

## The use of the word 'the' in academic writing in English by Sri Lankans

Siromi Fernando\*

*University of Colombo, Munidasa Cumaratunga Mawatha, Colombo 3*

In this paper, a report is made of a study of academic writing in English by Sri Lankans with respect to the definite article 'the'. The data for this study is drawn from the writing of persons with a relatively high level of English proficiency, i.e. twenty undergraduates studying English at the Faculty of Arts in the University of Colombo. Twenty-five per cent of the undergraduates in the study had no problems with the use of 'the' in academic writing. They use English as a first language and have 'near-native fluency' in English. The other 75 % made a large number of errors, totalling almost a 100 errors; although these were much smaller in proportion to the instances of correct use, both of definite and indefinite articles. These undergraduates are mainly characterized by their use of English as a second language. It had already been predicted that certain categories in the use of 'the' would not show up in academic writing, as these categories are more confined to informal, colloquial use. As predicted, no errors in these areas were found. Of the other categories, the errors were of two types, the omission of the definite article, and the incorrect addition of the definite article. The omission is, by far, the more recurrent, totalling about 80% of all errors. However a considerable proportion of errors in incorrect addition, about 20%, was also found. Overall, cataphoric reference was found to be the main source of error, totalling about 60%. It was also found that about 50% of errors were limited to a few of the undergraduates, although the other 50% was distributed among all 20. Further study discovered reasons for the distribution of these errors – lack of exposure to reading and writing, deficiency in the knowledge of English rules pertaining to the use of 'the', and the difference in English from the Sri Lankan languages in expressing concepts like definiteness. Suggestions are offered to deal with difficulties in the use of the definite article 'the'. Systematic programmes of reading and writing should be encouraged. It is also suggested that the difficulties in the use of 'the' can be effectively dealt with through discussion and systematic teaching of the rules. Errors should be regularly corrected, with accurate reasons given. In addition, the categories of errors in the use of 'the', like cataphoric reference, should be emphasized in teaching.

\* [siromifernando@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:siromifernando@yahoo.co.uk)