

Difficulties in Identifying the English Determiner System Among EFL students in Ghana: The Case of Francophone Students

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims at discussing the difficulties that students from French speaking countries who are pursuing their education in a Ghanaian university face in identifying English determiners. This is a qualitative study that analysed the difficulties that level 100 Francophone students who have French as a Second Language(L2) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a Ghanaian university face in identifying English determiners. The data used for the analysis comprised students' written exercises. The data gathered in the study were analysed qualitatively. The theoretical framework on which this research is based is article-focused theory which is discourse rule transfer propounded by Robertson (2000) as well as the semantic model developed by Huebner (1983), known as the "semantic wheel for noun phrase reference". The findings of the study depict that pre determiners, central determiners and post determiners were found in the data analysed. Central determiners recorded the highest number of 25 representing 64%, followed by pre determiners with 11 representing 28% and post determiners showing 3 determiners denoting 8%. Based on the findings, some pedagogical measures such as taking into consideration the needs analysis and teaching all the three types of determiners in context communication were proposed as means of minimising Francophone students' difficulties in English determiner system.

Keywords: English Education, Identification, Pre-determiners, Central determiners, Post determiners.

INTRODUCTION

The internationalisation of tertiary education has been a major growth industry globally (Bodycott, 2009 cited in Ackah & Kuranchie, 2015; Adjei-Yeboah et al., 2020). It is for this reason that universities in Ghana have also internationalised their academic programmes to attract students from all over the world, particularly, students hailing from French speaking countries in Africa as Ghana is surrounded by Francophone countries (Tabiri, 2016). These students who come from French speaking countries to pursue their education in various disciplines in Ghanaian universities usually encounter the difficulty of using English, especially the identification and use of the English determiner system. Considering determiners from semantic point of view, one can say that in the field of English education, determiners determine meaningful constructions in linguistics. This paper aims at discussing the difficulties that Francophone students face in identifying the three main types of determiners such as pre-determiners, central determiners and post determiners from semantic point of view. The analysis of this study was carried out in English to assess the impact of French (L2) on English (L3) due to the similarities and differences in English and French simultaneously.

According to Nordquist (2019), a pre-determiner is a type of determiner that precedes other determiners in a noun phrase. (The word that immediately follows a pre-determiner is called the central determiner and the word that follows a central determiner is called the post-determiner in English language. Determiners are considered as functional elements of structure and not formal classes. The term, "determiner" is an element in the syntactic or logical structure of the noun group. The basic function of a determiner is to particularise

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How to cite this article: Tabiri MO, Jones-Mensah I, Kongo AE, Budu G (2022). Difficulties in Identifying the English Determiner System Among EFL students in Ghana: The Case of Francophone Students Pegem Journal of Education and Instruction, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2022, 256-264

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None.

DOI: 10.47750/pegegog.12.03.27

Received : 28.02.2022

Accepted :26.05.2022

Published: 01.07.2022

and help to identify the NG referent in the context of the speech situation (Downing & Locke, 2006).

“Determiners identify a nominal group referent by telling us which or what or whose it is, how much, how many, what part or degree of it we are referring to, how big or frequent it is, how it is distributed in space or time.” (Downing & Locke, 2006, p.424)

It can be deduced from the above quotation that, a person or thing that determines or decides something is a determiner. That is to say that a determiner is a modifying word that determines the kind of reference a noun or noun group has (Learn English Grammar, 2016).

According to Abney (1987) a phrase that is headed by a determiner is called a determiner phrase. The head of a DP is a determiner, just as the head of a noun phrase is a noun in English. For example, in the phrase *the boy*, “*the*” is a determiner and “*boy*” is a noun; the two combine to form a phrase. The only grammatical form that can function as the determiner phrase head in English grammar is the determiner (The Linguistics Librarian, 2018).

Determiners are grouped based on their positions in the determiner phrase. All determiners can be grouped into two, namely specific determiners and general determiners. The two types of these determiners can be subdivided as pre-determiners, central determiners and post-determiners. This paper discusses the difficulties that Francophone students face in identifying determiners in sentences in English language.

Problem Statement

It is an irrefutable fact that Francophone students who pursue their education in Ghana encounter a lot of challenges or difficulties in identifying the determiner system in English (L3). One of the problem areas for Francophone students studying English (L3) is the English determiner system. For example, in English a preposition is used before a day of the week: “He is going to school *on* Monday”. In French, instead of a preposition the definite article is used: “Il va à l’école *le* lundi” (Tabiri, 2021, p.530).

Francophone students who are studying English may produce a transfer error and use the definite article instead of a preposition. Francophone learners can equally translate the same sentence into English as “He is going/he goes to **the* school **the* monday” (Tabiri, 2017). Again, following the first author’s teaching appointment at the Speakwrite International as English tutor in 2010/2011 where he taught adult Francophone learners while teaching as a full-time French tutor at the Presbyterian Boys’ Secondary School (Presec-Legon), and his appointment as French and English lecturer in 2013 at the Ghana Communication Technology University (formerly, Ghana Technology University College), he has realised that Francophone students usually find the use of indefinite articles extremely difficult. For examples,

Francophone learners are fond of producing the following sentences due to the interference of French (L2):

- a. *I am togolese (instead of I am a Togolese)
- b. *Kofi is student (instead of Kofi is a student). It is against this background that the researchers found it expedient to conduct this study by asking students to write down all the determiners that they could identify in English sentences.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following specific objectives guided our study:

1. To assess the difficulties that Francophone students face in identifying English determiners.
2. To classify the English determiners that Francophone students found difficult to identify.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions are used to guide the study:

1. What are the difficulties that Francophone students face in identifying English determiners?
2. What are the English determiners that Francophone students found difficult to identify?

Theoretical Framework of the English Determiner System

This study is based on article-focused theory which is discourse rule transfer propounded by Robertson (2000). Robertson (2000) uses a rule-based approach to explore L2 errors. According to Gressang (2010, pp.18), “L1 transfer is hypothesized to be the cause of L2 article errors” by Robertson, but no clear statement about whether adult L2 learners have access to Universal Grammar is made, and the rules given are language-specific and not universal”.

It can be deduced that Robertson’s rule-based analysis and classification has two or three parts. In the first place, “an English-specific classification system is used to label syntactic or background knowledge contexts in which the use of the or *a/an* is obligatory” (Gressang, 2010, p.18). As part of this, article use was further classified by what Robertson (2000) describes as pragmatic contexts—echo and non-echo situations. In echo situations, what was just said is repeated for clarification, but L2 or L3 learners may not produce an exact copy and sometimes omit an article in the repetition. Because the focus is on specific English syntactic environments, it is not clear what Robertson’s results from this part of the analysis say about L2 acquisition in general (Gressang, 2010). Not all languages have articles, nor do they use articles in the same syntactic positions.

In the second part of the analysis, Robertson uses a set of Chinese-specific discourse rules to analyse L1 transfer by Chinese learners of English (Gressang, 2010).

The rules are said to explain most of the situations in which the native Chinese speakers omitted or misused determiners in their L2 production (Gressang, 2010).

“No theoretical explanation of why these rules would be present in Chinese while not present in English is given, although it is commonly acknowledged that Chinese and English differ in regards to pro-drop and anaphors” (Gressang, 2010, p.19).

Robertson focuses on articles, considering the use of one and demonstratives in passing. No overt discussion of features such as \pm specific is made, although some of the specifications discuss background knowledge and previous mention in discourse. Apart from the fact that they can all occur in front of a noun, these words are rather different from one another, both in their semantics and in their syntax (Spinillo, 2004).

In other words, determiners help to identify the referent of a noun and are typically involved with one or more of the following semantic notions: definiteness, number and countability. The kind of reference a noun phrase has, i.e. definite or indefinite, is said to depend on the determiner (Quirk et al., 1985:253). Thus, semantically two types of determiners are often distinguished: definite and indefinite determiners. Some determiners also express quantity, and the twofold division is sometimes between referential and quantifying determiners (Radford, 1997).

Definiteness in English is typically conveyed through the use of the definite article *the*, but other determiners can also mark the noun phrase as definite. The definite determiners are therefore the following: *the*, the demonstratives *this*, *these* and *that*, *those*, the possessives *my*, *your*, *his*, *her*, *its*, *our* and *their* and the quantifier *both* (Spinillo, 2004). According to Spinillo (2004), it is generally assumed that words such as the articles, the demonstratives, the possessives and the quantifiers (e.g. *all*, *both*, *some*, *any*, *many*, etc.) constitute the English determiner class (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik, 1985; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan, 1999; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002). However, apart from the fact that they can all occur in front of a noun, these words are rather different from one another, both in their semantics and in the way they distribute syntactically. Most work on determiners has been concerned mainly with their semantics (van der Auwera, 1980; Keenan and Stavi, 1986) and their function in phrase structure (Zwicky, 1985; Abney, 1987; Hewson, 1991; Payne, 1993a; van Langendonck, 1994; Coene & D’hulst, 2003). Yet, to date, little has been said about the determiner class itself. That is, one aspect that has not been extensively discussed in the literature is the makeup of the determiner class and its significance as a form class for English. It is for this reason that the researcher found it necessary to carry out this study.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics (Matthews, 1997) defines a determiner as “any of class of grammatical units characterized by ones that are seen as limiting the potential

referent of a noun phrase.” Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999, p.19) used “determiner” to mean “the special class of words that limit the nouns that follow them”, and included various types of words in this category, such as articles, demonstratives, possessives, quantifiers, multipliers (e.g., *twice*, *three times*), and cardinal/ordinal numbers. Their classification separates the determiner from the adjective, while older grammars incorporate them into the adjective word class (Jespersen, 1933). In fact, in English, determiners precede an adjective if one is present; otherwise, they precede a noun. Radford (1997:46-47) distinguished determiners from adjectives using four properties:

The same type of adjective may be used recursively (the eloquent, articulate man), but the same type of determiner cannot (e.g., **the*, *this* man), while some determiners may occur together (e.g., *all* my friends; *my* many friends).

Syntactically, determiners occupy a separate slot (i.e., the specifier position) – and must precede all adjectives (e.g., the bright sunny day; **bright* the sunny day).

A singular count noun cannot stand without a determiner, though it can stand without an adjective (e.g., the boy; **tall* boy).

Most determiners can only modify nouns with specific count properties, but no adjectives are similarly constrained (e.g., **a* men; **these* building; **many* water; red men; a gray building; blue water). Simons (2001) more plausibly defines English determiners as “function words with little or no lexical meaning that modify a noun and carry overt or covert person, number, gender, and case properties” (p. 8). This definition distinguishes the determiner from the adjective, which is a content word with one (or more than one) lexical meanings.

Additionally, Simons noted that determiners have “the grammatical function that determines the referential or quantificational properties of the noun they accompany” (p.4). Various types of words fall into this category: for example, articles, possessives, demonstratives, quantifiers, ordinal/cardinal numbers, and multipliers.

Articles can optionally be preceded by one pre-determiner and followed by one or two post-determiners. In other words, as Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) note, “it is possible to sequence determiners in an English noun phrase by picking one determiner from the pre-determiner column, one from the core determiner column, and one or more from the post-determiner column” (p. 335), as shown by these examples (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999:335):

1. All our many hopes were kept alive by her encouraging words. (1-1) pre core post
2. These next two weeks before school starts will be hectic. Core post post

Each of the core-determiners is mutually exclusive in English, though not necessarily so in other languages.

In English, therefore, no more than one core-determiner can occur in a noun phrase (NP) as shown by these examples: *the big car, some other cases, my two sisters*.

- *the no person
- *my the book
- *the these houses
- *those some eggs.

In examples 1-3, the first three noun phrases are grammatically correct, because they have only one core-determiner (the, some, and my), each of which is followed by an adjective (big) or a post-determiner (other/two). The last four noun phrases are ungrammatical, because they have more than one core-determiner (e.g., the, no, my, the, these, those, and some).

Among the core-determiner category in English, articles hold a unique position:

They have little lexical meaning but are semantically more complex than other determiners in English. An English article has no salient meaning in itself, but has complex semantic distribution in discourse. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics (Matthews, 1997) defines the article as “a determiner whose basic role is to mark noun phrases as either definite or indefinite.” For example, “the” is definite in “the car” and “a” is indefinite in “a car.”

The use of English articles pertains to discourse referentiality (they refer or point to something in discourse). Bickerton (1981) provides a systematic approach to the analysis of English article usage. According to Bickerton, the use of the English articles – “a(n),” “the,” and “Ø” – is governed by the semantic function of the noun phrase (NP) in discourse. The classification of the semantic function of an NP is determined by two binary discourse features: (a) whether a noun has a specific referent (+SR); and (b) whether the hearer knows the referent (+HK).

According to Collins Dictionary (2018) in grammar, a pre-determiner is a word that is used before a determiner, but it is still part of the noun group. All pre-determiners can be divided into separate groups, such as: multipliers, fractions, intensifiers and others. “The Grammar Bank” (n.d) groups pre-determiners as multipliers, intensifiers and fractions while Encyclopedia.com (2016), explains central determiners as articles (*a, the in a storm, the weather*), demonstratives (*this, those, those clouds*), possessives (*my, your, in my hat, your umbrella*), some quantifiers (*each, every, no, any, some in each moment, every day, no excuse, any help, some clouds*). Such determiners are mutually exclusive and contrast with adjectives, with which however they can co-occur: *the best weather, any possible help, no reliable news*. Post determiners are used after central determiners and including numbers (*two, first in those two problems, my first job*) and some quantifiers (*many, several in your many kindnesses, his several attempts*). Ofori (2018) gives the following examples to exemplify post-determiners in English.

1. All the **three** students (cardinal numeral).
2. All the **three** former presidents were there.

As our focus in this study was to find out if students could identify all the determiners that have been used in sentences, we must proceed to the methodology of the study.

METHOD

The researchers opted for the controlled-data elicitation techniques to enable them to reduce the number of uncontrolled variables that may crop up in the work by giving the participants 10 questions to study and identify and write all the determiners in each of the sentences. In other words, the main task that was used for data elicitation is a test that consists of 10 questions that contain the various types of determiners in English.

Research Design

The research design for this study is convergent parallel design which concurrently conducts the quantitative and qualitative elements (Sacred Heart University, 2020; Sarder & Islam, 2016; Creswell & Pablo-Clark, 2011). The reason for using this design is to gather sociolinguistic information of the subjects using a 15-item questionnaire (Quantitative data), as well as conducting written exercises to identify the challenges that Francophone students encounter in identifying the English determiner system. In other words, the research design has a bearing on the initial data from the thesis of the lead or first author. However, for the purpose of this particular study, the research design would be highly qualitative.

Population and Sampling

All the level 100 Francophone students from the three public universities (about 100). The study involved a total of 21 Francophone students from the three public universities who willingly took part in the study. The participants were purposefully sampled because of their linguistic or sociolinguistic background as hailing from French-speaking countries. The data for this study were derived from the first year Francophone students pursuing their programme of studies at the Ghana Communication Technology University. Data were not accessed from any of the private universities in Ghana because this study focuses on students in a public tertiary institution only. Purposive sampling strategy was used to collect data for this study from Ghana Communication Technology University, (formerly Ghana Technology University College).

The biodata of the participants are as follows:

Data instruments Collection

Twenty-one level 100 Francophone students were asked to write a test by identifying all the determiners in ten (10) sentences

and write them accordingly to enable the researchers to assess Francophone students' level of comprehension and their ability to identify English determiners in context communication.

Data Analysis

The data gathered in this study were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics to analyse the data, and classifying the errors identified in the data.

Due to the outbreak of Coronavirus pandemic, the researchers were compelled to conduct the test via google forms through sharing a link with the level 100 Francophone students at the Ghana Communication Technology University Language Centre. One of the limitations of the study is that students could easily seek external assistance or copy each other as the researchers were not around to ensure that learners work independently.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The objective of the researchers here was to assess learners' ability to identify all the determiners used in the 10 sentences and categorise students' identification of the determiners in the test that was conducted via google forms through sharing a link with the level 100 Francophone students at the Ghana Communication Technology University Language Centre. Our findings and discussion have been deduced from the research questions raised in this work. The findings and discussions are as follows (Figure 3):

We can see from the above diagram that only eleven students answered this question. Even all the eleven students could not identify the determiners used in the sentence correctly. Only four students were able to identify "a" as a determiner, instead of all the students identifying 'my', 'half' and 'a" as determiners. One of the students even considered "cup" as a determiner. This means that some students could not distinguish between nouns and determiners in English. We can deduce from the above finding that only one student could identify all the determiners in the sentence.

Also, the students were expected to identify 'my', 'four', 'twice' and 'a' as determiners used in the sentence, but the eleven (11) students who willingly attempted the second question could not identify all the determiners. It was uncovered that some of the students did not even know that "usually" can never be considered as a determiner in English. The results are as follows (Figure 4):

Again, the respondents were to identify 'his', 'all' and 'the' as determiners in the sentence, but only two students were able to identify all the three determiners in the sentence. The detailed results are as follows (Figure 5):

Moreover, only two students were able to identify "both", "all" and "these" as determiners in the sentence, even though the determiners in the sentence were not used chronologically. One can see that pre determiners do not normally co-occur and that might be the reason why we did not see "All both these articles..." In fact, considering the use of "all" here, contextually, it seems it has not been employed as a determiner.

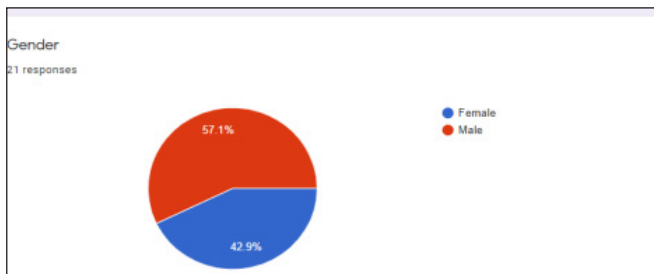


Fig. 1: Biodata of the respondents

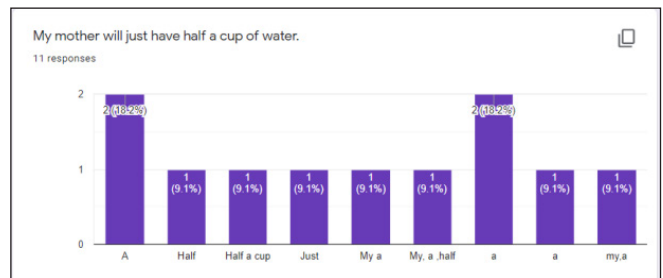


Fig. 3: Sentence 1

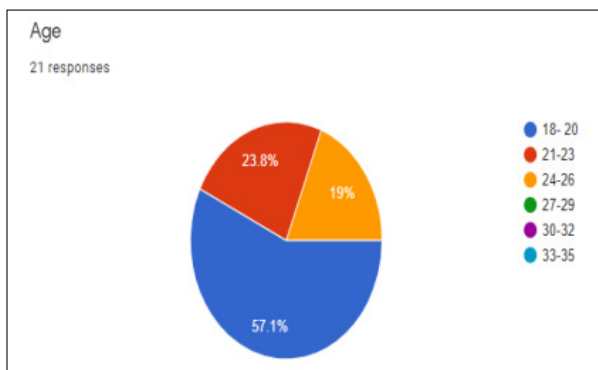


Fig. 2: Biodata of the students II

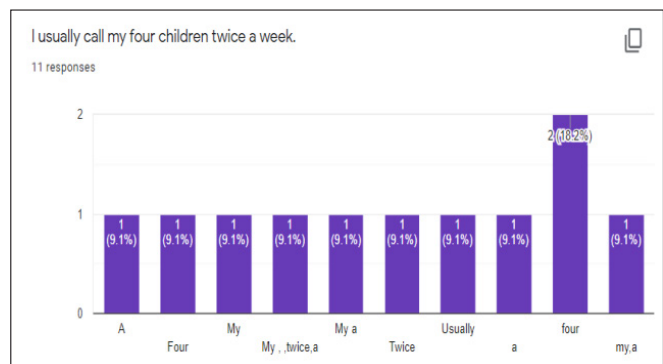


Fig. 4: Sentence 2

The results are as follows (Figure 6):

Furthermore, the students were supposed to identify ‘other’, ‘double’ and ‘the’, but all the 8 students who attempted the question could not identify any of the determiners in the sentence. The responses are as follows (Figure 7):

Moreover, it was revealed in the study that only three students were able to identify ‘a’ and ‘my’ as determiners out of the ten students who attempted to answer the question. The results are as follows: (Figure 8)

The students were also asked to identify ‘all’, and ‘his’ in the sentence below, but only four students were able to identify the correct responses. It was found that two of the respondents identified “into” and “indeed” as determiners. The detailed results are as follows (Figure 9):

Not all, the students were expected to identify ‘all’, ‘these’ and ‘their’ as determiners in the sentence, but only two students were able to identify all the three determiners in English. The detailed results are as follows (Figure 10):

Furthermore, the students were expected to identify ‘twice’, ‘that’ and ‘my’ as determiners in the sentence, but only one of the respondents was able to identify and write all the three determiners. The detailed results are as follows (Figure 11):

Finally, the students were supposed to identify ‘the’, ‘ten’, ‘this’ and ‘every’ in the last sentence as determiners, but only one of the students was able to identify all the four determiners in the sentence. The results are as follows (Figure 12):

From the foregoing discussions, it has been found that all the respondents found the identification of the English determiners extremely difficult. The summary of the analysis of the identification of the English determiners that students were to write are as follows (Table 3)::

The above table 3 shows the various types of determiners that were identified in the data analysed. In all, 25 central determiners were found in the ten sentences, 11 pre-determiners were identified while only 3 post determiners were found in the data analysed.

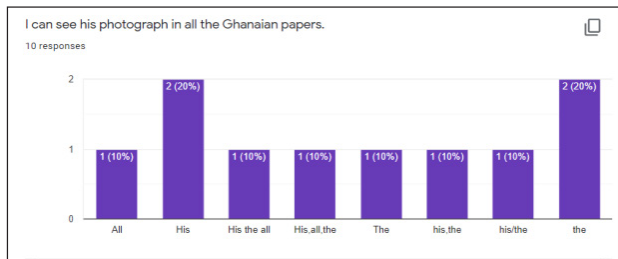


Fig. 5: Sentence 3

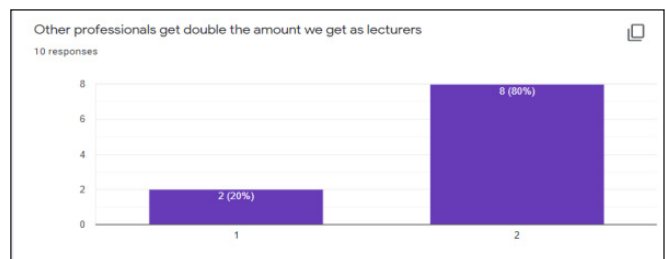


Fig. 7: Sentence 5

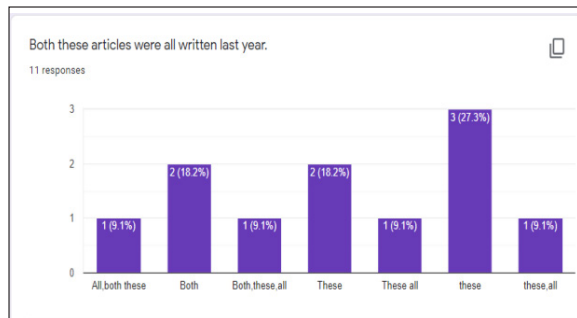


Fig. 6: Sentence 4

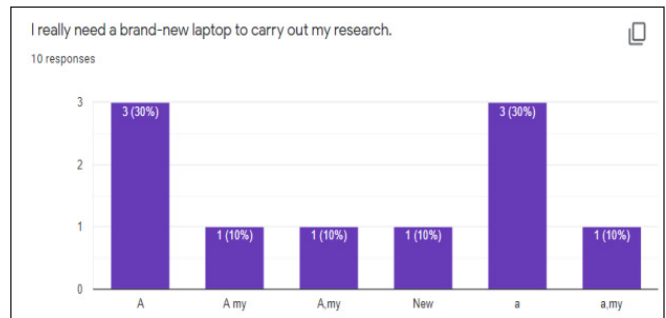


Fig. 8: Sentence 6

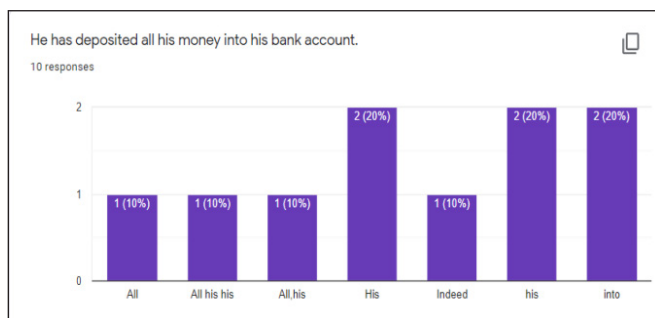


Fig. 9: Sentence 7

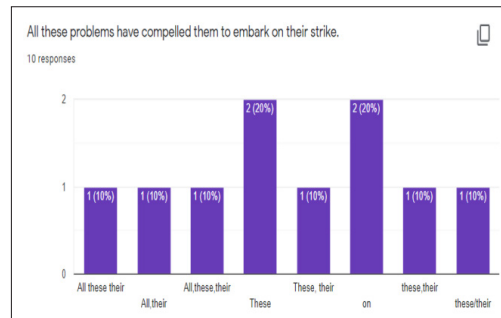


Fig. 10: Sentence 8

The types of the determiners identified in the data can therefore be represented statistically as follows (Table 4):

The table 4 represents the types of English determiners that were identified in the data analysed depicting central determiners recording the highest number of 25 representing 64%, followed by pre determiners with 11 representing 28% and post determiners showing 3 determiners denoting 8%.

Pedagogical implications

It is pedagogically prudent for language instructors in Ghana to take into account that, Francophone students who have French as L2 academic needs may differ from Anglophone students in Ghana who have English as L2, and hence systematic pedagogical measures must be taken into consideration when teaching Francophone students determiners in English in an Anglophone country. That is to say that bearing in mind the needs analysis when teaching Francophone students is highly crucial (Tabiri, 2021).

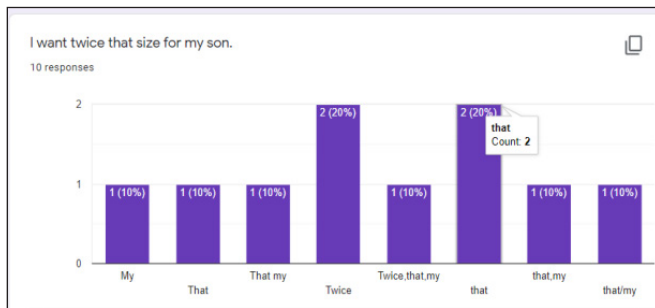


Fig. 11: Sentence 9

Table 3: Summary of the types of the determiners in the data

Pre-determiners	Central determiners	Post determiners
twice (2)	my (5)	four (1)
double (1)	his (3)	last (1)
ten (1)	their (2)	other (1)
half(1)	the (5)	
both(1)	a (4)	
all (5)	these (3)	
	that (1)	
	this (1)	
	every (1)	
Total: 11	Total: 25	Total: 3

Table 4: Types of determiners identified

Types of determiners	Frequency	Percentage
Pre determiners	11	28%
Central determiners	25	64%
Post determiners	3	8%
Total	39	100%

It was also realised through the analyses of the data that not all the 21 participants answered all the questions on determiners. All the 21 students gave their biodata, but they did not answer all the questions they might have found difficult. This might have cropped up as the researchers could not meet with the students face-to-face due to the outbreak of Coronavirus pandemic.

Again, through the analysis of the data, it is pedagogically advisable to point out to learners that a determiner (D) can be seen as a functional category that includes diverse sub-categories which might have very few shared morphological or semantic features, but which are in complementary distribution (Sideeg, 2016).

Moreover, it is pedagogically prudent to take Francophone learners who pursue their education in Ghana through pragmatic ways of helping them to identify, realise and master all the three types of determiners (pre-determiners, central determiners and post determiners) contextually so as to prevent students from mistakenly considering some open classes as determiners in English. The researchers therefore recommend and propose a determiner table that can be followed when teaching Francophone students English as follows (Table 5):

As students found it extremely difficult to identify all the three types of the determiners, teachers must do well to teach determiners in linguistic environment to enable Francophone students to discover the practical uses of the determiner



Fig. 12: Sentence 10

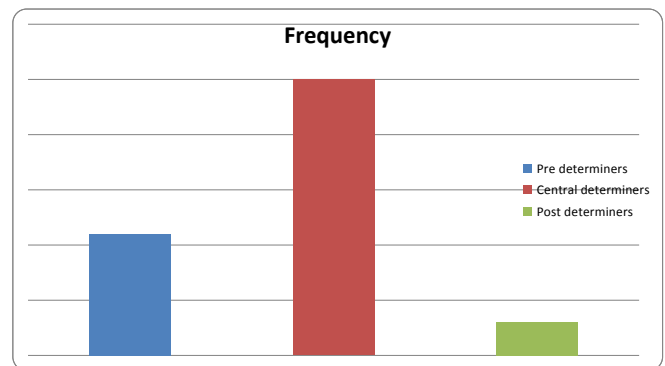


Fig. 13: Frequency of determiners

Table 5: Determiner Table

	Pre-determiner	Central determiner	Post-determiner	Noun
We saw	All	His	Many	Children
	All	the	Five	Students
	All	My	Numerous	Students
	All	These	Several	Years of learning

system in English. In other words, teachers or lecturers of the language should teach English language in context and not out of context.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing discussion, we have realised that the Francophone students who pursued their education in English in Ghana could not identify determiners that were found in the sentences they were supposed to deduce all the three types of determiners from. It was found that the types of English determiners that were identified in the data analysed, central determiners recorded the highest number of 25 representing 64%, followed by pre determiners with 11 representing 28% and post determiners showing 3 determiners denoting 8%.

From the findings on the determiners, we can realise that all the types of determiners can be classified as pre-determiners, central determiners and post-determiners in English language. It has also been observed that the three main categories of determiners can be subdivided into two broad categories as specific and general determiners. One can also deduce from the analysis that, pre determiners do not normally co-occur while post determiners can co-occur contextually. Moreover, it has been uncovered in this study that Francophone learners may find it extremely difficult to use the three types of English determiners as they could not even identify the determiner system in English.

Future researchers can focus on helping students to use all the three types of the English determiners correctly in context communication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are grateful to the Globelt and Globets conferences 2021 that permitted them to present the study partly at the conference, and hence paving the way for the extended paper.

The authors are equally grateful to Dr Charlotte Fofu Lomotey, the Dean of the Faculty of Foreign Languages Education, and Dr Obrempong Kwaku Ofori, both at the Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana.

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