

THE USE OF ARTICLES IN FRENCH: AN OBSERVATION

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Abstract: Studying French as a foreign language is enjoyable among Malaysian students. Even though French is not widely used in comparison to English as the second language in Malaysia, there are many courses offered in French to meet university programme requirements. Each language has its own challenges, especially in relation to the application of its grammar rules, and learning French is no exception, too. Therefore, this current study focuses on the exceptional use of articles in various sentence structures in French. To achieve this, students' formative-assessment projects, which are role plays based on specific situations captured in short videos, have been meticulously scrutinised and analysed. To support the collected data, interviews with two French lecturers have been conducted to elicit some professional feedback pertaining to the use of articles in French by the students. The findings show that errors associated with using articles for masculine and feminine nouns and the use of definite and

indefinite articles are abundant in the students' pre-recorded conversations. This is due to the fact that the articles used are not equivalent or do not even exist in their mother tongue. Hence, this study suggests that the students need to increase their knowledge of the French language and keep drilling intensively and continuously on the use of French articles for innumerable nouns and nouns phrases in French discourses.

Keywords: French Language, Articles, Error, Drilling

Introduction

French is a modern language that is being widely studied around the world. In the context of learning French, it was first brought in by traders from France and Ireland before the Second World War. By the 1960s, local universities and private institutions began to offer French-language instructions to their students.

Therefore, the learning of foreign languages in Malaysia, especially third languages, plays an important role in the era of globalisation. This is in line with Article 152 of the national constitution, which states that, even though the position of *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) has been clearly acknowledged as the national language, people are encouraged to learn foreign languages. This importance has been further strengthened by the existence of bilateral cooperations with foreign countries, such as Japan, France, Saudi Arabia, and others, which have been pioneered by national leaders. Unquestionably, knowing the languages of these countries gives benefits to the people and the

country of Malaysia per se. This is because the acquisition of a foreign language allows one to further elevate one's sensitivity to cultural diversity and the sense of openness and mutual acceptance of other cultural aspects. Furthermore, it also serves as one of the entries to achieving success in various fields. The map of foreign-language dominance is constantly changing, both at the world level generally and at the country level specifically, along with social and political changes (Suherman, 2011).

In UiTM, most of the students who take the course are so interested in learning French because they are aware of its benefits and relevance in learning other subjects. The students have found that most of the vocabulary and articles used could help them to better understand related subjects, such as culinary and food preparation, in which numerous French-related terminologies are used. This has encouraged the students to attempt to master the use of articles correctly in addition to identifying the correct gender of a noun. Assignments are given in culinary and food preparation classes have greatly aided the students' understanding on the correct use of French articles. The assignments include techniques and ways of cutting vegetables, the principal names of famous French chefs, and so on.

Concept Definitions of French Articles

The existence of various articles in French has made it difficult for students to use them properly. This serves as a constraint to the students because the use of such articles does not exist in their mother tongue (Malay language). This is due to the fact that the French articles differ in their usage according to the context of gender and singularisation and pluralisation of nouns referenced.

The Level-3 French students of the Bachelor of Hotel Management of the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism have used a French textbook module, titled *Français Niveau III* (French Level III), which contains notes and exercises of the use of **definite and indefinite articles** for French nouns. The syllabus on the correct use of articles for French nouns is a teaching material continuously used since the diploma level, and the use of a French textbook module, titled *Bon Sejour II*, has also been used throughout the teaching-and-learning sessions.

Indefinite Articles (L'article Indéfini)

Indefinite articles are used to indicate nouns that are not specific or things that are specific but not known to either a speaker or an interlocutor. Its use in the Malay language can be translated as 'satu' (one) or 'beberapa' (several), followed by corresponding classifiers.

In the French grammar rules, the indefinite articles are divided into 3, namely:

1. *Un* is used for a masculine singular noun, for example:

Un étudiant	A male student
Un tableau	A whiteboard
Un rideau	A curtain
Un gâteau	A loaf/piece of cake

2. *Une* is used for a feminine singular noun, for example:

Une étudiante	A female student
Une table	A table
Une chaise	A chair
Une voiture	A car

3. *Des* is used for a masculine or feminine plural noun, for example:

Des étudiants	Several male students
Des étudiantes	Several female students
Des tableaux	Some whiteboards
Des rideaux	Some curtains
Des gâteaux	Some loafs/pieces of cake
Des chaises	Some chairs
Des voitures	Some cars

Definite Articles (L'article Définis)

In French, a definite article can be matched with 'the' in English. However, the only difference is that, in French, the article would change according to a noun next to it, which is either in a singular or plural form of the object, the gender of the object to be referred to, and the first letter of a noun, either a vowel or consonant.

As in English, the use of a definite article in French is for specific nouns known to a speaker or listener. Basically, there are four types of definite articles in French, namely:

1. *Le* for a masculine singular noun, for example:

Le drapeau	A flag
Le rideau	A curtain
Le gâteau	A cake
Le stylo	A pen
Le crayon	A pencil

2. *La* is used for a feminine singular noun, for example:

La Voiture	A car
La salle	A room
La salle de bain	A bathroom
La table	A table
La chaise	A chair
La Porte	A door

3. *L'* is used for both masculine and feminine singular nouns that start with a vowel or silent 'h', for example:

L'hôtel	A hotel
L'étudiante	A female student
L'étudiant	A male student
L'appartement	An apartment
L'hôpital	A hospital
L'assiette	A plate

4. *Les* is used for both masculine and feminine plural nouns, for example:

Les tables	The tables
Les chaises	The chairs
Les portes	The doors
Les voitures	The cars
Les stylos	The pens
Les crayons	The pencils

Les gâteaux	The cakes
Les hôpitaux	The hospitals
Les étudiants	The male students
Les étudiantes	The female students

Problem Statement

For this study, the researchers have identified several problems encountered by the students of the Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu, which are the use of correct articles, because most of the vocabulary learned specifically for the subject of culinary and food preparation is closely related to other subjects they study in other cooking classes. They use a number of French terminologies in the cooking classes, such as terms associated to ways of cutting, cooking techniques, and some types of sauces, soups, and desserts.

This study is very important to determine the problems of the students learning French for the sake of helping those who have problems in mastering the French grammar so as to assist them to improve the level of their proficiency in the target language. A survey on French learning has found that students typically have a difficulty in mastering article formulas used in French. Based on the concept definitions described above, the patterns of these articles are not equivalent to those of the Malay language at all. Hence, the researchers have already anticipated the problem of mastering those aspects of the articles in French beforehand.

Research Objectives

1. To identify difficulties in using French articles according to lecturers' perspectives;
2. To examine errors that occur in French-speaking activities.

Literature Review

During the course of this study, the researchers have attempted their best to track down past studies that focus on French learning in Malaysia. Nevertheless, it is evident that the number of studies available are very limited since the fact that French is a foreign language which is only offered in some public universities as a foreign language, such as Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), and Universiti Malaya (UM).

Although there have been positive developments in the teaching and learning of French in Malaysia, there are very few studies specifically on the teaching and learning of French either at the school or higher-education level.

However, there is a study by Azhar Harun, titled *Penggunaan Preposisi Bahasa Perancis di Kalangan Pelajar Sekolah: Satu Kajian Analisis Kesilapan* (The Use of French Prepositions among School Students: An Error Analysis Study), which was completed in 2006 as a Master's thesis in Modern Language Studies at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya (UM). This study has used an error-analysis approach. According to the study, the researcher has examined the forms of errors committed by students and problems encountered when using French conjunctions correctly. The study has provided recommendations on the aspects of teaching French prepositions to students whose mother tongue is the Malay language.

A study using a similar approach has been conducted by Lim with the title *An Error Analysis of the Use of the Past Tense in French by Malay Students*, which was completed in 2001 as a Master's thesis in Modern Language Studies at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya (UM). The analysis, which has been made on the errors constructed by the Malay students in using

French verbs, has been given attention by the researcher. According to the researcher, the forms of French verbs that have tense and gender characteristics are sorts of challenges to the French-learning students. Having identified the students' errors, the researcher has given some recommendations to help the students learning French to overcome the problems of using the French verbs in both speaking and writing.

In the meantime, a research conducted by Roshidah Hassan, titled *Analisa Kontrastif Kata Ganti Nama Diri bahasa Melayu dan bahasa Perancis* (Contrastive Analysis of Malay and French Personal Pronouns), was completed in 1997 as a Master's thesis at the Faculty of Modern Language and Linguistics. Her research has focused on the contrastive analysis of the use of personal pronouns in Malay and French. The comparisons have been made from the sociolinguistic and grammatical aspects.

Based on the above literature, the study of the French language has still had remarkable room for investigation. As far as the studies discovered by the researchers, the focus of these studies have been placed on the error analysis and contrastive analysis. This shows that the field of French studies in Malaysia needs to be intensified and extended from time to time to unveil more precious treasure of knowledge, especially from the aspects of teaching French among the local community in Malaysia.

Research Methodology

This study has used a qualitative approach to ensure that the objectives of the study stated beforehand are achieved. Therefore, this study has not used statistical figures to interpret the data collected as a useful source of information for this study.

Sources of Data

This study has used an array of data based on records and notes obtained and compiled through the qualitative-data-collection method. The data are the actual data obtained from the field and authentic sources. The data of the field study has been the interview sessions recorded directly from the selected respondents whereas the authentic data are the records of the selected simulation videos of the French students based on the latest data obtained by the researchers.

Data-Collection Method

To obtain the data for the study, the researchers have used two data-collection methods, which are interviews and French simulation-video-recording.

1. Interview: A total of two French lecturers have been identified to be able to cooperate as the research respondents. The procedure performed has been interviewing both respondents individually from 30 minutes to 1 hour per session. The questions asked during the interviews have been associated to the experience of teaching the topic of French articles, common mistakes found to have been committed by students, and actions are taken to overcome these problems.
2. Checking the recorded videos of the French-simulated activities: This video-recording has been an assessed task of a continuous test. A total of 10 videos have been selected to evaluate the aspect of the use of the French articles by extracting the examples of such errors and listing them down as the data for this study.

Data Analysis

This study has used the critical, descriptive analysis, which means that each data collected from the sources of the study has been explained in relation to the objectives of the study, presented narratively,

and critiques related to the language errors that occur in the recorded data obtained from the respondents have been given.

Findings

The findings of this study have been divided into two; the first part is the findings obtained through the interview sessions with the French lecturers and the second part is the analysis of the students' simulation videos of the role-play test.

Teachers' Perspectives

Through observations and examination done by the French lecturers of the Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Cawangan Terengganu, it is found that most students who take the French courses are still not proficient in using the correct French articles for nouns. This finding is based on the results of the video review of the final assignment (simulation video-recording) completed by the students of the Bachelor of Hotel Management for the TFC501 course, which is Intermediate French Level 3. It is found that there are many repetitive errors made by the students even though they have heard the vocabulary used repeatedly during the teaching-and-learning sessions. The interview sessions with 2 respondents, who are French lecturers at the Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Cawangan Terengganu, have also been conducted. These interviews have aimed at identifying possible challenges, errors, and improvements which can be recommended to help the students to be able to use the French articles for nouns correctly.

Respondent #1 (French Lecturer 1): *"I have found that the main problem is that the students are not able to distinguish between genders that exist in the French grammar. Although it has been repeatedly emphasised that words ending in '-ette', '-tion', '-sion', such as 'télévision' (television) and 'assiette' (plate), are feminine objects using the definite article 'le'. One more thing, the students are found to have practised less in writing and reading, which causes them to be less sensitive in the gender status of nouns in French even though they have been described during the teaching-and-learning sessions"*.

The respondent has further added that, in an effort to help the students to master the correct use of articles for masculine and feminine nouns, for example, *le* for masculine nouns, *la* for feminine, *l'* for nouns starting with a vowel or silent 'h', and *les* for plural nouns, the students have been advised to make columns (masculine or feminine nouns) in their notebooks and asked to place the correct French articles for the list of the nouns. In addition, the lecturer has also instructed the students to drill and practise the correct use of the articles either through completing exercises in a classroom or answering online quizzes.

Respondent #2 (French Lecturer 2): *"Usually, students would be confused with genders that exist in French. This is due to the fact that genders for nouns in Malay and English can be easily distinguishable. For students who have just learned a foreign language as a third language, especially French and other European languages, such as Spanish, Italian, German, and so on, such gender cases exist in their grammar rules"*.

Besides, the respondent has also found that the students have placed the articles merely at their will without looking at the gender of a noun. On top of that, there have also been the students who have not placed an article directly before a noun; it is probably because they may have not known or may have been confused with the gender of the noun. With a view to helping the students to be able to use the correct French articles, the lecturer has given a lot of drills and game-oriented grammar quizzes in order to enrich and improve the students' vocabulary so that they can identify the gender of these nouns. In

addition, the students have also been encouraged to read because their reading experiences will increase their vocabulary effectively.

Students' Language Errors

These refer to the use of incorrect definite articles by the Bachelor of Hotel Management students for their final-semester assignment in the October 2020-February 2021 Semester for the course TFC501 (Intermediate French Level 3). The assignment has been in the form of a recorded role-play simulation video of which the students have been tasked to record a situation based on a syllabus or topic found in the textbook, such as going for holidays, searching or booking a hotel room or apartment, discussing about the weather, or talking about daily routines.

Each group has been composed of 3 or 4 group members, and each group member has been required to provide a minimum of 10 lines of dialogue for their recorded conversation. The findings of the article usage error analysis in this video recording have been summarised in the table below.

Based on the evaluation and observation made on the role-play videos completed by the Level-III Bachelor of Hotel Management students for the TFC501 course, it is found that there are groups that have kept using wrong articles repeatedly for nouns used. This may be due to the fact that the students have had difficulties in selecting the right articles even though they have been taught and emphasised by the lecturer during the teaching-and-learning sessions.

The next reason regarding the wrong article selection has been due to the attitude of the students who have been less concerned with the spelling of the suffix of each noun that ends with '-sion' (e.g. *saison*), '-e' (e.g. *température*, *cuisine*, and *piscine*), which, according to the French grammar, is a feminine noun and uses the article *la*.

In the interim, the students have also had a tendency to place articles, either *le* or *la*, in front of the nouns beginning with a vowel letter, such as *la Appartement*, *le étage*, and *la hôtel*, whereas in the French grammar, each noun beginning with a vowel and silent 'h' needs to use *l'* without the letter '-a' or '-e'.

It is also discovered that a confusion has also appeared to be present among the students when identifying the correct use of the French articles for the nouns used based on the chosen situations.

The Incorrect Use of French Articles in the Role-Play Videos

Group 1 (Conversation on Holidays)	
Incorrect Article	Correct Article
Le saison (season/feminine)	La saison
Le température (temperature/feminine)	La température
Le voiture (car/feminine)	La voiture
La soleil (sun/masculine)	Le soleil
Le piscine (swimming pool/feminine)	La piscine
La jardin (park/masculine)	Le jardin
Group 2 (Conversation on Weather)	
Le neige (snow/feminine)	La neige
Le piscine (swimming pool/feminine)	La piscine
La printemps (spring/masculine)	Le printemps
Le mer (ocean/feminine)	La mer
La soleil (sun/masculine)	Le soleil

Group 3 (Searching for/Booking a Hotel Room/Apartment)	
La appartement (apartment/masculine/vowel)	L'appartement
La salon (living room/masculine)	Le salon
Le chambres (rooms/ plural/feminine)	Les chambres
Le cuisine (kitchen space/feminine)	La cuisine
Le jardin (park/masculine)	-
Le mer (ocean/feminine)	-
Group 4 (Searching for/Booking a Hotel Room/Apartment)	
Le appartement (apartment/masculine)	L'appartement
Le chambre (room/feminine)	La chambre
Les cuisine (kitchen space/ feminine)	La cuisine
La salon (living room/masculine)	Le salon
La séjour (living room/masculine)	Le séjour
L'pièce (space/feminine)	La pièce
Les jardin (parks/ plural/masculine)	Le jardin
La parc (park/masculine)	Le parc
Group 5 (Conversation on Daily Routines)	
Le salle de bain (bathroom/feminine)	La salle de bain
La pantalon (pants/ masculine)	Le pantalon
Les chemise (blouse/feminine/tunggal)	La chemise
Le voiture (car/feminine)	La voiture
Le cuisine (food or cooking/feminine)	La cuisine
Le randonné (strolling/feminine)	La randonné
L'télévision (television/feminine)	La télévision
La théâtre (theatre/masculine)	Le théâtre
La jardinage (garden/masculine)	Le jardinage
Group 6 (Conversation on Holidays)	
Les train (train/masculine)	Le train
La bus (bus/masculine)	Le bus
La taxi (taxi/masculine)	Le taxi
Le mer (beach/masculine)	La mer
La hôtel (hotel/masculine)	L'hôtel
Le appartement (apartment/masculine)	L'appartement
La étage (level/masculine)	L'étage
La chambres (room/masculine)	Les chambres
Group 7 (Conversation on Daily Routines)	
Le douche (bathing/feminine)	La douche
La weekend dernier (last week/masculine)	Le weekend dernier
La pantalon (pants/masculine)	Le pantalon
Le chemise (blouse/feminine)	La chemise
Le campagne (village/rural area/masculine)	La campagne
Le piscine (swimming pool/masculine)	La piscine
La thé (tea/masculine)	Le thé
La café (coffee/masculine)	Le café
La diner (dinner/masculine)	Le diner
Le argent (money or cash/masculine/vowel)	L'argent

Group 8 (Conversation on Holidays)	
Le vacances (holiday/plural/ masculine)	Les vacances
La bus (bus/masculine)	Le bus
La taxi (taxi/masculine)	Le taxi
Le mer (beach/masculine)	La mer
Le réceptionniste (receptionist/masculine)	La réceptionniste
Le appartement (apartment/ masculine)	L'appartement
La étage (level/masculine)	L'étage
Le chambres (room/masculine)	Les chambres
Le mer (sea/feminine)	La mer
Group 9 (Conversation on Weather)	
Le été (salji/feminine)	L'été
Le neige (snow/feminine)	La neige
La printemps (spring/masculine)	Le printemps
Le mer (ocean/feminine)	La mer
La soleil (sun/masculine)	Le soleil
La météo (weather forecast/masculine)	Le météo
La saisons (seasons/ plural/feminine)	Les saisons
La heure (time/feminine)	L'heure
Group 10 (Conversation on Daily Routines)	
Le heure (time/feminine)	L'heure
La jardinage (gardening/masculine)	Le jardinage
Le sports (sports/plural/masculine)	Les sports
L'activités culturelles (cultural activities/ plural/feminine)	Les activités culturelles
La tennis (tennis/masculine)	Le tennis
La badminton (badminton/ masculine)	Le badminton
La foot (football/masculine)	Le foot

In the conversation of Group 1 (Conversation on Holidays), it is found that the students have used *le* for *température* (temperature/feminine) in their conversation while, in fact, the article should be *la* for the noun (*La température*). This has happened because the students have been confused of the spelling of the word suffixes in French as most of the nouns, but not all, which end with the vowel '-e', are feminine.

In the meantime, in the conversation of Group 2 (Conversation on Weather), the students have used the wrong article for the noun phrase *le piscine* (swimming pool/feminine), which is in fact should be *la piscine*. Likewise, the similar error has also been committed by the other groups.

Meanwhile, in the conversations belonging to Groups 8 and 9 (Conversations on Holidays and Weather respectively), the use of articles for *Le mer* has been incorrect. In French, the noun *mer* (beach/feminine) must use the article *la* (*La mer*).

For plural nouns, the use of the article *Les* should be used for both genders; masculine and feminine. Yet, it is found in the students' conversations that they have used the wrong article (*le* and *la*). For example, in the conversations of Groups 8 and 9, the use of the article *la* for the noun *chambres* (rooms) has been incorrect. This may be due to the fact that the students have been less sensitive to the suffix '-s' at the end of the word *chambres*, which indicates the plural form of the noun *chambres* that requires the article *les* (The noun phrase should be read *Les chambres*).

Conclusion

There is an awareness of the existence of the issue of students being unable to master the correct use of articles in French. This is due to the presence of different genders for nouns in French, which is quite difficult to determine although most nouns, not all, which do not end with the letter ‘-e’ are feminine. The students’ confusion and misunderstanding of the spelling of the noun suffixes have also led them to pick up and use a wrong article for those particular nouns.

Therefore, the teaching of French, especially the aspect of using the articles properly, can be further enhanced by providing fresh teaching materials to students. This will pull their interest to figure out the difference between the use of definite and indefinite articles and their correct uses in sentences.

Further studies regarding French-language proficiency that cover aspects not available in the Malay language as the mother tongue should be given special attention. Moreover, French teachers and lecturers must be geared with the knowledge of grammatical comparison between French and Malay. In addition, English prior knowledge among French learners can also be utilised to give them an understanding on the aspects that may be linguistically identical to French.

On top of that, the students themselves should also improve their knowledge of the French language, especially the knowledge of the correct use of articles, by acquiring it from outside their classroom, for instance, by increasing their knowledge of French courses either by getting enrolled in private or certain French courses offered beyond the walls of their campuses or learning institutions, in addition to improving their knowledge by performing a lot of drills and practices. These are done to facilitate their mastery of French articles in order to prevent errors when using the target language.

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