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Identifying the difficulty level of English ‘articles’ realized by the tertiary level students of Bangladesh: A case study.

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Abstract: Teaching the English articles has always been a challenging issue for the teachers of English language, because the learning strategies of students and the teaching techniques of the teachers are different. This paper attempts to find out which English article is difficult to acquire by the students studying at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. A survey has been carried out to find out the difficulties faced by the students and suggestions have been made regarding the learning strategies of the students and the teaching techniques of the teachers.

Key Words: Indefinite article, definite article, zero article, EFL, ESL, Grammar Translation Method, the Direct Method, Audiolingualism.

I. Background

Though teaching grammar has always been considered very important, it is one of the lesser understood aspects of language teaching. The obsession towards grammar grew a belief among the learners that learning rules would make them able to use the language. Often the rules were presented in isolation, having no context and the grammatical items like the articles were taught deductively. Students were expected to memorize the rules and exercises were given in the classroom to test their memory and understanding. Since very little emphasis was given on listening and speaking, students did not have enough opportunity to learn the rules naturally and apply them in real life. The blind emphasis on grammar reminds us about Thornbury’s (1999:21) comment on Grammar-Translation Method, “Grammar-Translation, as its name suggests, took grammar as the starting point for instruction. Grammar-Translation courses followed a grammar syllabus and lessons typically began with an explicit statement of the rule followed by exercises involving translation into and out of the mother tongue”. After having a strong emphasis on grammar, ironically it has been found that along with other areas of language students still remain weak in grammar.

In Bangladesh students studying different subjects at the tertiary level must take some courses on the introduction to English language. Besides grammar,

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these courses focus on all four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Most of the teachers teach grammar at this level deductively, without any context. Though there are very few qualified and trained teachers teaching at the public and private universities, they mainly deal with the students who already have had a “1600 contact hours” (Quader 1998:59) English lessons during their school and pre-university level. Surprisingly these trained teachers have no other option than teaching these students placing at the pre-intermediate level of language proficiency though they already have passed the HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) examination which is equivalent to intermediate level of language proficiency. So, there is doubt how much they could use their professional training in teaching English, especially grammar. It should also be mentioned that the students who are at present studying at the university level have been taught by the teachers who had been taught English by Grammar-Translation Method in their schools and colleges.

II. Research Problem

Most EFL (English as Foreign Language) teachers and students are aware of the fact that when it comes to mastering a foreign language like English, one of the most troublesome areas to learn is the usage of articles. Learning how to use articles correctly is a colossal task for the students in Bangladesh. From general observation and experience of teaching at tertiary level it is found that along with other skills and sub-skills of English language, students of Bangladesh find it difficult to use articles correctly. As the use of articles does not take place in isolation in real life, it affects the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing and sub-skills like grammar, vocabulary, cohesion, coherence etc. It is important for learners to use articles appropriately. Wrong or inappropriate use of articles can often impede comprehension.

The problem of improper and inappropriate use of articles arises from the method that has been used to teach English. In Grammar-Translation Method grammar items are always presented in isolation; most of the time they are learned by rote-learning without comprehension. In their school and college life students had the opportunity to learn the rules but had little or no scope to use them in real life. Teachers did not use the spoken form of English in the classroom at all where the student might have had some scope to correct their errors unconsciously, imitate some irregular as well as regular grammar items and thus remember the use of articles in an effective way.

III. Rationale for the Study

From the researcher's own teaching experience at the tertiary level it has been revealed that the students are weak in the use of articles. In their use of articles, they make a lot of mistakes. As a result, the meanings of the sentences become confusing; and misunderstanding occurs in communication. Students cannot improve their writing skills because of their poor knowledge in the use of articles. Therefore, the area of the current research is significant as it aims at developing the learners' knowledge of appropriate use of the articles. The researcher hopes that this research will extend existing knowledge in the area under investigation as very few researches have been conducted on the use of articles at the tertiary level in Bangladesh.

IV. Research Question

Which article, *definite*, *indefinite*, or *zero*, is more difficult to acquire?

V. Research Hypothesis

Acquiring the definite article *the* is easier than acquiring the indefinite articles *a* and (or) *an* for our students. Master and Parish (1987) claimed that *the* is acquired first and *a* and *an* are acquired later in case of L2 (second language) learners. We assume that this is also the case for the Bangladeshi students. At the same time, students find it more difficult to use zero articles correctly than the definite or indefinite article.

VI. Literature Review

Articles are only a part of the whole determiner system in English. Let us have a general idea of what articles are, what types of articles grammarians discuss as important for students to know.

An *article* is a limiting word, not descriptive, which cannot be used alone, but always joins to a substantive word to denote a particular thing, or a group or class of things, or any individual of a group or class. English has two types of articles: *definite* (the) and *indefinite* (a, an).

A and *an* signal that the noun is indefinite, referring to any member of a group. These indefinite articles are used with singular nouns when the noun is general; the corresponding indefinite quantity word 'some' is used for plural general nouns. The rules are:

- *a* + singular noun beginning with a consonant: a boy
- *an* + singular noun beginning with a vowel : an elephant

- *a* + singular noun beginning with a consonant sound : a user
- *some* + plural noun : some girls

If the noun is modified by an adjective, the choice between *a* and *an* depends on the initial sound of the adjective that immediately follows the article:

- *a* broken egg
- *an* unusual problem
- *a* European country

The indefinite articles are used to indicate membership in a profession, nation, or religion.

- I am *a* teacher.
- John is *an* Irishman.

The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is particular or specific. *The* signals that the noun is definite and a particular member of a group:

- *the* dog (that specific dog)
- *the* apple (that specific apple)
- *the* dogs (those specific dogs)
- *the* apples (those specific apples)

The is not used with uncountable nouns referring to something in a general sense:

[no article] Coffee is a popular drink.

[no article] Japanese was his native language.

The is used with uncountable nouns that are made more specific by a limiting modifying phrase or clause:

The coffee in my cup is too hot to drink.

The intelligence of animals is variable but undeniable.

The is also used when a noun refers to something unique:

The White House

The theory of relativity

The is used with superlative adjectives:

She is *the* best girl in the class.

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Zero article is the absence of any article. Here no article is used. No article is used before plural and uncountable nouns when talking about things in general. Examples: I like potatoes. Milk is good for us.

No articles are used before some places, countries, towns, streets, languages, meals, with some forms of transport:

- She goes to work by bus.
- What loud music!
- I was at home yesterday evening.

As articles are only a part of grammar and the entire process of Second Language Learning, it would be wise to deal with it along with the views on grammar teaching and learning. Different approaches and methods view grammar from different perspectives. The views mainly differ in terms of the importance of grammar, the ways it should be taught and presentation of grammar items.

Grammar-Translation Method, as its very name indicates, puts a strong emphasis on grammar. Grammar-Translation Method dominated European and foreign language teaching from 1840 to 1940s. The courses that follow this method make a syllabus and lessons that teach the learners rules of grammar by explicit statements. The rules are practiced in given exercises, most of the time presented without a context. The rules are taught in a deductive way as examples are given after the presentation of rules. Most of the time rules are presented in isolated sentences that are hardly used in real life.

About grammar teaching in the Grammar-Translation Method, Richards and Rodgers (2001) write: “Grammar is taught deductively—that is, by presentation and study of grammar rules, which are then practiced through translation exercises. In most Grammar-Translation texts, a syllabus was followed for the sequencing of grammar points throughout a text, and there was an attempt to teach grammar in an organized and systematic way”. It could also be mentioned here that this method gives very little emphasis on listening and speaking, the main focus is on reading and writing. Vocabulary selection is done based on the reading text used, much of the lessons are devoted to translating sentences into and out of the target language, accuracy is expected from the students and students’ mother tongue is used as the

medium of instruction. There is no doubt that these features obviously would influence the grammar teaching and learning.

The Direct Method was the first to challenge the explicit teaching of grammar rules. It emerged in the mid to late-nineteenth century. Proponents like Sauveur, Berlitz et al thought that “a foreign language could be taught without translation or the use of the learner’s native language if meaning was conveyed directly through demonstration and action” (Richards and Rodgers 2001:11). By claiming to be a “natural” method, the Direct Method gave priority to oral skills and rejected explicit grammar teaching. It was supposed that learners would pick up the grammar as children do while learning their mother tongue. If a little grammar teaching took place in this method it was done inductively.

Audiolingualism also gave us some views about grammar teaching. This method emerged toward the end of the 1950s in Europe and in the USA. This method had same stricter view about explicit grammar teaching. Audiolingualism had its theoretical basis in behaviorist psychology that considered language as simply a form of behaviour which could be learned through the formation of correct habit. In the process of habit formation rules were not significant. But there is doubt about how they could totally neglect grammar. “The Audiolingual syllabus consisted of a graded list of sentence patterns which, although not necessarily labeled as such, was grammatical in origin” (Thornbury: 1999:21). Two other important aspects of Audiolingualism that go with grammar teaching are analogy and contextualization of teaching terms. Richards and Rodgers (2001:57) write, “Analogy provides a better foundation for language learning than analysis. Analogy involves the processes of generalization and discrimination. Explanations of rules are therefore not given until students have practiced a pattern in a variety of contexts and are thought to have acquired a perception of the analogies involved. Drills can enable learners to form correct analogies. Hence, the approach to the teaching of grammar is essentially inductive rather than deductive”.

In the late 1950s grammar teaching takes a new turn as Noam Chomsky claimed that language ability is not merely a habituated behavior but an innate human capacity. This concept led many applied linguists to reassess the teaching practice that were based mainly on drills and repetition. Chomsky’s view about language gave birth to many approaches in the 1970s

and 1980s among which Krashen and Terrell's (1983) Natural Approach and different communicative approaches are significant that put new light on grammar teaching. Natural Approach, mainly based on the belief of Krashen that formal instruction was unnecessary. In Natural Approach there were places neither for a grammar syllabus nor for explicit rule-giving. Krashen in his theory talked of "comprehensible inputs" towards which learners should be exposed. About input and place of grammar in Natural Approach, Thornbury (1999:21) wrote, "Innate processes convert this input into output, in time...Natural Approach attempts to replicate the conditions of first language acquisition. Grammar, according to this scenario, is irrelevant".

Learning difficulties of the English articles have been discussed by Kuribara (1999), Robertson (2000), Trenkic (2000), Kowaluk (2001), Leung (2001), Ionin (2003), White (2003), Goad and White (2004), Snape, Leung and Ting (2006), Huebner (1983), Tarone (1985), Parrish (1987), Thomas (1989), Master (1990) etc. All the studies found that L2 learners of article-less background find English articles very difficult item to learn.

The English article system is considered one of the difficult grammatical items for Bangladeshi learners of EFL because the article system in Bengali is quite different from that of English. It seems that the difficulty of article acquisition relies on the difference of cognitive processing between native speakers of English and non-native Bangladeshi speakers of English. Hiki (1994) worked on the acquisition of English article system by Japanese speakers of English. He suggested that Japanese may process "language on the noun level, but not on the noun countability level, whereas native speakers of English may process language on the noun countability level (Hiki 1994:48). In Japanese, there is no need to check whether a noun is singular or plural, or whether it is countable or uncountable (Mizuno 1985:24) which is also true for Bengali.

Thompson (1978) gave an explanation for the evolution of the English article system. She said that languages like English that use word order to signal grammatical relations such as subject and object tend to develop articles since new and old information cannot be consistently signaled through word order the way it is in topic-comment languages. Thus, it is the definite and indefinite articles in languages like English that help us to identify new and old information; old information tends to be definite, while new information tends to be indefinite.

In a survey of the teaching problems of ESL (English as Second Language) teachers working in the Los Angeles area (Covitt, 1976), the teachers reported that the teaching of how to use articles was their number one teaching problem. Celce-Murcia and Freeman (1983) pointed out that languages which do have articles or article-like morphemes (e.g. French, Spanish, Persian, and the Semitic languages) often use these morphemes in ways that differ from the English article system. For example, many of these languages that use articles mark the generic use of an abstract noun with their equivalent of the definite article. Some of these languages can indicate definiteness or indefiniteness with a suffix or a morpheme following the noun as opposed to the consistent pronominal position that articles have in English. Several Scandinavian languages and Persian, for example, make use of such post nominal marker.

Murcia and Freeman (1983) viewed that the idiosyncrasy and dissimilarity between learners' first language and the target language may cause acquisition problem, which is also relevant to our students. Bengali learners seem to have a strong inclination to find an absolute correlation between the English and the Bengali article systems.

L1 (first language) acquisition studies of articles indicate that children often use definite article rather than indefinite articles when introducing a noun for the first time (Warden 1976:109; Power & Dal Martello 1986:150; Karmiloff-Smith 1979:144), because of the child's "egocentricity" in the sense that the child assumes whatever is known to him/her is known to the hearer, shapes the frequent use of the definite article (Cziko 1986:896). L2 (second language) naturalistic data show that **the** is acquired first and **a/an** later (Master 1987; Parrish 1987) and **the** is over-generalized in some certain situations (Huebner 1983; Master 1987; Thomas 1989). Huebner (1983:142) observed early "flooding" of the definite article in all noun features in a year-long study. Master (1987), after studying the use of English articles by 20 ESL learners in spontaneous speech, reported that non-use dominates in all features for articles in the early stages of L2 acquisition, at least for learners whose L1 doesn't include articles. Parish (1987) collected the oral data of one Japanese woman longitudinally, and observed that the appropriate use of the definite article was 848, while that of the indefinite one was 508, thus concluding the early acquisition of the definite article. Thomas (1989) studied 30 adult ESL learners and found that they over-generalized the definite article in first-mentioned contexts.

Yamada and Matsuura (1982) studied Japanese EFL learners (35 senior high school students and 35 college students) by using the fill-in-the-blank test, reporting that the accuracy ratio was high in the definite article and that they may have over-generalized it. Hiki (1990) examined the judgment of noun countability made by 61 Japanese college students, employing the editing test. It was shown that the mean accuracy rate was significantly different between the countable and uncountable environments, and that the effect of countability environment significantly varied from noun class to noun class. Therefore, the difficulty of choosing the right article (*a* or *0*) is related to countability environment and the interaction between noun class and countability environment.

Another research work was done by AKM Waliul Islam (1998) on the acquisition of the English article system with IML (Institute of Modern Languages) students at the University of Dhaka. He took fill-in-the blank tests and observed the usage of the English articles with unfamiliar, vague and 'distant shot' nouns among two groups of learners. The subjects did not perform very well. Although both the groups showed slight improvement in using the English indefinite articles (*a/an*) after the lesson but they could not sustain the improvement till the third test. The subjects were able to improve their perceptions about the usage of the definite article "*the*" with nouns referring to shared world knowledge among the interlocutors. However, they failed to recognize the difference between the *zero* article nouns referring to their primary functions and the nouns with definite article *the* to mean what they mean literally.

From different studies and research works, it may be considered that the problem of using articles among the learners is common in most of the languages. Bangladeshi learners try to find correlation between English and Bengali article systems. As a result, they cannot use articles properly. It is assumed that learners often use "definite" articles instead of using "indefinite" articles when they are using a noun for the first time. "*The*" is acquired first and "*a/an*" later. Learners sometimes over-generalize *the*. At the same time, the learners, who have higher proficiency, have improved in the accurate use of "*a/an*". The problem arises from the learner's lack of knowledge in countability and uncountability of nouns. As students lack proper knowledge of countable and uncountable nouns, they make mistakes in the use of definite and indefinite articles. The students are not aware of the

rules of the omission of articles. So, their performance is very poor in the use of zero articles.

VII. Objective and Methodology

The nature and purpose of this study matches basically with that of a descriptive research. Seliger and Shohamy (1989) asserted that descriptive research is often quantitative and it may provide measures of frequency. As the purpose of this research is to find out which article is difficult to learn by the students at the tertiary level in Bangladesh, the principles of a descriptive research were followed. The data were collected from a fill-in-the gap test.

In this research data were collected from the students who were studying at the tertiary level. Five universities were selected for survey and data collection. A total of 74 students were surveyed. Among them 24 were selected from the University of Dhaka, 20 were selected from Jagannath University, 10 were selected from Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology, 10 were selected from World University of Bangladesh and 10 were selected from City University following the random sampling method. The researcher surveyed two categories of universities in Bangladesh, public and private universities. More students were selected from public universities because the number of students studying in public universities is much higher than private universities. More private universities were selected because the number of private universities is higher than public universities.

The instrument used in this study included a language test. The instrument was constructed in accordance with the purposes of the study. The instrument was prepared following the instruments used by other researchers in similar researches.

In this research a “fill-in-the gaps” test (added in the appendix-1) was carried out in the class which became a data source in order to find out in which articles students’ mistakes were more frequent. The students were given a test where they used articles to complete some sentences. Some of the gaps were given in a single sentence, a dialogue or short paragraph based on discourse. There were 15 sentences where the students had to use articles. Finally, mistakes were identified and analyzed to reveal which articles were more difficult to acquire.

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After collecting the data, they were analyzed and the findings were compared with the research question and the hypothesis above. The results were analyzed in an integrative way to have a holistic idea of the prevailing situation about the use of articles at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. The researcher observed that there were significant similarities between the hypothesis and the findings got after the data analysis.

VIII. Data Presentation and Analysis

The students were given a test to participate where they used articles (*a/an, the, zero*) to complete 15 sentences. From this test students' frequencies of mistakes in using articles were identified. The results have been shown in table and the question of fill-in-the gaps has been presented in the appendix-1.

Table: Mistakes in using the articles

Name of the Universities	Mistakes using "The"	Mistakes using "a/an"	Mistakes using "Zero article"
University of Dhaka	18.5%	21.4%	41.66%
Jagannath University	23.07%	31.15%	76.6%
World University of Bangladesh	25%	27.56%	61.11%
City University	21.5%	26.9%	80%
Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology	16.5%	30.30%	63.33%
Total	20.9%	27.4%	64.5%

Source: Survey

From the data analysis of students "fill-in-the gaps", it was noticed that the students, both from public and private universities made more mistakes in the use of "*a/an*" than the definite article "*the*". But the highest percentage of mistakes was found in their use of *zero* articles. On an average 64.5% of mistakes were done while using *zero* articles whereas 20.9% of mistakes were made in the use of "*the*" and 27.4% of mistakes were in "*a/an*".

The students' performance indicated that the students did not have clear concept of vowel and consonant sounds. The learners made more mistakes in the use of "*an*". The reason may be that in Bengali (the learners' First

Language), pronunciation has got almost absolute correlation with its spelling system, whereas English has not. So, Bengali learners often find it difficult to identify nouns beginning with vowel-sounding consonants such as honest, hour etc. Sometimes the students had over-generalized the rules which led to use wrong English articles. For example, they used “*an*” before the word “*hat*”. The data analysis indicated that students omitted “*a*” sometimes. They did not use any article before the common nouns like “*girl*”, “*couple*”, “*housewife*” etc.

Another problem which our learners encountered was that they made correct choice of articles for nouns in single sentence exercises but they made errors when they had to use those articles in longer units. The reason may be that the students failed to monitor the usage of the articles in discourse situation.

The students had highest percentage of errors in the use of zero articles. For example, Q. nos. -5, 11, 15 were about the omission of articles. The students had over-generalized the use of “*the*” instead of using “*zero*” articles (the omission of articles). Widdowson’s (1988) observation, that lack of sufficient use of Target Language was one of the causes of low rate of improvement, seemed to be true about our students.

The students also failed to understand the context in some sentences given for their test. Our students have the declarative knowledge of articles but they don’t have the procedural knowledge. From the data it was observed that the students were not aware of the singular and plural nouns. As a result, mistakes occurred in the use of “*the*”. For example, in question no-8, the noun is the plural but the students used “*a/an*”.

IX. Findings of the Current Research Regarding Students’ Fill-in-the Gap Activity

The fill-in-the gap activity was carried out to identify which article (definite, indefinite or zero) is more difficult to acquire. The results denoted that the definite article “*the*” is easier to acquire than acquiring the indefinite articles (*a/an*). At the same time, the highest range of mistakes was found in *zero* articles. So, the research hypothesis is valid.

X. Implications of the Research

This study was conducted to investigate which article (definite, indefinite or zero) is more difficult for the students to use at the tertiary level in

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Bangladesh. The purpose was to get an idea about how to become aware of the students' difficulties in using articles correctly, so that teaching could aim at resolving some of their problems in the use of articles properly.

From the finding it was evident that students do not have any ability to judge their uses of articles if they are unaware of rules. So, it is important to teach them not only the rules of articles but also the uses of the articles which are more important for communication. Learning in a communicative way can help them to imitate use of articles, as it is difficult and less effective to memorize a huge number of rules. Teachers should emphasize on the communicative need and purpose to enhance learners' motivation and effectiveness of learning.

Another thing to notice is that natural learning of articles can be found more effective as students might forget the rules. If the students use articles frequently, it would help them to imitate, memorize and form habits.

Grammatical structures like articles should be placed in real or realistic context. For example, creative use of various sorts of everyday objects, visuals and graphics should be introduced. Students would learn effectively if the articles are taught in contexts. Articles in isolation merely have meanings and if students learn them in isolation they might get confused when they required using it in a given context.

The habit of using second language should be formed. To Rivers (1964), "Habits are strengthened by reinforcement... Foreign language habits are formed most effectively by giving the right response, not by making mistakes". Language is "behaviour" and behaviour can be learned only by encouraging the students to behave. To form a sound habit of article use students need to form the habit correctly. If they learn incorrectly at a level, it will be difficult for them to correct the errors in future. So, no matter what method is followed, teachers must try to provide correct input of articles to the students. Then they may be able to use articles correctly.

Exposure towards the second language is important as the use of articles does not take place in isolation rather it takes place in an integrated way in real use. Students can have exposure if they read outside the textbooks like the English newspapers, fictions etc. It can expose them towards the second language in a delightful manner. Watching television or listening to music

can also be a source of exposure to L2. The visual image would be able to provide them a schema that would help them to learn the use of articles.

Teachers should make the students aware that articles of English are not used randomly, rather they follow a system. Therefore, it would not help if they relied on blind guessing while using articles. Instead, students should always be encouraged to find the reasons behind an article use. Teachers can help them to learn articles in a logical way.

Teachers need to be trained in the newer methods of teaching so that they can have a variety of means available to do their work well and make students like the language (L2). Teaching should incorporate humor or other highly motivating content. Teachers should provide challenge and interest through game-like features.

XI. Conclusion

In conclusion it could be said that teaching grammatical items like the English articles should be more contextualized. Students should be given opportunity to practice speaking and listening the second language inside the classroom. They should also be encouraged to read beyond their textbooks. The teachers of English language must focus on the procedural knowledge rather than declarative knowledge where they will not only know the rules of grammar including articles but also be able to use articles for communication. Structures like “articles” should be taught based on the real life situations. Special attention has to be given to those areas, which are markedly different from the subjects’ First Language. At the same time, teachers must be proficient in English. Teachers can make integrated lessons on articles since learning articles in isolation might be meaningless and ineffective. This study aimed at investigating the most difficult article for the students at the tertiary level in Bangladesh based on hypothesis. The hypothesis that acquiring the definite article (*the*) is easier than acquiring the indefinite articles (*a/an*) is true. Our students also find it more difficult to use *zero* articles correctly than the *definite* or *indefinite* article.

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Appendix-1

Fill-in-the gap questions

Level of the learner _____

Years you have learnt English _____

Date _____

Complete the sentences with *a/an, the, or nothing*

1. She bought ____ hat and ____ pair of shoes at ____ shops. Unfortunately ____ shoes are ____ wrong size. I'll take them back tomorrow.
2. A. Where are ____ children?
B. They're in ____ garden.
3. My aunt has ____ large family. She has four children. Three boys and ____ girl. ____ boys are in a college.
4. Emily and Tommy are ____ very nice couple. She has ____ fashion house and he works in ____ office in the centre of town.
5. She goes to work by ____ bus.
6. I'll give you ____ English to English dictionary. But, please take care of ____ dictionary.
7. Really, can you play ____ guitar?
8. A: Have you checked ____ answer scripts?
B: Not yet.
9. My friends live in ____ old building in Dhaka. There is ____ beautiful lake in front of ____ building.
10. We arrived in Khulna on ____ third of July.
11. He had ____ lunch with his colleagues.
12. A: Where's ____ nearest restaurant?
B: There's one at ____ end of this street.
13. I need ____ hour to complete the assignment.
14. My mother is ____ housewife and my father is ____ architect.
15. A: Where did you go last week?
B: I went to ____ Chittagong to my aunt's house.

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