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**EFL LEARNERS' ABILITY OF DEFINITE AND INDEFINITE  
ARTICLES: A STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH EDUCATION  
STUDENTS IN INDONESIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*EFL learners in Indonesia have learned to use English articles since they started learning English. However, English articles pose significant challenges for Indonesian EFL learners due to the absence of articles in Bahasa Indonesia, abstract and complex usage rules, and overgeneralization and transfer errors. This study examines the ability of first-year EFL learners in the English Education Department at UMMY Solok (academic year 2024/2025) in using definite and indefinite articles. Using a descriptive quantitative design, 10 first-year students from English Education Department at UMMY Solok were assessed by using a validated 40-item grammar test. Although the sample was limited, the study offers preliminary insights since it was an exploratory or early stage research. The results revealed that the students' proficiency level in using both definite and indefinite articles were at good level. The findings suggest that students have a functional understanding of the basic usage of articles. Students likely demonstrate awareness of noun classification and contextual usage, which are key to article use. This study contributes to curriculum development by highlighting the importance of gradual, context-based instruction in teaching English articles. Furthermore, it recommends that future researches should examine article usage in students' academic writing across genres or proficiency levels.*

Keyword : *English articles, definite articles, indefinite articles, grammar acquisition*

**INTRODUCTION**

Grammar is a fundamental component of language learning that enables learners to construct clear, coherent, and contextually appropriate expressions in both spoken and written communication. It acts as the framework through which meaning is conveyed and interpreted. According to Ellis (2006), grammar instruction is essential in second language acquisition (SLA) because it facilitates the internalization of syntactic and morphological rules necessary for effective language use. Within this domain, the English article system, specifically the use of definite ("the") and indefinite ("a"/"an") articles, poses a persistent and complex challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This difficulty arises due to the abstract

nature of article rules, which involve distinctions based on definiteness, specificity, generic reference, and countability (Master, 1997; Liu & Gleason, 2002).

Previous studies have examined article acquisition among EFL learners from various language backgrounds. Trenkic (2008) found that Chinese learners generally perform better with indefinite articles, likely due to their clearer syntactic functions and frequent use in instructional materials. In contrast, definite article usage requires more context-sensitive judgment, making it more difficult for learners to acquire. Ekiert (2007) similarly concluded that learners' performance varies between article types and is often influenced by the interplay between grammatical instruction, L1 background, and exposure to English input.

In the context of Indonesian EFL learners, article usage becomes even more problematic due to the absence of an article system in Bahasa Indonesia. This linguistic difference often results in L1 transfer effects, where learners apply structures or patterns from their native language to English, leading to errors such as article omission or misuse. Research by Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004) has demonstrated that L1 transfer plays a significant role in shaping learners' article use, particularly when their L1 lacks grammatical markers for definiteness or specificity. Consequently, Indonesian learners may face challenges not only in mastering article form but also in understanding the nuanced meanings that articles convey.

Based on an interview conducted with second semester students of the English Education Department at UMMY Solok, it was found that some of the participants were unable to accurately explain the concept of definite and indefinite articles. Their knowledge was limited to identifying the articles "a," "an," and "the" without a clear understanding of their specific functions. Furthermore, when asked about the rules governing the use of these articles, the students indicated that they relied primarily on the initial letter of the noun following the article, rather than a comprehensive understanding of grammatical rules. These findings suggest that the students face notable difficulties in mastering the correct use of English articles.

The first issue identified was that students exhibited confusion in the use of definite and indefinite articles, particularly when applying more specific grammatical rules. This confusion suggests a tendency to make errors in article usage. Given that mastery of articles forms a fundamental aspect of grammatical competence, students' ability to use them accurately is essential for effective communication in both academic and everyday contexts.

The second issue identified was that students perceived the rules governing the use of definite and indefinite articles as difficult to understand. This perception contributed to a lack

of motivation to further explore and study the more specific rules related to article usage. As a result, many students struggled with applying articles correctly in various contexts. This challenge became a key reason the researcher was motivated to investigate the issue further.

Previous studies have shown that elementary learners are better at using definite articles, while intermediate learners used indefinite articles better (Vahdani, 2011; Elyidirim, 2019). However, limited research exist on EFL learners at university level particularly in Indonesian EFL context. Therefore, this study addresses further examine the ability of English Education Department students at UMMY Solok in using definite and indefinite articles, as evidence suggests that many students continue to experience difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentences involving article usage.

## **METHOD**

### **Design of the Research**

This is a descriptive quantitative study. Siregar (2014) states that descriptive research is a study conducted to determine the value of independent variables, either one variable or more (independent) without making a comparison or association with other variables. In this research, the researcher analyzed and identified the result of research by using statistical method.

Moreover, Sugiyono (2012) explains that quantitative research methods is a research method based on the philosophy of positivism, is used to examine in a particular population or sample, data collection using research instruments, data analysis is quantitative / statistical, with the aim to test the hypothesis that has been fixed. So, this research was conducted by applying descriptive quantitative design. It means that the data obtained from the research sample were analyzed in accordance with the statistical methods used.

### **Population and Sample**

Arikunto (2010) says that population is all respondents of the research subject. The population of this study was all of the first year students of English Education Department at FKIP UMMY Solok that are registered on 2024/2025 academic year. The total of population were 10 students.

According to Siregar (2014), sample is a data retrieval procedure, in which only a portion of the population is taken and used to determine the nature and desired characteristics of a population. The sampling technique used in this study was total sampling. Sugiyono

(2012) says that total sampling is a sampling technique where the number of samples equals the population. The reason for taking the total sampling because Sugiyono (2012), if the population is less than 30, the entire population can be used as sample research. The total sample in this study were 10 students. However, although the sample was limited, the study offers preliminary insights since it was an exploratory research.

## Research Instrument

The research instrument is a tool that can be used to obtain, process, and interpret information obtained from the respondents conducted with the same measuring pattern. The instrument of this research was test. Arikunto (2010) defines that test is a series of questions or other instruments which are used to measure individual or groups skill, knowledge, intelligence, capability or talent. In this research, the researcher used grammar test.

The test consisted of fifty-five cloze-type sentences, each requiring respondents to fill in the blanks with the appropriate definite or indefinite articles. The number of test items was determined based on the sub-indicators being assessed, with five items allocated for each. Participants were given 75 minutes to complete the test. This duration was calculated based on an average of 1.2 minutes per item, totaling 66 minutes for answering all 55 items. An additional 5 minutes were allocated for explaining the test instructions, and 4 minutes were allotted for collecting the completed papers. Number of items based on the indicators of definite and indefinite articles are shown in the following table.

**Table 1: Indicator of Instrument**

No	Indicators	Sub Indicators
1	Definite Articles	<p>When the object or group of objects is <u>unique or considered to be unique.</u></p> <p>Before superlatives and <i>first, second etc,</i> used as adjectives or pronouns.</p> <p>Before certain proper names of seas, rivers, groups of island, chains of mountains, plural names of countries, deserts, regions.</p> <p><u>before names consisting of noun + of + noun.</u></p>
2	Indefinite Articles	<p>Before a singular noun which is countable (i.e. of which there is more than one) when it is mentioned for the first time and represents <u>no particular person or thing.</u></p> <p>Before singular countable noun which is used as an <u>example of a class of thing.</u></p> <p><u>With a noun complement. This includes names of profession.</u></p> <p><u>In certain expression of quantity.</u></p> <p><u>With certain number.</u></p>

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In expression of price, speed, ratio etc.  
In exclamations before singular, countable  
nouns.

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Prior to administering the actual test, a try-out test was conducted with students who were not part of the main study sample. This try-out test was given to third-year students of the English Education Department at UMMY Solok on as they had completed all three stages of grammar course making them suitable for evaluating the instrument. The purpose of the try-out test was to determine whether the instructions were clear, the time allocation was sufficient, and the test items were appropriate and reliable for assessing the intended competencies.

Validity and reliability of instrument are integral part in conducting a research since the instrument which used must be valid and reliable before using it to collect data. The researcher ensured that the instrument was valid and reliable by doing validity and reliability testing as follows:

#### *Validity*

Ary et al. (2010) argues that validity is the most important consideration in developing and evaluating measuring instruments. It means that validity is the most complex criterion of an effective test and the most important principle of language testing. Test validation is the process of accumulating evidence to support such inferences. Content validity was applied to validate the instrument.

Moreover, to have a content validity, the instruments are representative of some defined universe or domain of content (Ary et al., 2010). The test was content validity if it includes a proper sample of the structure or content which is relevant with the purpose of the test. The instrument in this research was content validitated because this test was designed based on the syllabus of Basic English Grammar course at UMMY Solok.

#### *Reliability*

To see the reliability of the test, the technique that was used is Kuder and Richardson (K-R 21). According to Siregar (2014: 110), there are several reasons for testing the reliability of research instruments using K-R 21 technique. First, the answer option for each question is only two answers. The correct answer is filled with a value of 1, and the wrong answer is filled with a value of 0. Second, the number of research instruments (questions) must be odd that they can not be split. The formula of K-R 21 is follows:

$$r_{11} = \frac{k}{(k-1)} \left( 1 - \frac{\bar{X}(k-\bar{X})}{k.V_t} \right)$$

Where:

$\bar{X}$  = Mean of total score

k = the sum of item in instrument

$V_t$  = varians total

### Technique of Data Collection

According to Siregar (2014), data serves as raw material that must be processed in order to generate information and reveal facts. For data to be used as a basis for drawing conclusions, it must be reliable. In this study, the data were obtained from the results of students' tests. The research was conducted on June 10, 2025. The data collection procedure involved several steps: first, the researcher provided students with instructions on how to complete the test; second, the test papers were distributed, and students were allotted 75 minutes to complete them; finally, the completed tests were collected for analysis.

### Technique of Data Analysis

After the data were collected, they were subjected to analysis. The instrument used was a grammar test specifically designed to assess students' proficiency in using definite and indefinite articles. The test consisted of 55 items, each scored with one point for a correct response and zero for an incorrect one. Thus, the maximum possible score was 55, representing a perfect performance on all test items.

After collecting the data, it was analyzed by using the formula to know the grammar ability in using definite and indefinite articles and then interpret the data. To calculate the percentage of the frequency of each student's mastery in using definite and indefinite articles, the researcher used the following formulation proposed by Sudjana (1989:129) as the following:

$$P = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

Where:

P= Percentage of the answer

F= Frequency of the students who get correct answer

N= Total number of the items

After calculating the percentage of correct responses using the frequency of correct answers and the total number of test items, the researcher proceeded to the next stage of

analysis. The students' scores were examined to determine the extent of their grammatical ability. Subsequently, the researcher categorized the students' performance levels based on the classification criteria proposed by Arikunto (2009).

**Table 2: Criteria of Students' Grammar Mastery**

Percentage of Score	Grading Criterion of the Students' Ability
81% - 100%	Excellent
61% - 80%	Good
41% - 60%	Average
21% - 40%	Poor
0% - 20%	Very Poor

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the description of the students' grammar ability on using definite and indefinite articles among 10 students. The test was informed of cloze test in grammar test. The data of this research are grammar test resulted by the first year students of English Education Department FKIP UMMY Solok at 2024/2025 academic year.

### *Data Description*

In this section, the researcher presents the data description and the data analysis. The total point of students' answer is on the following table.

**Table 3: Students' Work Sheet**

No.	Students	Point of correct answer		Total Point
		Definite	Indefinite	
1.	Student 1	12	15	27
2.	Student 2	15	25	40
3.	Student 3	16	28	44
4.	Student 4	13	23	36
5.	Student 5	18	24	42
6.	Student 6	13	17	30
7.	Student 7	7	17	24
8.	Student 8	16	24	40
9.	Student 9	18	30	48
10.	Student 10	16	29	45
		$\sum = 144$	$\sum = 232$	$\sum = 376$
		$\bar{X} = 14,4$	$\bar{X} = 23,2$	$\bar{X} = 37,6$

Based on the table above, there were 55 items in the test answered by 10 students. The test items were divided into two indicators, definite article and indefinite article, and eleven sub indicators such as four in definite articles and seven in indefinite articles. The research found that the highest point was 48 and the lowest point was 24.

### *Data Analysis*

After the scores were checked, the researcher then analyzed them to find out the number of students who got excellent, good, sufficient, bad, and fail. The percentage of students' ability in using definite and indefinite article at the first year of English Education Department FKIP UMMY Solok at 2024/2025 academic year was found by counting score using the formula of percentage.

#### *Students Ability in Using Definite Article*

In measuring the students' ability in using definite article, the researcher counted the students' score using the formula of percentage. The result of the score can be seen in the following table.

**Table 4: Percentage of Students Grammar Ability in Using Definite Article**

Range of score	Grade	Qualification	Frequency of students	Percentage
81-100	A	Excellent	3	30%
61-80	B	Good	5	50%
41-60	C	Sufficient	1	10%
21-40	D	Bad	1	10%
0-20	E	Fail	0	0%

Based on the table above, it can be seen that there were three students who got A (30%), five students who got B (50%), one student who got C (10%), one student who got D (10%) and zero student who got E (0%). It is found that there were 50% of students (the highest percentage) who got B. It can be concluded that the students' ability in using definite article dominantly was good.

#### *Students Ability in Using Indefinite Article*

In measuring the students' ability in using indefinite article, the researcher counted the students' score using the formula of percentage. The result of the score can be seen in the following table.

**Table 5: Percentage of Students Grammar Ability in Using Indefinite Article**

Range of score	Grade	Qualification	Frequency of students	Percentage
81-100	A	Excellent	3	30%
61-80	B	Good	4	40%
41-60	C	Sufficient	3	30%
21-40	D	Bad	0	0%
0-20	E	Fail	0	0%

Based on the table above, there were three students who got A (30%), four students who got B (40%), three students who got C (30%), zero student who got D (0%) and zero student who got E (0%). It is found that there were 40% of students (the highest percentage) who got B. It can be concluded that the students' ability in using definite article dominantly was good.

## **Discussion**

Grammar is a fundamental skill that must be mastered by students in the English Education Department (EFL learners). At the university level, the teaching of grammar plays a crucial role, as it enables students to communicate and express their ideas effectively, both orally and in written form, in accordance with appropriate sentence structure. This study specifically investigates students' proficiency in using definite and indefinite articles

This study focuses on two specific indicators: the use of definite and indefinite articles. Articles pose significant challenges for learners in both understanding and correct usage (Azar, 2010). Many languages lack articles entirely, and even in those that do, their usage often differs substantially from that of English. From the perspective of many educators, articles are among the most difficult grammatical elements to teach due to their nuanced meanings, complex usage patterns, and idiomatic variations. Learners who struggle with mastering articles should be reminded that articles constitute only a small component of the English language. The definite article is used when both the speaker and the listener are referring to the same specific person or object, while the indefinite article is used with singular countable nouns when making generalizations.

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher found that students' overall ability in using definite and indefinite articles is categorized as good. Specifically, students demonstrated a satisfactory level of proficiency in using the definite article. However, difficulties were identified in one particular sub-indicator: the use of the definite article 'the' before names consisting of the pattern noun + of + noun. In this area, students' performance was notably weak. The errors suggest that students experienced confusion when applying the correct article in this grammatical structure, often selecting a or an instead of the. This is in line with previous research by Nopjirapong (2011) which indicates a lack of understanding regarding the specific rules governing the use of definite articles in complex noun phrases.

Secondly, students' ability in using indefinite articles was found to be generally good, indicating that they were, for the most part, able to apply indefinite articles correctly. However, difficulties emerged in specific sub-indicators. In sub-indicator 2, which involves

the use of an indefinite article before a singular countable noun representing an example of a class of things, student performance ranged from sufficient to poor. Many students incorrectly used 'the' instead of 'a' or 'an', indicating confusion in identifying when a noun is functioning as a representative of a broader category. This is in line with Thomas (1989) who stated that L2 learner frequently use the definite article in referential indefinite context. Additionally, challenges were observed in sub-indicator 5, which pertains to the use of indefinite articles with certain numbers. In this area, student performance varied from excellent to poor. A common error was the incorrect use of 'an'/'the', suggesting that students remain uncertain about the appropriate use of the indefinite article 'an' in numerical contexts.

In conclusion, the results of this study indicates that, on average, students demonstrate a good level of proficiency in using definite and indefinite articles. While most students are able to apply these articles appropriately, some still lack familiarity with certain specific rules governing their usage. Nonetheless, the overall ability of the students in using definite and indefinite articles can be categorized as good.

## **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

This study examines the ability of first-year students in the English Education Department at UMMY Solok in 2024/2025 academic year to use definite and indefinite articles. The findings revealed that students demonstrate a good understanding of both types of articles. However, specific difficulties were identified in certain sub-indicators. In the case of definite articles, many students struggled with using "the" before noun phrases structured as "noun + of + noun." Similarly, with indefinite articles, students encountered challenges in correctly applying them before singular countable nouns representing a class and in contexts involving certain numbers. These errors suggest that while students grasp the general concept of article usage, they require further instruction and practice on more complex grammatical patterns. These results indicate a need for more solid foundational understanding. To address this challenge, students are encouraged to engage with continued exposure, targeted instruction, and practice so students proficiency in article usage can be further improved. Additionally, lecturers could adopt more contextual and interactive teaching approach to enhance students' understanding on using articles. Furthermore, it recommends *that* future researches should examine article usage in students' academic writing across genres or proficiency levels.

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