



SYSTEMATIC DEVELOPMENTAL FEATURES IN THE ACQUISITION OF THE ENGLISH ARTICLE SYSTEM BY LUHYA L1 LEARNERS

By:

Mary Khejeri

Mount Kenya University, School of Education.
Email; mkhejeri@mku.ac.ke

Martin Situma

Koitaleel Samoei University College, Department of Languages and Literature.
Email; situma@ksu.ac.ke

Abstract

This paper is set out to examine the systematic developmental features in the acquisition of the English article system by Luhya L1 learners in secondary schools, conducted in Vihiga County, Kenya. Even though English plays a central role in Kenya's education system, there is still a dearth of research on how Luhya speaking learners really learn how to use the English system in secondary schools in Vihiga County, Kenya. There isn't a clear picture on the stages these learners go through or the various errors that stick around for a long time. This kind of insight will enable teachers and curriculum developers to provide interventions which meet the needs of these learners. The objective of the study was to examine the systematic developmental features in the acquisition of the English article system by Luhya L1 Learners. The study was guided by Fluctuation Hypothesis which was used to predict and explain the systematic errors of L2 learners and Full transfer /Full access hypothesis according to which in the learning process the L2 learner transfers the entire L1 grammar on to L2. The study adopted a pragmatic paradigm and a case study design to explain how learners construct their knowledge of L2 English article system in the context of L1 Luhya that is linguistically different from English. A mixed method approach was employed to allow for the use of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies leading to a better understanding of the article use phenomenon. The study sample included 6 schools purposively selected from three sub-counties and 24 students of English from these schools. The data collection instrument was a multiple-choice task. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics and content and thematic analysis procedures. The study revealed various developmental features which included: overuse, fluctuation, and omission errors. In the light of the study findings, it was concluded that the pedagogy utilized in the instruction of the English article is flawed, there is minimum content coverage for the English article and that both learners' L1 and L2 negatively influence the acquisition and learning of English article. Thus, it is recommended that teachers adopt an eclectic approach in teaching the English article system and that the curriculum developers review the English language syllabus with regard to the article system and accord it the prominence it deserves. Theoretically, the study contributes to the advancement of knowledge about the teaching of the English article system. Practically, curriculum developers should find the study useful and reconsider revising the English language curriculum reconsidering content overage at the various levels of learning, factoring in elements that would facilitate SLA and SL learning.

Keywords:

English Article, systematic developmental features, second language, second language learning.

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1.0 Introduction

The value of a well-developed and well learned article system cannot be overemphasized. The English article system is an important aspect of grammar for learners acquiring English as a second or foreign language. Articles are important because they constitute a crucial part of the English system for information referencing and identification which are an important function of language (Celce – Murcia & Larsen – Freeman, 1999). In addition, articles are some of the function words that occur most frequently in English as revealed by corpus data. The article *the*, is ranked as the most frequent word while *a*, is ranked the fifth most frequent word (Sinclair 1991). This means that knowledge, competence and use of the English article system have a significant effect on learners' spoken and written English. It is therefore not surprising that proper use of the articles by learners is a pointer to the learners' increased level of accuracy. On the other hand, inaccurate use of the article system is an indicator that learners have a shaky grasp of language. However, it has been documented that acquisition of the English article system poses problems to learners (Master, 1990; Ekiert, 2004). This has been linked to learners' L1 (Trenkic, 2007; Crompton, 2011). In cases where the linguistic structures of L1 differ from those of L2 then negative language transfer is experienced or generalization of rules leading to poor learning of grammar structures and consequently its inaccurate use by learners. However apart from learners' L1, there are other factors that contribute to the difficulty in article acquisition. Master (1990) posits that among the factors is the complexity of the article system. He explains that articles serve a variety of functions in the article system and this makes rule application difficult for learners. However, the problems in article misuse may also arise from article pedagogy. Teachers may be experiencing challenges in handling the complex article system Therefore this study sought to determine the challenges teachers of English in SL classes face when teaching the English article system.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

It is said that the acquisition of the article system is one of the most challenging areas of grammar for second language (L2) learners and is even more challenging for second language learners whose first language lacks articles (ART) than for those whose first language has articles (+ ART) (Master, 1997; Thomas, 1989). The first language of majority of learners in Vihiga, which is Luhya does not have an overt article system. Even though English plays a central role in Kenya's education system, there is still a dearth of research on how Luhya speaking learners really learn how to use the English system. There isn't a clear picture on the stages these learners go through or the various errors that stick around for a long time. This kind of insight will enable teachers and curriculum developers to provide interventions which meet the needs of these learners.

The functions of articles in their first language are realized through demonstrative pronouns, discourse pragmatic contexts and nominal locatives. Therefore, this is likely to present challenges to teachers and learners in the process of teaching and learning English. Articles appear in many areas of discourse practices; and are some of the function words that occur most frequently in English as revealed by corpus data (Larsen- Freeman, 1999) as such they have a significant effect on the effective use of language both written and spoken. According

to Master (1997), errors with articles automatically mark a person out as a non-native speaker and call into question the person's general competence in their English. Therefore, misuse of the English article system among learners is a clear indicator of poor mastery of the language the consequence of which may be poor performance in English at school and in national examination.

English language plays a crucial role as a medium of instruction across curriculum in schools in Kenya and if the learner is handicapped in the language of instruction then learning is affected and if this trend continues then learners will miss out on many opportunities such as joining institutions of higher learning and job opportunities. In addition, there are various engagements in the society which take place through the English medium. But above all when students perform poorly, the society tends to blame their teachers. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the developmental features in the acquisition of the English article system among Luhya LI learners in secondary schools in Vihiga County.

1.2 Study Objective

Based on the problem stated, the objective of the study was to examine the systematic developmental features in the acquisition of the English article system by Luhya L1 Learners among secondary school learners in Vihiga County.

1.3 Review of related Literature

Review of Studies on systematic developmental Features among Luhya L1 learners in the course of learning of the English article system

In the course of learning the article system various studies have reported recurring developmental features exhibited in learner language in relation to the English article system. Some of these studies are discussed in the following section.

Thomas (1989) was interested in the phenomenon of flooding and fluctuation among learners whose L1s assign articles according to definiteness setting which had been observed in the studies of some researchers among them Heubner (1983) and Master (1987). He therefore carried out a study to investigate differences and similarities in the order of article acquisition among adult learners of English who were from both (+ART languages) and (–ART languages).

The results from the study revealed that learners from the –ART languages tended to omit articles. Furthermore, the results also revealed that regardless of their L1 background, the groups overused the definite 'the' in definite specific contexts. This was because they associated 'the' with specificity and not definiteness.

Ionin and Wexler (2003) carried out a study on acquisition of the English article system among Russian L2 learners. Their aim was to find out how the learners used articles in different definite, indefinite, referential and non-referential contexts. Two studies were conducted in this research and both of them involved Russian learners. The findings revealed article overuse in referential indefinite contexts. The second study investigated the learners'

use of articles in referential and non-referential contexts. The findings of this study again supported the previous ones; there was the overuse of the definite article in specific indefinite contexts. From these findings various conclusions were drawn; that L2 learners have full access to UG but they have a problem in getting the right parameter setting because they are unable to decide which of the two parameters specificity and definiteness differentiates ‘the’ from ‘a’ as a result they fluctuate since they fail to pinpoint the right trigger to guide them to the correct choice in the input.

Hawkins (2006) also carried out a study on article acquisition that was similar to the one of Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004). The purpose was to test the Fluctuation Hypothesis. The Japanese learners fluctuated whereas the Greek learners did not. His findings thus revealed that learners whose L1 lacks articles fluctuate between definiteness and specificity.

Atay (2010) investigated the acquisition of the article system by Turkish learners with focus on the role of semantic notions in the process of article acquisition. Her main goal was to establish whether learners who have Turkish as a first language fluctuate between definiteness and specificity and how this fluctuation impacts on the learning of the article system. The study findings confirmed the researcher’s prediction that Turkish learners would fluctuate in their article use between definiteness and specificity. Secondly the study revealed that learners made a number of systematic errors which included substitution errors, omission errors and errors of overuse.

Ekiert (2004) carried out a study to investigate L2 development sequence of article acquisition by L2 learners of English whose L1 is Polish. Her findings revealed that the sequence of L2 acquisition of articles was similar to that of L1 natural order of article acquisition. Over all, the developmental sequence was found to be $a > the > \emptyset$. This finding is different from the findings of other studies; (Master 1990), Heubner, (1979) where ‘the’ was reported to be the earliest to acquire. In addition, there was evidence of overuse of the zero article which was overused by Fen and Lu (2001) conducted a study on article use. The aim of the study was to investigate the order in which articles are acquired and to establish the underlying processes involved in article accuracy and use by Chinese learners. The findings of the study revealed that acquisition order across the groups as $the > a > \emptyset$. The results of the study also revealed that ‘the’ is associated with (+SR) contexts than with (+HK) contexts in other words ‘the’ is associated with specificity rather than definiteness. Therefore, Fen and Lu concluded that the context (+SR –HK) was the main cause of the overgeneralization of ‘the’ and therefore the most problematic and least article to acquire is in the (+SR –HK) context where learners choose ‘the’ instead of ‘a’.

Gunzhao Sun (1916) was interested in the acquisition sequence of the article system. Before his study there had been a number of studies carried out on the sequence of article acquisition with divergent results. He investigated the acquisition sequence differences and difficulties of English articles among learners of English as a second language. The findings revealed the following sequences: $a > the > zero$ for levels A and C and $the > a > zero$ for level B participants in (–ART) group. For (+ART), the sequence was $a > the > zero$ for levels A and B participants;

the for-level C participants. The results of his study were interesting in two ways: first ‘a’ was the easiest article to acquire for both the groups; secondly the most difficult article to acquire for both the groups was zero article. Thirdly the +ART group also had difficulties with ‘the’. This was a breakaway from the findings of most studies where the +ART group had less difficulties with the definite ‘the’. The findings also dispelled the belief that learners with +ART Ls acquired articles faster than those with –ART L1s. It was also evident from his findings that when two languages are similar it does not necessarily lead to positive transfer.

2.0 Theoretical framework

The study was guided by three theories: Fluctuation hypothesis advanced by Ionin (2004) and full transfer /full access hypothesis proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse (1994,1996). According to Fluctuation Hypothesis, article systems in two-article languages like English can encode the features [\pm definite] or [\pm specific]. (Ionin et al., 2004), They further state that the way in which the articles are grouped in such languages is governed by a semantic parameter. They call this parameter, the Article Choice Parameter (ACP). This parameter can be set to either the definiteness value or the specificity value. They further assert that L2 English learners with articleless L1 do not have any setting of the ACP. However, since ACP is a UG parameter-setting for articles it is available to L2 learners within the limits of its framework. For this reason, L2 learners will fluctuate between the two settings of the parameter in the course of article acquisition. The cause of the fluctuation will arise from the fact that initially L2 learners have insufficient input so they are not yet confident about which setting is correct thus they may either select the definiteness or specificity setting. This will continue until they are exposed to sufficient input to enable them set the parameter correctly. This theory is relevant to my study because it predicts the error patterns of L2 learners with articleless L1. Therefore, the study will use this hypothesis to predict and explain the systematic errors of L2 learners.

According to full transfer/full access hypothesis, the initial state in L2 acquisition is L1 grammar. Thus ‘Full transfer’ means transfer of ‘the entire L1 grammar with abstract features and functional categories. In other words, any time learners begin to learn a second language, they use their L1 as a spring board. It means during the L2 acquisition process the learner is guided by his knowledge of first language which plays a crucial role in acquiring the second language. Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) posit that in the L2 acquisition process, the learner transfers all the grammar of his first language to the second language that he is learning. For this reason, I have found it necessary to include FT/FA to account for predictions of acquisitions patterns outside the FH. The FH does not cover L1 transfer.

The study was also guided by the natural order hypothesis advanced by Krashen (1985). This hypothesis argues that there is a natural order to the way second language learners acquire their target language. According to the hypothesis, learners of a second language acquire grammatical items in a given order. This order does not depend on the apparent simplicity or complexity of the grammatical features involved. This means this order does not go by what we believe is easy or difficult. There is also evidence that the order is independent of the order in which rules are taught in language classes (Krashen, 1985). The objective of the

study was to find out systematic developmental features of L2 learners' acquisition of English articles. The natural order hypothesis was deemed relevant to this study because it helped the researcher to understand better the development of the article use by the learners, the order in which the articles are acquired and whether this order is reflective of the learners' L1. The order in which the articles are acquired was a pointer to the semantic challenges the learners face when learning the English article system.

3.0 Methodology

This study was conducted in selected schools in Vihiga County of Western Kenya using a case study design. Vihiga County has 159 secondary schools and 579 teachers of English. Quota sampling was used to identify the categories of schools from which the actual samples were purposively selected. Thus 6 schools were selected. Purposive sampling was then used to select 24 students from the 6 schools who participated in the study. A multiple-choice task was adopted for data collection. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Systematic Developmental Features in the Acquisition of the English Article System by Luhya L1 Learners

The objective of this study was to investigate the systematic developmental features among Luhya L1 learners of English in the acquisition of the English article system. To help address this objective, a multiple-choice task was given to elicit answers from various contexts in order to be able to find out students' accuracy in each context and to determine the developmental features and the acquisition sequence of the English articles for the participants. In the analysis of students' performance, the researcher used the descriptive analysis of the SPSS Packet Program. This analysis reveals at what percentages learners assign the correct article and make errors.

The respondents' answers from the lower and upper intermediate classes were categorized into six contexts according to the way the articles are used. The first context involved five questions in which all the NPs were [+definite and +specific] (previous mentioned) therefore requiring the use of 'the'. The second context comprised of five questions in which also all the NPs were +definite +specific (with speaker explicit knowledge of NPs) also requiring the use of 'the'. The third context had five questions in which all the NPs were +definite -specific (with complete denial of the speaker knowledge) requiring the use of 'the'. Therefore, for the first three contexts, the target answer was 'the' since the NPs were definite regardless of the speaker's state of knowledge and the specificity of the NPs. The fourth context comprised of five questions in which all the targeted NPs were -definite +specific (with explicit speaker knowledge about NPs) and the target answer was 'a'. The fifth context had five questions in which all NPs were -definite, -specific (first mentioned NPs) and the target answer was 'an'. The final context contained five questions in which the NPs were -definite -specific (with complete denial of speaker knowledge), the targeted answer was \emptyset .

Scrutinizing the collected data from both the lower and upper intermediate classes the following is the presentation and discussion of the findings:

The following section shows the percentage scores and the errors that learners made in the multiple-choice task. To arrive at the percentages of each group use of articles in various contexts, the total number of articles per context was taken and the percentages calculated for correctness and incorrectness. Each context had 5 items. A score of all the five items was equivalent to 100% score and there were 12 students per group therefore for each context the total number of articles produced by learners was 60. Production of articles, correct and incorrect in the 6 contexts was computed and the total of articles was 360 for lower intermediate group and another 360 for upper intermediate group. Percentage scores per context and per group were computed and the information is graphically captured in the following sections.

From Table 4.1, the following observations can be made: The results indicate that the highest percentage of accuracy is observed in upper intermediate group across all the settings while the lowest percentage is observed in lower intermediate group across the settings. The findings also reveal the correct article usage for most of the items was observed in [+Definite + specific]. The highest score for both the groups being in [+definite +specific] previous mentioned NPs: 91% for upper intermediate and 83% for lower intermediate. The second highest score is in [+definite +specific] 'explicit speaker knowledge about the NPs: 83% for upper intermediate group and 67% for lower intermediate group. The lowest score is in the [-definite-specific] at the rate of 50% for lower intermediate and 58% for upper intermediate group.

In [+ definite –specific] context, there was a sharp decrease in the level of accuracy for both the groups. In [-Definite + specific] context there was some improvement in performance compared to the previous context where the scores were 75% for upper intermediate group and 67% for lower intermediate group in [-Definite –specific] context where NPs are first mentioned requiring the use of indefinite 'an' the upper intermediate learners scored much higher than the lower intermediate learners. The lower intermediate learners tended to fluctuate between 'an' and 'the' article whereas the upper intermediate learners had control over the indefinite 'an' and answered most of the items correctly scoring 75% against 67% score of the lower intermediate group. The last context [- definite – specific] requiring the use of zero article was most difficult for all learners at both levels, their percentage scores being 50% for lower intermediate group and 58% for upper intermediate. Lower intermediate learners were able to produce correct answers for just half of the items whereas the upper intermediate class produced correct instances for just over half of the items. Both the groups tended to supply 'the' in the contexts where zero article was required.

Table 4.1: Article choice percentage scores in all contexts

Group	[+Definite +specific] (previous mentioned NPs)	[+Definite +specific] (speaker has explicit knowledge about NPs)	[+Definite - specific] (speaker has no knowledge about NPs)	[-Definite +specific] (Explicit speaker knowledge about the indefinite NPs)	[-Definite - specific] (NPs are first mentioned in the context)	[-Definite - specific] (NPs are anonymous for the speaker)
	The	The	The	A	An	Ø
Lower intermediate Group	83%	67%	58%	67%	58%	50%
Upper intermediate Group	91%	83%	58%	75%	75%	58%

4.2 Summary of the Findings of the Systematic Developmental Features among Luhya L1 learners in the Acquisition of the English Article System

The aim of this paper was to address the research objective which was to establish the systematic developmental features among Luhya L1 learners in the learning of English L2 articles. The findings revealed the following features: fluctuation overuse and omissions.

4.2.1 Fluctuation

Fluctuation in this section is exhibited by learners' substitution of incorrect articles for correct articles.

i) Substitution of 'a' for 'the'

One of the sharpest decreases in level of accuracy for both low and upper intermediate learners was observed in context III[+definite/-specific] where 'the' was required. Results from the multiple-choice task show that learners' level of fluctuation was much higher. In this context both the groups scored only 58% correct answers leading to a significant decrease in the level of accuracy compared to the previous two contexts that is, context I and II. The lower intermediate chose 'a' instead of 'the' 25%. 'an' for 'the' 8%. The upper intermediate group chose 'a' for 'the' 17% and 'an' for 'the' 8%.

The performance in context III (+definite –specific) was generally poorer for both the groups despite a few differences in some areas. This is the context where we find generic use of 'the' and the poor performance shows that the generic reference of 'the' is difficult for L2 learners regardless of their proficiency level. Ekiert (2007) argues that generics 'require the highest level of sophistication in article use as they both call for skilful placement of 'a' 'the' and 'zero' article' and Liu Gleason (2002) echoes similar sentiments when she states that the cultural use of articles is the most difficult. This finding is supported by several researchers in the field (Ionin Ko & Wexler, 2003; Ionin, Ko and Wexler, 2004; Hawkins, 2006; Sarko (2009); Atay, 2011). However, Lardiere (2005) in her study had contrary findings. She found less cases of fluctuation instead omission errors were frequent. She argued that the problem learners have with articles is due to syntactic representation of features not present in learners' L1. She thus does not support the existence of UG and the whole idea of fluctuation.

The cause of the poor performance in this context can be explained in two ways: first generics are rare in the input and secondly both the groups of learners may have associated definite ‘the’ with specificity. Therefore in [+ definite – Specific] contexts they failed to use ‘the’ correctly and instead chose ‘a’ because they are only considering the notion of specificity and generalizing it to definiteness hence in their thinking what is not specific is also not definite. This leads them to fluctuate. This result confirms the fluctuation hypothesis advanced in chapter one according to which there could be overuse of ‘a’ in [+ definite – specific).

ii) Substitution of ‘the’ for ‘a’

In context IV [-definite + specific] where learners were required to use ‘a’ the overall results reveal high levels of accuracy in both the groups. The results for context IV (- definite +specific) shows that learners are more accurate in marking indefiniteness when it comes to the use of the indefinite ‘a’. However, learners still fluctuated in this context opting for ‘the’ instead of ‘a’ although the upper intermediate learners fluctuated in low proportions. This finding is in keeping with the expectations of the study that the upper intermediate would fluctuate in lower proportions. The lower intermediate learners’ higher rates of fluctuation compared to the upper intermediate group in this context could be attributed to the fact that having had more exposure to English language, through environmental input and classroom instruction, the upper intermediate group have better control of the definite and indefinite NPs whereas for lower intermediate group their interlanguage is still at an earlier stage and have more problems with indefinite NPs.

Similar results where the definite article ‘the’ is used in contexts where the indefinite article ‘a’ is required were reported in various studies including Atay (2010), Ekiert (2007), Ionin and Wexler (2003), Ionin, Ko and Wexler, (2004), Hawkins et al (2006), Huebner (1983), Master, (1987), Parrish, (1987). In the studies of Atay (2010) and Ekiert (2007) overuse of ‘the’ occurred in higher proportions in intermediate level learners compared to elementary level learners and advanced level learners. The two researchers interpreted this to mean that from the intermediate level, students begin to develop awareness of the syntactic properties of the definiteness and specificity which makes them more confused and this confusion results in fluctuation. However, the higher level of accuracy in this context to a large extent concurs with the findings of Kimambo (2016) which revealed that learners did not associate ‘the’ with specificity and fluctuation between definiteness and specificity only occurred at elementary level. In Kimambo’s study the use of ‘the’ where ‘a’ was required was not significant. Kimambo’s finding is interesting given that the learners in his study had Swahili as their L1 which is closely related to Luhya language in structure and both the languages are articleless. Perhaps the explanation here is that in the case of the learners in this study, their exposure to English has begun earlier that is from day one in school and in the course of learning English the article ‘the’ has been more frequent in their input while in the case of Kimambo’s study, learners’ exposure to English happens much later.

4.2.2 Overuse

i) Overuse of ‘the’

Overuse of ‘the’ also referred to as ‘the flooding’ Butler (2000), was observed in context (–definite +specific) under fluctuation. Learners across the board fluctuated in this context as they opted for ‘the’ instead of ‘a’ in the multiple-choice task. The results of this study also revealed overuse of ‘the’ in context IV [–definite-specific] where ‘ø’ is required. The overuse of ‘the’ where ø is required was evident in significant proportions. The overuse of ‘the’ was contrary to the expectations of this study since it was expected that because Luhya L1 has no articles the learners would have less challenges with the use of ‘ø’ article.

The overuse of ‘the’ has also been reported in literature. Crompton 2011 reported overuse of the definite article where ‘a’ ‘an’ and zero article were required. The overuse was in context where NPs were generic and non-count. However, for Crompton this was chiefly due to learners’ L1 because the misuse was in contexts where ‘the’ equivalent in Arabic was always used. Atay (2011) in her study reported that Type 2 definite articles were the most overused where learners used definite articles with non-referential noun phrases. Other studies which have reported overuses include (Bergeron- Matoba 2007; Fen & Lu, 2001; Ekiert, 2007; Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004).

ii) Overuse of ‘a’

Overuse of ‘a’ was evident. The overuse of ‘a’ was observed particularly in context III (+definite –specific) where ‘the’ was required but ‘a’ was used instead of ‘the’. There was also evidence of misuse of ‘a’ instead of ‘ø’. The study however notes that the overuse of ‘a’ ‘an’ for ‘ø’ is in less proportions compared to the overuse of ‘the’. The overuse of ‘a’ is a finding reported in many studies; Bergeron –Matoba reported that learners frequently assigned ‘a’ ‘an’ Other studies which have reported ‘a’ overuse include: (Lu & Fen, 2001; Ekiert, 2004; Butler, 2002; Atay 2011). The study of Huebner (1979) also revealed overuse of ‘a’ although some of the overuse of ‘a’ was as a result of pause phenomenon since he was dealing with oral data only. In this study the cases of ‘a’ overuse resulted from a combination of written and oral data. Overuse of ‘a/an’ can be attributed to intralingual influence in the sense that learners had problems in the use of these articles with uncountable nouns. Some uncountable nouns can be both count and uncountable depending on the context for example the NP ‘desire’ was a problem for many learners. Overuse of ‘a’ is therefore an intralingual error in that it stems from learners’ inability to distinguish uncountable nouns from count nouns. According to El Wefarlli overuse of ‘a’ may reveal that learners were overgeneralising and probably under the impact of transfer of training.

4.2.3 Underuse (omission)

i) Underuse of ‘the’

A developmental feature that turned out to be the most common was the underuse of ‘the’ and ‘a’ which translates to overuse of the zero article where ‘the’ or ‘a’ is required. The overuse of zero article is not done consciously because at this level most learners do not understand the concept of zero article. So here we describe this phenomenon as underuse or in Ekiert’s words ‘the failure to use any article’. The findings of the study reveal that learners

underused ‘the’ articles in contexts where they are required in significant proportions. This occurred at both the levels. In the multiple-choice task underuse is evident in all contexts however, the highest rate of underuse is evident in (+definite +specific) and (+definite-specific) contexts where the definite ‘the’ is required.

Underuse of articles or overuse of zero article is a common finding of most studies on L2 acquisition. Various studies including (Master, 1997; Erkiert, 2007; Parish 1987; ; Ionin et al (2008); Atay 2011; Thomas, 1989 have reported overuse or overgeneralization of the zero article and they have given different interpretations for the overgeneralization. Master 1997; Parish 1987, have purported that such findings are an indication of mastery of zero article on the initial stages. However, while this may be true of the learners in their studies, it is not true of the learners in this study since they are not aware of the concept of zero article and therefore their use of zero article is by default. Rather the cause of underuse could be traced to the learners’ first language which lacks an article system and most NPs are bare and therefore learners must have transferred the concept of bare noun from their L1 to their interlanguage which resulted in omissions.

Thomas (1989), attributed overuse of zero article to learners L1 stating that the [-ART] participants “produced the zero article more frequently (or perhaps...failed to use any article) in ‘a’ and ‘the’ contexts” (p. 349) due to L1 transfer. Ekiert has explained this as a reflection of the differences between the target language and any other language previously acquired including the native language. The proposal of Thomas and Ekiert supports the hypothesis that negative transfer is playing a substantial role in the process of article acquisition by adult learners. As noted by Jarvis (2002), the use of zero article by [-ART] participants should not be interpreted as either carelessness or ignorance. Rather, it is “quite intentional, or at least rule-governed” (p.416). It may be an indication of learners avoiding redundancy in marking definiteness and indefiniteness (as perceived by [-ART] L1 learners who have some other system at work, e.g. word order).

ii) Underuse of ‘a’/‘an’

For the multiple-choice task, the lower intermediate learners underused ‘a’ in higher proportions than the upper intermediate group. Underuse of ‘an’ was also evident with both groups omitting ‘an’ in equal proportions. The reason for underuse could be attributed to the learners’ L1 which lacks an article system. It implies that the Luhya L1 learners of English show indefiniteness by not using an article at all. The fact worth noting here is that in their first language, Luhya L1 learners mark indefiniteness by using no article at all so this is a case where they are showing indefiniteness in English by also not using an article. It is an example of interlingual interference from the native language. In her study of Arab learners, El Werfalli (2013) reported similar findings and noted that Arab learners do not have the indefinite articles in their Arabic L1 and therefore it was a case of language transfer. But for ‘an’, there is also the idea that it is less frequent in the input and structurally its use is a bit more complex than the other two articles.

4.3 Developmental sequence of the English Article System

To provide more information in response to my first research question it was necessary to find out the developmental sequence of the English article system. The analysis of the collected data yielded the following results.

The upper intermediate group registered the highest score in contexts I, II and III where the required article was the definite 'the'. They used 'the' correctly out of 140 (78%) of their answers out of 180 (100%). The second highest score was in the use of 'a' with 45 (75%) out of 60 (100%). The third highest score was in the use of 'an' where the group used 'an' correctly 45 (75%). The last in the sequence of acquisition is 'ø' in which the group scored 35 (58%). The lower intermediate group registered low scores but followed the same pattern with the highest score in the correct use of 'the' at the rate of 69%, use of 'a' correctly at the rate of 67% and 'an' 58%. The last in the sequence is 'ø' at 58%.

From the above analysis it is observed that the sequence of the English article system for both the upper intermediate group is 'the' > 'a/an' > 'ø' and for the lower intermediate group it is 'the' > 'a' > 'an' > 'ø'. The difference being in the acquisition of 'an'.

When the sequence differences and difficulties of the article acquisition by the two groups are considered the following observations can be made based on the findings. The study reveals that the earliest article to acquire for both upper and intermediate learners is the definite 'the' followed by 'a' 'an' then lastly 'ø'. The earlier acquisition of 'the' results agrees with the findings of Heubner (1985) who reported that his subjects performed better with 'the' than with 'a' and conclude that for L2 learners acquisition of 'the' comes first. This finding is further supported by Lu, C.F. and Fen C. (2001). (2001) in an investigation of acquisition sequence by Chinese speaking learners which was the > a > an > ø. In addition, the findings of this study are similar to the findings of Master (1987) and Parrish (1987) whose findings reveal that the emergence of 'a' in its appropriate environments in L2 learners is later and more gradual compared to the emergence of 'the'. However, the findings contradict the findings in the studies of Ekiert, 2004, Gunzhao 2016. Ekiert's findings revealed that the sequence of acquisition of the English article was 'a' > the > ø and she even questioned the findings of the earlier researchers whose sequences were 'the' > 'a' > 'ø'. For Gunzaho the sequences in his studies differed according to the level and to whether the L1 of the group was (-ART) or (+ART). His findings revealed that for (-ART) group Level A & C the sequence was 'a' > 'the' > 'ø' and for level B it was 'the' > 'a' > 'ø'. For (+ART) group the sequence was 'a' > 'ø' 'the' for level C and 'a' > 'the' > 'ø' for level A and B. From his findings he concluded that the easiest and the earliest article to be acquired is 'a' followed by 'the'. Humphrey Simon (2007) also noted that the acquisition sequence deferred among the groups according to the level of learners; for the elementary group the sequence was 'the' > 'ø' > 'a'/'an' and for the intermediate group it was 'the' > 'a'/'an' > 'ø'

For the use of 'the' in this study, it is noteworthy that the best performance is in context I [+definite +specific] the anaphoric use, where the groups registered 91% and 83% answers correct for upper and lower intermediate groups respectively. Here both the groups had

native-like performance probably due to the fact that teachers often focus their teaching on anaphoric use. The worst performance in the use of ‘the’ for both the groups is in context III [+Definite -specific]. This is the most problematic area in the use of ‘the’ and it shows the least observed percentage of accuracy for both the groups 58% and 50% correct answers for upper and lower intermediate groups respectively.

Another observation from the results is that the most difficult article to acquire for both the groups is ‘ø’ article. This finding tends to agree with Master’s (2007) observation that in the course of acquisition of the English article system, L2 learners particularly those who do not have an article system in their L1 have a problem with the zero article in all environments as they tend to overuse it.

According to the natural order hypothesis on which this study is based, learners acquire certain elements of a language in a given predictable order (Krashen, 1987). Krashen states that for any given language certain grammatical structures or morphemes are acquired earlier than others in first language acquisition and a similar natural order is found in second language acquisition. Krashen further suggests that this order is not dependent on the learner’s age or the learner’s first language or even conditions of exposure. It is also not affected by deliberate classroom teaching. However according to the findings of this study, in the process of learning the English article system students tend to acquire the articles they are exposed to more frequently in the input earlier than others; these are ‘the’ and ‘a’. Furthermore the ‘ø’ article which the results of this study reveal is acquired latest, is less transparent in the input and from the teachers’ interviews, they do not devote a lot of time on teaching it or explaining to the learners the concept of the zero article.

From the findings of various researchers and the findings of this study, it is obvious that the acquisition of the English article system does not follow a uniform order rather it differs from group to group and depends on the level of learners.

4.4 Conclusion

Based on the findings the researcher concludes that L1 learners of English in secondary schools in Vihiga do face challenges in the acquisition of the English article system. This study also notes the pedagogy for teaching articles is flawed. The teaching and learning of the English article system has been largely undermined by various factors starting from the inception of the English curriculum to the classroom instruction and to learners’ Luhya L1. All these pose challenges for the learners of English.

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