Research Article

Exploring The Mastery Of English Articles Among Mongolian EFL Students

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ARTICLEINFO	ABSTRACT
	Mastering the English article system is particularly challenging for students whose native languages do not include articles. This study examines the progression of article acquisition among Mongolian university students, highlighting their developing understanding of the English article system during interlanguage development. Twenty-five participants with different levels of English proficiency participated in an extensive evaluation, consisting of a fill-in-the-article cloze test and structured interviews. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses, the study explores participants' comprehension of essential factors such as hearer's knowledge, specific reference, uniqueness, and countability, which affect article errors across various proficiency levels. The results provide valuable insights into the step-by-step acquisition of the English article system and deepen the understanding of interlanguage phenomena. This research adds to the broader discussion on second language acquisition and informs teaching strategies aimed at enhancing learners' proficiency with English articles of Form
	Keywords: Indefinite article, Definite article, Zero article

Introduction

The intricate nuances of the English article system, encompassing definite (the), indefinite (a/an), and zero (null) articles, present formidable challenges for ESL and EFL students, persisting even at advanced proficiency levels (Ekiert, 2014). These articles, notably "the" and "a" rank among the most prevalent words in English, underscoring their linguistic significance (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

However, their subtle usage distinctions, coupled with their downplayed role in spoken discourse, render them particularly daunting for learners, especially those whose native languages lack similar systems (Master, 2002; Thomas, 1989). Effective remedial strategies often involve real-world application and structured grammar teaching methodologies (Master, 1990, 1994; Muranoi, 2002; Huebner, 1983; Thomas, 1989; Goto Butler, 2002).

The selection of articles is intricately linked to the semantic function of the Noun Phrase (NP), which is categorized by specificity [+/- SR] and presumed familiarity to the hearer [+/- HK]. In this study, we employed an online survey administered to 25 EFL students, comprising a cloze form test. Immediately following the test, structured interviews were conducted to elucidate the rationale behind their article selection. The survey consisted of 75 questions, adapted from Ekiert's (2007) work on the Acquisition of the English Article System by Speakers of Polish.

By examining the cognitive processes underlying article selection, this research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of second language acquisition, particularly concerning the acquisition of English articles. The findings of this study have implications for instructional methodologies aimed at enhancing learners' proficiency in navigating the complexities of the English article system.

Zero Articles

Traditionally, instances, where a noun requires no article, have been encompassed under the concept of zero articles. However, recent scholarship has made a finer distinction between zero and null articles, attributing them to noncount/plural nouns and singular count/proper nouns, respectively (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-

Freeman, 1999; Chesterman, 1991; Master, 1997). The evolving hypotheses of learners, coupled with the influence of their first language (L1), add layers of complexity to the acquisition of articles (DeKeyser, 2005).

This study focuses on investigating the developmental sequence of second language (L2) acquisition among Mongolian learners, whose native language lacks articles [-ART]. By exploring the factors contributing to variability in article usage accuracy, the research aims to shed light on the nuanced interplay between language acquisition processes and linguistic structures. Specifically, the study seeks to uncover how Mongolian learners navigate the challenges posed by the absence of articles in their L1 while acquiring proficiency in the English article system.

Psycholinguistic Difficulty
The intricate nature of article usage in English underscores the profound impact of subtle distinctions on meaning, as evidenced by variations in sentences such as "John and Susan talked about divorce," illuminating the psycholinguistic challenge inherent in grasping form-meaning relationships in second language (L2) processing (DeKeyser, 2005).
Learners' metalinguistic knowledge plays a pivotal role in shaping article usage, often reflecting their exposure to past pedagogical approaches (Butler, 2002; James Allen Venuti, 2011). The consequences of misusing English articles extend beyond mere grammatical errors, potentially leading to significant misunderstandings and conflicts in communication. Consider the nuanced interpretations that emerge from different constructions involving the word "divorce":
"John and Susan talked about divorce": This sentence conveys a discussion about divorce in a general context.
"John and Susan talked about the divorce": Here, the presence of the definite article implies a specific divorce, possibly referring to a third party's marital dissolution where the name is unspecified.
"John and Susan talked about a divorce": In this instance, the indefinite article suggests a discussion about a particular divorce, potentially involving the speakers themselves.
DeKeyser (2005) characterizes these challenges as psycholinguistic difficulties, emphasizing the complexities involved in accurately expressing meaning in the target language. Such nuances underscore the need for learners to develop a nuanced understanding of article usage to facilitate effective communication and avoid potential misinterpretations.

2. Literature Review
Early investigations into learner writing primarily examined articles as grammatical morphemes, with later studies shifting focus towards the broader article system (Hakuta, 1976; Huebner, 1979, 1983; Tarone, 1985; Master, 1987, 1997, 2003; Parrish, 1987; Tarone & Parrish, 1988; Thomas, 1989). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) attribute the struggles of second language (L2) learners to disparities in lexical classification between their native and target languages, particularly concerning countable and uncountable nouns. Seminal frameworks introduced by Bickerton (1981) and Huebner (1983) shed light on the semantic and discourse-pragmatic factors influencing article usage.

Alhaysony (2012) identified native language interference and instructional strategies as critical factors contributing to article usage errors among Saudi learners. These insights underscore the multifaceted nature of article acquisition and the importance of considering both linguistic and instructional influences in understanding learners' challenges and strategies in mastering the English article system.

Goto Butler (2002), Huebner (1985), and Thomas (1989)
Huebner (1983) stands as a pivotal figure in advancing research on second language (L2) article acquisition by incorporating Bickerton's (1981) noun classification system into the discourse. Building upon Bickerton's semantic framework, Huebner embarked on an analysis of various types of noun phrases (NPs) and the corresponding article usage patterns, elucidating the developmental trajectory of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' comprehension of the article system.
Thomas (1989) proposed a developmental sequence suggesting the precedence of integrating the definite article into learners' interlanguage before the integration of the indefinite article. This notion underscores the significance of mastering the specific and identifiable referents denoted by the definite article before navigating the more abstract and generalized references encapsulated by the indefinite article.

In 2002, Goto Butler expanded upon existing models by incorporating idiomatic expressions as a distinct category, denoted as type 5, into the framework. This addition acknowledges the complexities introduced by idiomatic language usage, further enriching our understanding of L2 article acquisition.

These contributions reflect the dynamic evolution of research methodologies and conceptual frameworks aimed at unraveling the intricacies of L2 article acquisition, thereby informing pedagogical practices and instructional approaches tailored to the diverse needs of language learners.

Features Environment Articles Examples

Table 1: Environments for the Appearance of a, the, and 0 Adapted from Goto Butler (2002), Huebner (1985), and Thomas (1989)

Features	Environment	Articles	Examples
Type 1 [-SR,+HK]	Generic nouns	A,the,0	∅ Fruit flourishes in the valley. The Grenomian is an excitable person. A paper clip comes in handy.
Type 2 [+SR, +HK]	Referential definites Previous mention Specified by entailment Specified by definition Unique in all contexts Unique in a given context	the	Pass me the pen. The idea of coming to the US was… I found a book. The book was… The first person to walk on the moon…
Type 3 [+SR, -HK]	Referential indefinites first-mention nouns	A, 0	Chris approached me carrying a dog. I keep sending 0 messages to him.
Type 4 [-SR, -HK]	Nonreferential nouns Attributive indefinites Nonspecific indefinites	A, 0	Alice is an accountant. I guess I should buy a new car. 0 Foreigners would come up with a better solution.
Type 5	Idioms Other Conventional uses	A, the, 0	All of a sudden, he woke up. In the 1950s, there weren't many cars. His family is now living 0 hand to mouth.

Article Acquisition by L2 Learners

The complex process of acquiring second language (L2) articles has attracted considerable scholarly interest, revealing intricate patterns influenced by learners' native language backgrounds and developmental stages (Master, 1987, cited in Master, 1997). Notably, research indicates that learners tend to acquire the definite article "the" before the indefinite article "a" in L2 acquisition, a phenomenon consistently observed across multiple studies (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989).

This early mastery of the definite article often leads to what researchers refer to as "the-flooding," where learners tend to generalize its usage across various contexts, including referential indefinites and definites, as well as generics (Huebner & Master). On the other hand, learners whose native languages do not include articles, indicated as [-ART], demonstrate a unique path of acquisition characterized by initially favoring the zero article (Parrish, 1987; Master, 1997).

Parrish (1987) proposed a developmental pattern where learners first grasp the zero article, then progress to acquiring the definite article, and finally, the indefinite article. Master (1997) supported this sequence, emphasizing the widespread use of the zero articles, particularly among learners with lower proficiency levels while acknowledging the difficulty in distinguishing between using the zero article and omitting articles altogether. Contrarily, Liu, and Gleason (2002) questioned conventional views by proposing that the excessive reliance on the zero article and the limited use of the definite article at more advanced stages indicate a delayed acquisition of both articles.

This proposition is reinforced by Young's (1996) research on Czech and Slovak learners lacking articles, which demonstrates ongoing challenges in accurately expressing definiteness despite competent usage of the indefinite article. Definiteness and indefiniteness in the Mongolian language there are no English articles however; proximal demonstrative and determiner play roles as English articles. It is shown in the below sentences (Luvsanvandan. Sh 2010) A. Definite article is expressed by proximal pronouns such as this, that, these, those, such, (ene, ter, iim tiim, tedgeer) When we classify two things from one another we may use an adjective to distinguish them. The red horse won in the race. (the reflexive possessives)

(1) Neg hun delguurt orj irlee.
One man store-to entered
"A man entered the store."
In English, we know that "man" is [+SR, -HK] by the indefinite article. One man in Mongolian expresses [-HK] however in a sentence (2) in which the man is marked as [+SR, +HK] by the definite article in English.
(2) Nuguu/unuuh hun delguurt orj irlee.
The man store to entered.
The man entered the store.
In English, we know that "man" is [+SR, +HK] by the definite article. That man in Mongolian express [+HK] however in sentence (2) in which man is marked as [+SR, +HK] by the definite article in English. A proximal pronoun can be expressed as the definite article 'the' in the Mongolian language.
(3) Minii chamd helsen ugiig bitgii martaarai.
My you said word don't forget.
"Please don't forget the word (saying) I have told you."
(4) Minii chamd ugsun nomiig avchirsan u?

My you gave book bring?
Did you take the book which I gave you?
The words with definite articles "the word" and "the book" are expressed by words "ugiig" and "nomiig" in the accusative case.
(5) Ter hun….gert orj irlee.
That person the yurt entered.
That person entered the yurt.
Purev-Ochir.B, Guliraanz.Z, 1993
The word "gert" with zero articles in Mongolian is interpreted as "the yurt" –a word with a definite article in English.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study encompassed twenty-five Mongolian university students, drawn from diverse regions across Mongolia, with an age range spanning from eighteen to twenty years. These students, all products of the Mongolian public school system, embarked on their English language learning journey at the age of twelve, persisting through six years of instruction, with English classes occurring three times weekly. Despite their varied proficiency levels, none of the participants were English majors, yet all were enrolled at the Mongolian University of Science and Technology.

To delineate the spectrum of English proficiency among the participants, three distinct levels were established: low-ability, intermediate-ability, and high-ability. Low-ability learners scored 20 or below on assessments, while intermediate-ability learners achieved scores ranging from 20 to 30, and high-ability learners surpassed the 30 mark out of a possible 40. Importantly, none of the participants had ventured outside of Mongolia for more than a month, and their English language usage was confined to the classroom setting.

Throughout their English language learning trajectory, the average duration of formal instruction amounted to six to seven years, with weekly instructional hours totaling six. The methodological approach incorporated a fill-in-the-blank cloze test comprising 75 sentences, designed to assess participants' comprehension and application of English articles. Subsequently, learners were briefed on prominent models of article acquisition, including those proposed by Huebner (1985), Thomas (1989), and Goto Butler (2002), before being tasked with identifying various types of English sentences and articulating their rationale behind article selection.

This comprehensive approach aimed to elucidate the developmental nuances in article acquisition among Mongolian learners, shedding light on their interlanguage representations and facilitating a deeper understanding of the challenges and strategies inherent in mastering the English article system.

Questions: Choose the correct articles and explain why you have chosen these types.

DISCUSSION

Among the delineated types of article usage, Type 2, encompassing referential definites [+SR, +HK] (the), demonstrated the highest observed accuracy rate, with 29.6% of responses aligning with this category. Conversely, Type 4, representing nonreferential nouns [-SR, -HK] (a,0), emerged as the most challenging for students, with a mere 8% accuracy rate. Notably, this type posed a considerable difficulty, as students grappled with selecting the appropriate indefinite article 'a' or zero article '0' in nonspecific indefinite contexts.

For instance, in the sentence "What is the sex of your baby? It is a boy!" none of the participants selected Type 4, which should theoretically correspond to the indefinite article 'a.' Instead, they predominantly opted for Type 1 [-SR, +HK] (9 out of 25), typically associated with generic nouns, and Type 2 [+SR, +HK] (9 out of 25), indicative of definite article usage. This trend suggests a tendency among learners to conflate the usage of the indefinite article 'a' with that of the definite article 'the' in generic contexts.

Type 1, characterized by the detection of the [+HK] semantic feature, exhibited a relatively straightforward identification process for Mongolian learners, particularly following Type 2. Conversely, Type 3, encompassing referential indefinites [+SR, -HK], which necessitates the usage of both 'a' and the zero articles, presented an average challenge for students.

Type 5, involving idiomatic expressions, accounted for the second lowest percentage of accurate responses at 15.2%. This finding underscores the complexity inherent in discerning the appropriate article usage within idiomatic contexts, highlighting an area warranting further attention and pedagogical support. Ultimately, these observations contribute to a nuanced understanding of the challenges encountered by Mongolian learners in mastering the intricacies of English article usage, thereby informing targeted instructional strategies and interventions.

Table 2: Correct number of choosing articles When selecting articles, the highest score attained by students was 83 out of 86, equivalent to 96.50% accuracy, while the lowest score was 26 out of 86, reflecting a 30% accuracy rate.

Type	Number of article exercise	Number of choosing article	Percentage
Type 1	15	108	28.8
Type 2	15	111	29.6
Type 3	15	86	22.9
Type 4	15	30	8
Type 5	15	57	15.2

Overuse of a, the, and zero

In evaluating learners' performance on the article test, relying solely on accuracy scores may not offer a complete portrayal of their linguistic competence. To provide a more nuanced understanding, akin to the approach taken by Monika Ekiert (2004), the analysis includes the calculation and reporting of the percentage of unnecessary uses of "a," "the," and zero articles. This examination of article overuse among learners yields valuable insights into the development of their interlanguage systems. Table 2 presents a breakdown of instances where learners exhibited an excessive use of articles, contributing to a more comprehensive assessment of their language proficiency and article usage patterns.

Table 3: Proportion of Correct Usage of Zero, Definite, and Indefinite Articles by Students

Total number of correct article	A(31) 750	An (2) 50	The (32) 800	Zero article (23) 575
Correct answer chosen by students	404	17	333	216
Percentage	18.5%	0.7%	15.3%	9.9%

The mean analysis of English article misuse offers valuable insights into learners' tendencies in article selection. Across the categories of "A," "An," "The," and zero articles, mean scores serve as indicators of the average frequency of errors encountered in article usage.

Notably, learners exhibit a relatively higher frequency of correct usage when selecting "A" articles, as evidenced by a mean score of 18.5%. This signifies a notable proficiency in the selection of the indefinite article "a" compared to other articles.

Conversely, the mean score for selecting "An" articles is markedly lower at 0.7%, indicating a notably lower frequency of accuracy in employing the indefinite article "an." However, the mean scores for "An" and zero articles, standing at 0.7% and 9.9% respectively, denote varying levels of challenge in accurately selecting these articles.

Overall, the mean analysis of English article misuse furnishes a quantitative gauge of learners' proficiency levels and areas of difficulty in article selection, thus offering actionable insights for instructional interventions and language development strategies. The overarching trend in article misuse underscores a common inclination among learners to default to the indefinite article "a" when "an," "the," or zero articles are warranted.

Further scrutiny reveals a prevalent overuse of the indefinite article "A," followed by a relatively accurate selection of the definite article "the," with the zero article and the indefinite article "an" trailing behind. This progression hints at a gradual improvement in article selection accuracy, with learners exhibiting the highest proficiency in Type 1 (Generics) and Type 2 (Referential definiteness) contexts.

Type 4 poses the most formidable challenge due to its nonreferential nature, followed by Type 5, which involves idiomatic expressions unfamiliar to learners. These findings align with established research indicating that learners typically attain mastery of the definite article "the" before mastering the indefinite article "a," thus challenging earlier hypotheses suggesting the inverse relationship.

Type 2, characterized by referential definites with specific reference and hearer knowledge, emerges as the context with the highest accuracy rate at 29.86%. This signifies relative ease among learners in accurately selecting the definite article "the" when referring to known entities. Conversely, Type 4, encompassing nonreferential contexts without specific reference or hearer knowledge, presents the greatest challenge for learners, with an accuracy rate of only 8%. This underscores the difficulty learners' face in discerning when articles are unnecessary or when to employ zero articles.

Overall, the findings highlight the nuanced nature of article usage acquisition among Mongolian EFL learners, with varying degrees of accuracy observed across different linguistic contexts. These insights can inform targeted instructional approaches aimed at addressing specific challenges and fostering greater proficiency in English article usage.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of article usage across various linguistic contexts (Types 1-5) among Mongolian EFL learners underscores the diverse levels of proficiency and challenges encountered. Notably, Type 2, involving referential definites with specific reference and hearer knowledge, emerges with the highest accuracy rate at 29.86%, suggesting a relative ease among learners in selecting the definite article "the" when referring to familiar entities. Conversely, Type 4, encompassing nonreferential contexts without specific reference or hearer knowledge, presents the most significant challenge, with an accuracy rate of only 8%. This highlights the difficulty learners face in discerning when articles are unnecessary or when to employ zero articles.

Overall, these findings emphasize the nuanced nature of article usage acquisition among Mongolian EFL learners, with varying degrees of accuracy observed across linguistic contexts. These insights can inform targeted instructional approaches aimed at addressing specific challenges and fostering greater proficiency in English article usage.

Building on the foundation laid by Monika Ekiert's research in 2007, I extended my investigation to include [-ART] language learners from Mongolia, whose native tongues are exclusively Slavic languages containing article-like morphemes. Utilizing cloze-type tests administered through Google Forms, complemented by immediate post-test interviews to elucidate article selection rationale, my study unveiled significant insights into the influence of L1 interference on second language acquisition, particularly regarding articles.

Contrary to earlier hypotheses proposed by Huebner (1983), Master (1997), Parrish (1987), and Thomas (1989) suggesting the early emergence of the definite article and later acquisition of the indefinite article in L2 acquisition, my research yielded contrasting results. Termed 'the-flooding' by Huebner and Master, Mongolian EFL learners tended to overuse the indefinite article 'a' while simultaneously underutilizing 'the' and zero articles. This underscores the significant impact of L1 interference on article selection accuracy and highlights the challenges learners face in mastering the intricacies of the English article system.

Moreover, my findings align with the conclusions drawn by Liu and Gleason (2002) and Young (1996), indicating early and accurate control of the indefinite article among learners. These insights underscore the importance of integrating authentic situational examples into instructional practices to enhance learners' comprehension and application of English articles. Additionally, frameworks proposed by Huebner (1983), Thomas (1989), and Goto Butler (2002) offer effective tools for elucidating learners' usage of the English article system.

In the realm of education, harnessing the power of proximal demonstratives such as 'this,' 'that,' 'these,' and 'those' to represent definite articles, alongside numerical indicators for indefinite article usage, holds immense potential for enhancing learners' comprehension and application of articles. By incorporating these strategic tools into pedagogical methodologies, educators can significantly mitigate the detrimental impacts of L1 interference and cultivate heightened proficiency in English article usage among Mongolian EFL learners. This proactive approach not only facilitates clearer understanding but also fosters a more robust grasp of articles, thereby empowering learners to navigate the complexities of the English language with confidence and accuracy.

As educators, leveraging proximal demonstratives such as 'this,' 'that,' 'these,' and 'those' for translating definite articles, along with numerical indicators for indefinite article usage, can facilitate clearer understanding and application of articles among learners. By integrating these strategies into pedagogical approaches, educators can effectively mitigate the adverse effects of L1 interference and foster greater proficiency in English article usage among Mongolian EFL learners.

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