistic research, definite articles are addressed on the basis of different criteria which include free or bound morphemes, constituents of noun/determiner phrases. Importantly definite articles cannot occur in isolation (Schwarz, 2013). In this line Dryer provided detailed criteria which apply to English (the), Dutch (het/ de) to the definite articles in French that consider gender (le, la) and number (le, les) and to the definite articles in German, which inflect for gender (der, die, das), number (die) and case (der, des, dem, den and so on). Moreover, König (2019) reported some explications of definite articles which he classified into types. These explication include (i) uniqueness (ii) salience), (iii) existence, (v) identifiability and inclusiveness of these elementary notions and uniqueness is the most important one.

2.2. English Definite Article

The use of the English definite article '*the*' suggests that both hearers and speakers have background knowledge about the referent being spoken about. This concept allows the use of *the* only to indicate something that is already known to speech participants. The English definite article is used with singular, plural, and mass nouns, and with most proper nouns. Leech and Svartivik (1989) provide rules for the usage of the English definite article. When *the* denotes a general or typical class of things, such as *The dog is a loyal animal or The lion is dangerous*, we refer to this as the "generic" use of *the*. However, mass nouns do not receive *the*, which is called "zero article." These comprise nouns *like water*, *silk*, *milk*, *salt*, *water*, *history*, *engineering*, etc., e.g., *Salt is an essential element for most meals, and All planets lack water*. However, both mass and plural nouns take *the* when they are post-modified. There are some common nouns that occur without having a definite article (a zero article). These nouns comprise institutions, means of transport, times of the day and night, meals, and parallel phrases.

2.3. The Arabic Definite Article

Arabic has a complex definiteness system. It contains several definiteness patterns, such as *al* and *al-idhafa* (*alumdhaf*), which have rich syntactic properties that pique the interest of many linguists. However, this paper does not study all of the patterns of definite articles and instead it gives priority to establishing differences between the Arabic definite article *al* and that of English '*the*'. First, it is because *al* represents the primary definite article in Arabic. Secondly, linguistically, Arabic *al* is assumed to correspond to English *the* in terms of distribution and function (Michael and Smith, 2001). Arabic uses *al* as a functional word (or a prefix) that qualifies both nouns (e.g., *alwalad*" 'the boy') and adjectives (e.g., *alwalad altawil* 'the tall boy'). Linguistically, researchers interpret the occurrence of the errors of the English definite article *the* as a type of developmental (intra-lingual error) that occurs due to the construction of L1 (inter-language). Errors such as these are argued to be, in fact, not errors but categorical features of the definiteness systems of such inter-languages (Crompton, 2011). Many recent cross-linguistic studies emphasize that L1 can influence L2 language learning as result of existence of definite/indefinite system. This is because linguists divided L1s into a binary typology, in which they classified a language as either has an article system [+article] or does not have [–article]. Arabic is labeled as [+article] language. In this concern Arabic language system has definite article but unlike English which has both definite and indefinite articles (Schulz, 2004). Alenizi (2013), reported that learners' proficiency with definite articles forms an essential factor affecting the acquisition of the define article by Saudi learners of English. Furthermore, according to Crompton (2011) learners whose L1 has no article system such as Russian and Japanese, need more time to learn the English definiteness system than learners whose L1 contains a definite article or articles. Incorrect use of '*the*' may result from the lack of practice and ignorance of the definite article rule in English.

2.4. Teaching via Reading Comprehension Tasks

The study adopted a three-phased method of teaching that includes a pre-task, a cycle task, and a post-task. This study has adopted a task-based approach for developing the students' language knowledge through reading comprehension tasks. When assigning reading tasks to students, it is critical to prompt them to do something with the information they learned from the text, allowing students to build language knowledge and apply it in similar contexts (Garcia and Manjeshwar, 2020). Moreover, this approach allows students to perform reading comprehension tasks in the classroom context through which they reach highest level of understanding the targeted grammar rule/s. Therefore, a task-based approach is useful for teaching grammar rules (Yildiz and Senel, 2017). In the pre-task phase, the teacher prepares students for the task under consideration by informing them about the target grammar item (Nurhayati, 2019; Poghosyan, 2018). In the pre-task, students perform the reading task, trying to

understand, analyze, and repeat the grammar item. In the practice (cycle?) phase task, students do more practice, trying to boost their practical use of the target language item. During the post-phase, teachers attempt to determine whether or not students benefited from the tasks they completed. The teacher's role is to monitor the learning process so that students grasp the target language. Students have more freedom to play the task in the post-task phase, where they can repeat it as many times as they want. Thus, they can pinpoint the problematic areas of the language form they are trying to learn through a task-based approach (Nurhayati, 2019). In task-based teaching, the teaching material includes target lessons, or sequences of lessons to be delivered to students through activities to be taught in three phases. The study used authentic material, which is claimed to be a necessary challenge and is demanding.

2.5. Contrastive Analysis of English and Arabic Systems of Definiteness

The study used Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH) theory that adopted contrastive analysis (CA) (Alhaysony, 2012; Nour, 2020). The purpose behind this is to improve error prediction. MDH claims there are contrasts between different aspects of languages (Bovolenta and Marsden, 2022). The MDH is based on marked and unmarked forms of language. One way to define a "marked" language form is that an "unmarked" form is one that is more common and more frequently used in the languages of the world than a "marked" form. According to Selinker (2008), second language studies apply MDH to predict how a speaker of a language with more marked forms need less effort and less time to learn the contrasts of the target language (TL) than a speaker descending from an L1 with unmarked forms. In this section, we can use the markedness principle to locate contrasts between the definiteness systems of English and Arabic, which represent L1 and L2, respectively.

3. Empirical Study
3.1. Description of Reading Comprehension Tasks

Reading comprehension textbook comprise a number of English reading texts that are written by native speakers who are specialized in the field of language teaching (see Gavell (2021) and Alexander (1970)). Although the textbook has been published 4 or 5 decades ago, it is authentic and is sufficient enough for the purpose. In these reading texts, teachers ask students to read to understand a text, discuss the content of the text, e.g., by answering questions, writing a summary, etc., and finally students are asked to infer the grammar item targeted in the text. Arguably, EFL learners understand the grammar rule well if it is introduced to them through reading texts on the basis of a task-based approach. Students are asked to read passages. The goal of these reading assignments is to help students understand the target language item *the* in context.

3.2. Features of the Reading Comprehension Tasks

1. Passages have been written by native speakers of English.
2. Passages are all examples of contemporary English. These comprise a number of texts chosen from Redman (2000), covering various topics.
3. Passages are not especially designed to serve EFL students but are adapted for all learners of English including native speakers of English.
4. Texts are of medium length—not too short or too long.
5. The texts' inclusion of interesting and authentic topics proved more effective.

4. Data Collection

The study used pretest and posttests to collect data from students and Native American speakers of English. The same set of questions was repeated in the pretest and the posttest. The test items were intended to provide data on correct and incorrect use of the English word *the*, which included multiple-choice questions. Moreover, the test covered all course content. Data from American native speakers of English was also collected as standard data.

5. Participants

A number of 33 Sudanese University students participated in the experiments. The students were preparing for BA degree in English language. They were at semester 5 when they joined the tests. They descended from the same cultural backgrounds and they speak Arabic as their mother tongue. A control group which includes (3) Native American speakers also participated in the experiments. They worked for in Eastern Sudan as recruitments of some international organizations.

6. Testing and Scoring Procedures

Researchers asked students to take a pre-test by reading and answering the story of Charlie the Brave (manipulated text). The aim of the pre-test is to provide insight into the actual performance of the students before they received any training in using the English definite article. In the next stage, students received training on using the English definite article in formal reading comprehension texts. Training extended for four weeks, after which the researchers asked students to take a post-test. Pretest and posttests were distributed to students to reply to a reading comprehension cloze test. The reading texts were chosen from the course taught in the four weeks training. The test items covered the uses of '*the*' with proper nouns, the generic use of *the*, the zero article, the second mention, and post-modifications. In the tests, all definite articles were deleted from the English texts, and subjects were asked to

fill in the blank on the answer sheet with '*the*' if they thought that *the* must be inserted in the given blank. However, if the subjects found that it is incorrect to insert the definite article "the," then they should leave the blank empty. The test includes 50 items where each test item has 2 scores; the full mark is 100. All scores are assessed and can make sense in our testing process.

1. Ask your test participants to read the modified text and fill in the blanks with their best guesses as to the missing words. Each person should work alone.
2. The score is the percentage of correctly guessed words. Because you're testing comprehension rather than spelling skills, synonyms and misspellings are allowed.

7. Results

This section presents the findings of the pretest and posttest.

7.1. Cronbach's Alpha

It is important to mention beforehand in this section, the results of Cronbach's alpha so that readers get information about reliability of test used. The value of Cronbach's alpha is .825 which indicates that there is a high level of internal reliability (consistency) between test items.
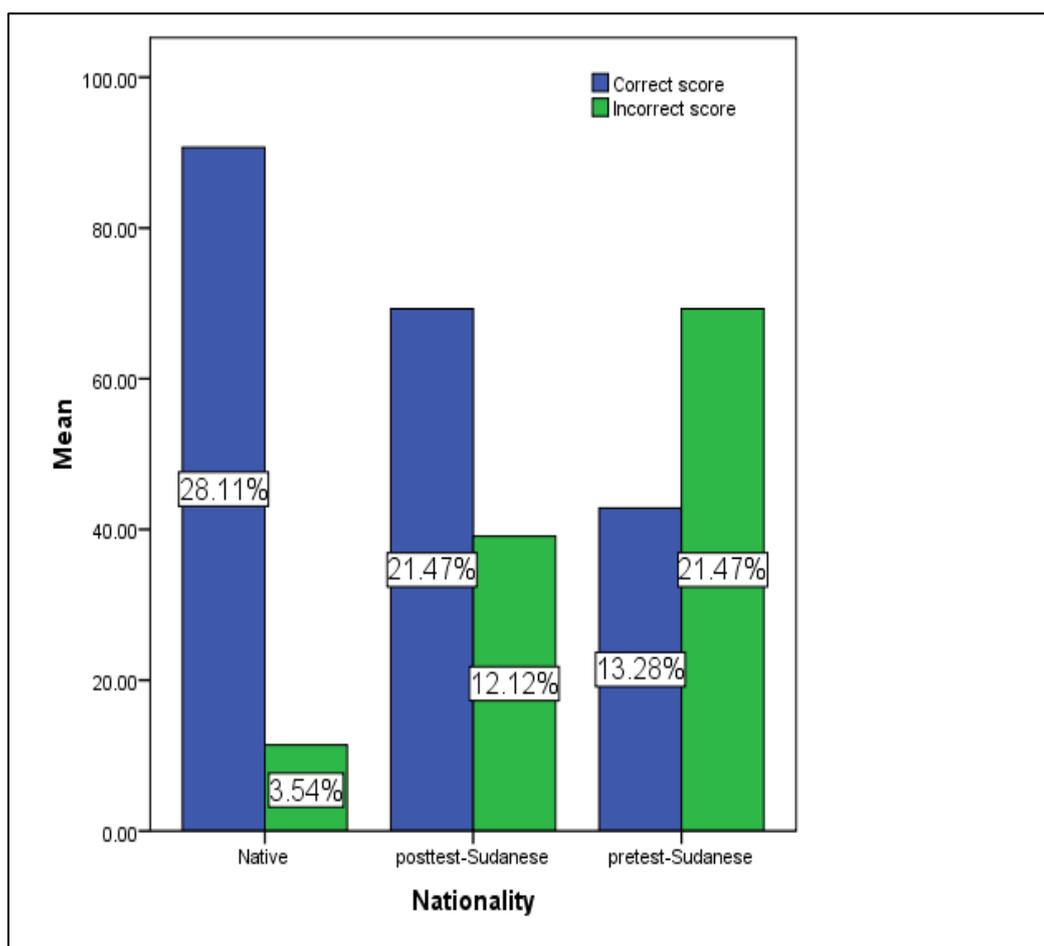
7.2. Results of Pre-and Post-tests

Figure-1. Show the performance of EFL students in the pre-and posttests and performance of Native American speaker in the posttest (a control group) regarding English definite article.

As figure (1) shows the total mean of correct use of English definite article of Sudanese students is 21.47 % in the pre-test. However, their total mean of incorrect score in the pretest is 13.28%. On the other hand, the students' total mean score of incorrect is posttest is 12.12%, while their correct score of correct use is 21.47%. This suggests that students benefited from the training. For more detail about the range of scores, the majority of the scores of the students in the pretest range between 4 to 34 marks while in posttest the students' scores range between 30 to 55 marks (maximum score = 100 marks). The results of the American native speakers, who took the test as a control group, revealed relatively very higher correct score; i.e. the total mean of correct use is 28.11% while the total incorrect mean is 3.54%. In comparison to scores of Sudanese students in both pre-and post-tests, Native Americans have higher correct scores and very slight percentage of incorrect scores.

Interestingly, the computation of the correlation coefficient of the two data reveals statistically a significant correlation between the scores of the students in the pretest and post-tests at $r = .778$ ($p < .01$). This suggests some

pattern between the scores of the students in the pretest and posttest. This also suggests some pattern between the scores of the students in the pretest and posttest.

Table-1. Proximity matrix showing relationship between Sudanese students' scores and the American Natives (control group)

Proximity Matrix			
	Euclidean Distance		
Participants	Native	Posttest	Pretest
Native		35.014	75.089
Posttest			40.110
This is a dissimilarity matrix			

As proximity matrix in table (1) shows, the entry value (35.014) suggests that (the scores) performance of Sudanese students in the posttest is closer to scores of the Native Americans than their performance in the pretest (entry value = 75.089). Moreover, statistics shows that there is some closeness between the students' scores in the pretest and posttest (40.110). This value implies that the students' the scores of students in the pretest and posttest share some pattern.

Moreover, table (2) provides more detail about the correct and incorrect scores of the Native American speakers and the students across test items. This suggests some pattern between the scores of the students and the native speakers. Discussion of this takes place later in the next section.

Table-2. Correct and incorrect percentages of students and native English speakers using English definite article

Sudanese	Use of Definite article	Correct	Incorrect
1	Second mention	70	39
2	Uniqueness	70	39
3	Publicity	65	45
4	Species	74	47
5	Before post modification	65	45
6	With mass nouns	70	38
7	With nationality	71	47
Total percentage		69.29	42.86
Native speaker	Use of Definite article	Correct	Incorrect
1	Second mention	94	5
2	Uniqueness	97	8
3	Publicity	91	10
4	Species	90	8
5	Before post modification	90	9
6	With mass nouns in zero article	87	12
7	With nationality	90	8
Total percentage		91.29	8.6

8. Predications

In foreign language acquisition/learning it is often useful to accompany suggested learning predictions such as errors, problems or facilitations that are expected to take place due to difference or similarities between L1 and L2. Therefore, the study adopted predictions strategy which is presently seen to play an important role in impressions about the anticipated language learning problems /errors. It is supposed here that if the predictions are met by what is substantially anticipated, the results may establish a consolidate knowledge.

Table-3. Total mean of Predictions error vulnerability for Sudanese learners using the English definite article

No	Context of use	Incorrect mean
1.	A language indicates identity by second mention	1.33
2.	The use of definite article to indicate uniqueness	.93
3.	Publicity	1.13
4.	Species	.53
5.	Before Post-modification	.60
6.	Definite article with both nouns and adjectives	.90
7	Definite article with mass nouns in zero article	.37
8.	No definite with count nouns in zero article	1.20
9.	With Nationality	.90

The percentage of errors in Table (1) strongly converges with the predictions which are presented in table (2). The highest percentages of incorrect scores of students in using English definite markers; to indicate publicity, with nationality, count nouns in zero article contexts and post modification, as predicted. These categories form the most common areas of error. Thus, predictions strongly support the results.

9. Discussion

In general, the results suggest that students have problems using the English definite article. Addition and omission errors are the most frequent error type that students make in a zero-article context. These types of errors probably occur due to Arabic (L1) interference, where the use of zero articles in Arabic includes more categories than in English. Crompton (2011), found similar findings reporting that 44% of the errors of Arab learners using definite articles are conflation the generic non-count nouns and around 57% misuse of *the* in zero contexts. Other errors detected in the students' performance using of specific and generic terms, as well as nationalities and country names. The findings support the results of Hassan and Eng (2018), which point to transfer and interference from L1 into L2.

10. Conclusions

Sudanese students make different types of errors using English definite article. This conclusion may apply to all Arab learners of English.

Addition and deletion errors are most common in contexts where zero articles are required.

These types of errors may be due to differences in linguistic systems between English and Arabic.

The rate of error-making may decline with relatively effective teaching and more practice activities on definite articles via reading tasks such as reading comprehensions.

Predictions give a useful indication of the common errors of definite articles, which supports experimental evidence.

Recommendations

Similar study is urgently needed in wide Arabic context to give further insight into the errors of definite articles of English made by Arabic speaking students.

Pedagogical material must allow more space for reading comprehension tasks dealing with the learning and teaching English definite articles.

Pedagogical hints

Language teachers and applied-linguists should provide more attention for the teaching of English definite article. Courses should comprise authentic material and effective exercises which contribute to the learning of English definite article.

References

Alenizi, A. M. (2013). The acquisition of the nongeneric uses of the english definite article the by arabic speakers of english (2013). Theses. Paper 1069.

Alexander (1970). Developing Skills: An Integrated Course for Intermediate Students. Longman group limited – London.

Alhaysony, M. (2012). *An analysis of article errors among saudi female efl students: A.* 8 vols.: Department of English, University of Ha'il, Saudi Arabia: Saudi Arabia.

Bovolenta, G. and Marsden, E. (2022). Prediction and error-based learning in l2 processing and acquisition: A conceptual review. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition,* 44(5): 1384-409.

Crompton, P. (2011). Article errors in the english writing of advanced l1 arabic learners: The role of transfer. *Asian EFL Journal. Professional Teaching Articles,* 50: 451-80.

Garcia, M. G. A. and Manjeshwar (2020). Reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition in the e¬ classroom compiled centro de lenguas grupo: Cavida seccional montería.

Gavell, M. (2021). Task-based reading activities using authentic materials and skills. *English Teaching Forum,* 59(2): 2-9.

Hassan, M. T. A. and Eng, W. B. (2018). Acquisition of english definite article 'the' by arab efl learners. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research,* 5(1): 319-27.

Kałuża, H. (1963). Teaching the english article to speakers of slavic. *Language Learning,* 12: 113-24.

König, E. (2019). *Definite articles and their uses. Aspects of Linguistic Variation, edited by Daniël Olmen, Tanja Mortelmans and Frank Brisard, Berlin.* De Gruyter Mouton: Boston. 165-84. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110607963-006

Leech, G. and Svartivik, J. (1989). *A communicative grammar of english.* Longman Singapore Publishers (Pte).

Lyons, C. (1999). *Definiteness.* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Michael, S. and Smith, B. (2001). *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems.* 2nd edn: Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. 195-213.

Mumba, C. and Mkandawire, S. B. (2019). The text-based integrated approach to language teaching: Its meaning and classroom application. *The University of Zambia Multidisciplinary Journal of Language and Social Sciences Education,* 2(1):

Nour, e. h. O. N. (2020). *Error analysis in the use of definite and indefinite articles among BA students of English (unpublished MA thesis).* University of Ahmed Draia Adrar-Alegeria.

Nurhayati, D. A. W. (2019). Learning basic grammar using task-based learning: A perspective on analyzing online media text. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics,* 4(1): 2527-6492.

Poghosyan, N. (2018). *The main criteria of constructing task-based reading activities for esp learners innovation in language learning.* 11th edn:

Redman, S. (2000). *Vocabulary in Use: self-study reference and practice for students of North American English.* Cambridge University Press.

Schulz, E. (2004). *A student grammar of modern standard Arabic.* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Schwarz, F. (2013). Different types of definites cross-linguistically. *Language and Linguistics Compass,* 7(10): 534–59.

Selinker, S. M. G. (2008). *Second language Acquisition: An introductory course.* New York.

Vincent, J. v. H. and Constantijn, K. (2017). *Prosody of restrictive and appositive relative clauses in Dutch and German.* University of Pannonia, Hungary and Leiden University, The Netherlands / Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Italy - John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Yildiz, M. and Senel, M. (2017). *Teaching grammar through task-based language teaching to young efl learners. Available from: The reading matrix: An international online journal.* 2 vols.: York Press: Baltimore, MD. 17: 233-77.

Zdorenko, T. and Johanne, P. (2008). The acquisition of articles in child second language English: fluctuation, transfer or both? *Second Language Research,* 24(2): 227-50.

Appendeicies

Appendix (1) A summary of universal grammar principle of definiteness system across some languages: English, Dutch, French, Arabic and Spanish

No	Language	Definite article/s	Rule
1	Arabic	al	al + noun/adjective
2	English	the	the + noun
3	Dutch	De	de + common noun
4		Het	het + neutral noun
5	French	le	le + masculine singular
6		la	la + feminine singular
7		les	les + masculine/feminine plural
8		l'	l' + word beginning with /h/ or vowel
9	Spanish	el	el + masculine singular
10		La	la + feminine singular
11		los	los + masculine plural
12		Las	las + feminine plural

Appendix (2) students' scores in the pre-tests and post-tests

STUDENT	PRETEST	POSTTEST	
1	4	40	
2	8	43	
3	4	40	
4	20	60	
5	22	65	
6	4	50	
7	14	65	
8	8	60	
9	13	54	
10	30	70	
11	14	43	
12	13	46	
13	22	65	
14	2	24	
15	8	24	
16	6	32	
17	50	82	
18	8	51	
19	18	39	
20	8	54	
21	44	70	
22	30	65	
23	8	40	
24	10	56	
25	28	70	
26	40	76	

27	26	66	
28	6	34	
29	4	54	
30	8	54	
31	34	56	
32	4	43	
33	32	32	
Total mean	16.19	52.84	