

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/362034102>

# The Systematic Errors of English L2 among Luhya L1 Learners in the Course of English Article System Acquisition

Article · July 2022

CITATIONS

0

READS

76

4 authors, including:



[Carolyne Omulando](#)

Alupe University College

24 PUBLICATIONS 18 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



[Prof Peter Barasa](#)

Moi University

18 PUBLICATIONS 18 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

## Research Article

## The Systematic Errors of English L2 among Luhya L1 Learners in the Course of English Article System Acquisition

Mary Khejeri<sup>\*1</sup>, Prof. Carolyne Omulando<sup>2</sup> and Prof. Peter Barasa<sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup>Mount Kenya University, School of Education P.O. Box 2591-30100 Eldoret, Kenya<sup>2</sup>Alupe University College .School of Education and Social Sciences P.O Box 845- 50400, Busia, Kenya<sup>3</sup>Alupe University College, P.O Box 845- 50400

\*Corresponding Author

Mary Khejeri

## Article History

Received: 30.03.2022

Accepted: 05.04.2022

Published: 10.04.2022

## Citations:

Mary Khejeri, Carolyne Omulando & Peter Barasa. (2022); The Systematic Errors of English L2 among Luhya L1 Learners in the Course of English Article System Acquisition. *Hmlyan Jr Edu Lte*, 3(2) 29-40

**Copyright** @ 2022: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution license which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non commercial use (NonCommercial, or CC-BY-NC) provided the original author and source are credited.

DOI: 10.47310/Hjel.2022.v03i02.004

**Abstract:** This paper is a product of a study that was carried out examining the errors learners make when learning the English article system in secondary schools, conducted in Vihiga County, Western Kenya. The need to carry out the study arose from two main interests: one, the growing concern by various researchers that the English article is one of the elements of grammar that causes difficulties for the learners of English as a second language (SL) resulting on wrong uses by learners; and two, the fact that performance in English as a subject in national examinations has been dismal as reflected in Vihiga County results. The study was guided by fluctuation hypothesis and full transfer /full access hypothesis. 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 story-telling task. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The study revealed various types of errors. Thus, it is recommended that teachers adopt an eclectic approach in teaching the English article system. Theoretically, the study contributes to the advancement of knowledge about the learning of the English article system.

**Keywords:** English Article, systematic errors, second language, second language learning.

## 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 a key 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 (as cited in Master, 2002) 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, misuse of the article system is an indicator that learners have a shaky command of language. However, it has been documented that acquisition of the English article system poses problems to learners and in most cases English L2 learners (Master 2002, Ekiert 2004). This has been linked to learners' L1 ((Yamada & Matsuura, 1982). In cases where the linguistic structures of L1 differ from those of L2 then negative language transfer is experienced. In addition generalization of rules may occur leading to poor learning of grammar structures and consequently its use by learners. Therefore this study sought to determine the type of errors learners make in the course of learning the English article system.

Students in Vihiga county of Western Kenya have Luhya language as their first language; a language which lacks an article system. According to Trifonovitch, (as cited in Moraa, 2012), a student is automatically placed at a disadvantage when he/she already has a language of his/her own and he/she is asked to learn another language. After all as already pointed out, studies of adult second language learners have revealed that second language learners whose first language lacks articles, experience difficulties in acquiring the English articles as they tend to over-generalize articles in both definite and indefinite contexts and to omit articles in cases where they are required as a result of first language transfer. Apart from this, first language learners in Vihiga County may also be experiencing problems related to the difficulty of the article system itself.

Problems with the article system could impact negatively on learners' performance in English in national examinations since articles are some of the function words that occur most frequently in English . Performance in English in national examinations in Vihiga county has remained below average since 2016 with an average mean score of 5.0 against the country's mean score of 6.0 (MOE Vihiga county analysis of KCSE results 2016 – 2020). Poor mastery of the language means inability to access the benefits accruing from good mastery of the English language. Consequently, the central role of English for its utilitarian value renders it an important subject and cannot be overlooked in the educational field.

Given this scenario, this study set out to investigate the errors secondary school learners make in the course of learning the English article system.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is said that the acquisition of the article system ranks among the most challenging areas of grammar for learners learning English as a second language and is even more challenging for learners whose first language is article-less (-ART) than for those whose first language has articles (+ ART) (Ganzho Sun, 2016; Kwame, 2018). The first language of majority of learners in Vihiga, which is Luhya, has no articles. Therefore, this is likely to present challenges in the process of learning English. Articles appear in many areas of discourse practices; they are some of the function words that occur most frequently in English as revealed by corpus data Sinclair (as cited in Master, 2002) as such they have a significant effect on the effective use of language both written and spoken. According to Miller (2004), 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.

In this regard, the analysis of KCSE results of Vihiga County in English from 2016 to 2020 reveal a mean score below the country's mean score of 6.0 as follows: 5.385 (2016); 3.9965 (2018); 4.6208 (2019) (Ministry of Education Vihiga County analysis of KCSE results 2016 – 2019). Thus the overall performance for Vihiga county in the last five years remains dismal over the years.. In the perspective of this study, this could partly be attributed to the poor mastery of the English language grammar and specifically article system. This worrisome trend called for an investigation.

More importantly because English language plays a crucial role as a medium of instruction across curriculum in schools in Kenya, it implies that 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 placement in jobs.

Furthermore an analysis of the English language syllabus for secondary schools in Kenya reveals that articles are treated as a grammatical item under nouns and only appear as a topic in year two (KIE, 2006). This raises concern for the present study, because although they are a well-known area of challenge for learners of English as a second language, and they are actually regarded as hard grammar (Liu & Gleason, 2002), they are obviously not being given the attention they deserve. Hence the study wished to create an understanding of how learners of English as a second language negotiate the learning of the English article system; the kinds of hypotheses they come up with regarding the rules governing the article system; how they handle the learning of articles given that their L1 is article-less. Based on the foregoing information, this study therefore sought to investigate the errors learners make in the course of learning the English article system influence of Luhya first language among the secondary school learners in Vihiga County.

### **Study Objective**

Based on the problem stated, the objective of this study was to describe the systematic errors of English L2 among Luhya L1 learners in the course of learning the English article system.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Unlike the acquisition of English article by L1 learners, the English article system has been described as one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for English L2 learners and among the last features of grammar to be acquired (Master 1987) .Therefore owing to the complexity of the system, learner errors during the acquisition of the system have been a subject

of study and discussion among researchers in the recent past. In the following section some of the literature on the subject is reviewed.

Among the outstanding studies on article acquisition by L2 learners are the studies which were guided by the fluctuation hypothesis advanced by Ionin (2003) and Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004). These include the studies of Atay (2011) Kimambo (2016) and Kwame (2018).

Thus in the literature on article acquisition according to fluctuation hypothesis, L2 English learners whose L1s have articles are assumed to transfer the article semantics of their language onto the L2 inter-language grammar, while those without articles fluctuate between definiteness and specificity when using articles in English (Ionin, Ko and Wexler, 2003, 2004). Accordingly, Ionin, Ko and Wexler carried out a study on Korean and Russian L1 speakers and found that both the L1 Korean and L1 Russian L2 English learners fluctuated between the definiteness and specificity settings of the ACP consistent with the FH predictions.

Therefore according to Ionin et.al the errors L2 learners make should come in two types; overuse of 'a' in -specific + definite contexts and overuse of 'the' in +specific -definite contexts.

Atay (2010) investigated whether Turkish L2 learners fluctuated in their article use. Her study supported the fluctuation hypothesis. The study showed that learners indeed fluctuated in their use of articles between 'the' and 'a'/'an' and that intermediate learners had higher levels of fluctuation compared to elementary level learners. This finding concurred with the finding of Butler (2002); Lu & Fen, (2000) where the intermediate level learners were reported to have registered higher levels of fluctuation than the elementary learners. The study revealed three types of errors: substitution omission and overuse.

Based on Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis, (Prevost & White, 2000), several scholars investigated article acquisition. The MSIH addresses the problem of article omission. According to the hypothesis, a break in connection between the underlying structure in the learners' L1 and the surface morphological realization of the target language might be the cause of the omission of articles for (- ART ) L2 learners. The scholars who based their studies on this hypothesis include among others : Trenkic (2007), Sarko (2009) and Lardiere (2005).

Trenkic (2007) sought to investigate the claim that learners whose L1 lacks an article system tend to make omission errors in environments where NPs are modified by adjectives. The study focused on Serbian learners whose L1 is article-less. The results of this

study revealed that learners indeed omitted articles in contexts where NPs were modified by adjectives. The results of this study were in line with the findings of Goad and White (2004) who reported a higher frequency of omission errors in contexts where nouns were modified by adjectives.

Lardiere (2005) is also one of the researchers who were concerned about the errors learners make in the course of learning the English article system. She rejected the argument advanced by Fluctuation Hypothesis. Lardiere (2005) set out to investigate how article-less (-ART) L2 learners acquire definiteness in English. Lardiere's findings revealed that omission errors were frequent.

Sarko, (2009) conducted a study on acquisition of English articles by L1 Syrian Arabic speakers and L1 French speakers of English. The purpose of his study was to investigate the role of Fluctuation Hypothesis, Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH) and Full Transfer / Full Access Hypothesis on Syrian Arabic and French L2 learners. The researcher predicted that L1 Syrian Arabic and L1 French learners of L2 English would transfer the markings of definiteness from Arabic/French into their inter-language grammars for English and therefore they would not fluctuate in definite and specificity contexts. Since French has the indefinite article and Arabic does not have, the researcher also predicted that the two L1 Syrian Arabic and L1 French learners would behave differently in [-definite,/+ specific] contexts. In addition Sarko predicted that since French unlike Arabic does not allow bare NPs, French learners would overuse articles in English. The researcher also predicted that based on MSIH hypothesis learners would omit articles in oral productions. The results of this study revealed that in definite contexts (both specific and non-specific), both groups of learners did not fluctuate. The researcher attributed this to L1 transfer since both the groups have definite article in their L1. The findings therefore supported Full Transfer/Full Access hypothesis. For indefinite contexts specific and non-specific, again the results were as predicted. French speakers had no problem and there was no evidence of fluctuation, but Syrian Arabic speakers fluctuated thus supporting fluctuation hypothesis.

Through the examination on L1 transfer in article acquisition Crompton (2011) found that the new article system produced by L2 learners showed resemblance with their L1 article system.

El Wefarlli (2013) conducted a research on the acquisition of the English article system by Libyan learners of English. Her study revealed three categories of errors made by Libyan students; omission, overuse, and substitution errors. She attributed some omission errors to the learners' Arabic L1.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND 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. 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.

### Findings Types of Errors

Once the errors were highlighted the researcher then revisited each story to identify the type of errors learners made. In the story-telling task the data collected was based on learners' own productions; that is, learners told a story based on picture prompts using their own language. As a result learners used language liberally without being conditioned to focus attention on article use. As was expected incorrect use of articles was evident in more variety of ways than it would have been in made up contexts.

The errors were compiled computed and classified. To ensure no article problem was overlooked, a thorough analysis of data was done to make certain of the inclusion of all article errors. The following errors were evident

Omission errors (underuse)

Unnecessary insertion errors (overuse)

Confusion errors (fluctuation)

They are explained as follows:

#### Omission errors

In omission context, a learner fails to use an article where it is required.

#### Unnecessary insertion errors (Overuse)

Unnecessary insertion means using articles in places where they are not required for example using the indefinite article before marked and unmarked plurals and before uncountable nouns.

#### Confusion errors (Substitution or fluctuation)

Confusion error means substituting a wrong article or another word such as a demonstrative, a possessive pronoun or a locative preposition for the right article. Table 1 captures the type of errors in the story telling task. The table reveals that confusion errors were the most frequent with the lower intermediate group having 120 (25%) and upper intermediate group at (100)20%. The next most frequent errors are omission errors with the lower intermediate group having 105 (20%) and the upper intermediate group 75 (15%). The least number of errors were the unnecessary insertion of articles. Both the groups make less of unnecessary insertion of article errors compared to the other type of errors with the lower intermediate group registering a higher percentage of 60(13%) than the upper intermediate group with 45 (9%).

**Table 1.** Summary of Systematic Errors of the Story-telling task by Type

GROUP	Total number of article Errors	Type of article Errors	Number of errors per type	Percentage of errors per type
Lower intermediate	270	Omission errors	105	20%
		Unnecessary insertion errors	45	9%
		Confusion errors	120	23%
Upper intermediate	242	Omission errors	75	15%
		Unnecessary insertion errors	67	13%
		Confusion errors	100	20%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>512</b>		<b>512</b>	<b>100%</b>

In the next section the details of the types of errors that learners made in the story telling task are captured.

#### Omission of Articles

From table 2 the findings reveal that the errors of omission were the second most common in both the groups of learners. However for the lower intermediate learners the omission of 'a' was more common at 8% compared to upper intermediate learners who had 6%. The omission of 'the' is highest for both the groups 11% for the lower intermediate group and 10% for the upper intermediate group and it is slightly higher for the lower intermediate learners.

Omission errors were the second most common in the story telling task. Table 4.2 reveals that the omission of the indefinite 'a' and 'an' was quite frequent for the lower intermediate group. This group had considerable problem with the indefinite 'a/an'. Omission of indefinite article 'a' occurred mostly in environments where uncountable nouns were used or before NPs that were pre-modified by adjectives. For instance "deep sleep", "good plan". The NPs 'sleep' and 'interest' are uncountable. But 'sleep', in this context is pre-modified by the adjective 'deep' and therefore can take the indefinite article 'a' and 'interest' can be countable and uncountable depending on the context. This variation in article use confuses the learners who have learnt that uncountable nouns often

are not preceded by indefinite articles ‘a’ and ‘an’. The chief cause of errors of omission of ‘a’/‘an’ in this context is complexity of the article system.

**Two types of errors of omission of articles were evident in the story telling task:**

- Omission of the definite article ‘the’
- Omission of the indefinite article ‘a’ ‘an’

**Table 2.** Category of Omission Errors

GROUP	number of omission Errors	Category			
		Omission of the indefinite ‘a’/an		Omission of ‘the’	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Lower intermediate	105	50	10%	55	11%
Upper intermediate	75	25	6%	50	10%

**Unnecessary Insertion of Articles**

There were two categories of unnecessary insertion errors: unnecessary insertion of ‘the’ and unnecessary insertion of ‘a’. This is captured in table 4.3 below:

From table 3 the upper intermediate group had the highest number of unnecessary insertion errors 67(13%) while the lower intermediate group had 45 (9%). This is contrary to the trend where the upper intermediate has all along outperformed the lower intermediate group. The upper intermediate group tended to use a lot of ‘the’ in constructions where it was uncalled for leading to overuse of ‘the’ but the lower intermediate group in most cases only overproduced ‘the’ without overusing it. Unnecessary insertion errors were the least in the story telling task. In other words learners did not

overuse articles much. Most errors of overuse were with the definite article ‘the’ for both groups although the lower intermediate group registered a lesser percentage. The causes of ‘the’ overuse were due to misapplication of the rules governing article use. The overuse of the indefinite ‘a, an’ in this context may have been due to the learners having a problem with the concept of uncountable nouns as can be seen in the two examples learners tend to think the abstract nouns, ‘‘permission’’ and ‘‘advice’’ are count nouns. The fact that unnecessary insertion errors are fewer compared to other categories of errors may also be attributed to learners’ L1 which lacks articles’. Overuse errors particularly of ‘the’ also surfaced in the studies of Atay, 2011; Fen & Lu, 2000; Crompton, 2011; Buttler, 2002).

**Table 3.** Category of Unnecessary Insertion Errors

Group	number of Errors	Category			
		Insertion of ‘a’/ an’		Insertion of ‘the’	
		Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Lower intermediate	45	17	4%	28	6%
Upper intermediate	67	27	5%	40	8%

**Confusion Errors (substitution/fluctuation)**

Confusion errors occur when a learner uses a wrong article or another word such as a demonstrative pronoun, a locative preposition or a possessive pronoun instead of the correct article. As already established confusion errors were the most frequent errors made by both groups of learners in this task. Confusion errors were of four types:

- Use of the indefinite ‘a’/ ‘an’ instead of the definite ‘the’
- Use of the definite ‘the’ instead of the indefinite ‘a’/‘an’
- Use of demonstrative pronouns, and locative prepositions instead of the definite ‘the’
- Use of possessive pronouns instead of the indefinite ‘a’

**The information is captured in table 4.**

From table 4 the following facts emerge: both the upper and lower groups fluctuate in their use of all the articles. There is little difference in the number of confusion errors made by the two groups. The lower upper intermediate has 120 (23%) of confusion errors while the upper intermediate group has 100 (20%). Table 4.12 also reveals that a higher percentage of learners use ‘the’ instead of ‘a’/‘an’ 50 (10%) for lower intermediate group and 41 (8%) for upper intermediate group. There is also use of demonstratives and locative prepositions instead of ‘the’ at 40 (8%) for lower intermediate group and 34 (7%) for the upper intermediate group. In the following section are excerpts taken from the data illustrating the way learners’ confused use of articles in various contexts.

**Table 4.**Category of Confusion Errors

Group	number of confusion Errors	Category of Errors					
Lower intermediate	120	Substitution of 'a'/'an' for 'the'		Substitution of 'the' for 'a' 'an'		Substitution of demonstratives/possessives, locative prepositions for 'the'	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
		30	6%	50	10%	40	8%
Upper intermediate	105	30	5%	41	8%	34	7%

The multiple choice task also revealed a number of errors. The errors were grouped based on the type and per group in order to ascertain the percentages of errors made by each group and the type of errors made. This helped to establish the most frequent errors and the least frequent errors. The categories of errors and their frequencies are displayed based on the group in Table 5

Table 5. reveals a detailed categorization of the errors; the frequency and percentages of these errors per group. From table 5 it can be observed that the lower

intermediate group had a higher number of article errors, 130 (58%) compared to the upper intermediate group which had 95 (42%). It can also be observed that the lower intermediate group had higher percentages of confusion errors at 70 (31%) and unnecessary insertion errors at 30 (13%) compared to the upper intermediate group which had 35 (16%) confusion errors and 35 (16%) of unnecessary insertion errors. However, with omission errors, the upper intermediate group had a higher number of this type of errors at 35 (16%) compared to the lower intermediate group at 30 (13%).

**Table 5.** Summary of Article Errors of the Multiple Choice Tasks by Type and Group

Group	Total number of errors	Types of article errors	Frequency of errors per type	Percentage of errors per type.
Lower intermediate	130	Omission errors	35	13%
		Confusion errors	65	31%
		Unnecessary insertions	30	13%
Upper intermediate	95	Omission errors	35	16%
		Confusion errors	35	16%
		Unnecessary insertions	25	11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>225</b>		<b>225</b>	<b>100%</b>

The composition task also revealed the same types of errors although in different proportions. Table .6 summarizes the errors that were evident in the composition task. From table 6 the following facts emerge; all the three types of errors were common but as can be observed, unnecessary insertion of article errors was the most frequent in this task however they were more frequent in the lower intermediate group at the rate of 22% than in the upper intermediate group at the rate of 15%. Omission and confusion errors occurred in similar proportions 32% for each type. However the proportions in which they occurred differed according to the level of the learners. Omission

errors were higher among the lower intermediate group at 18% and lower for the upper intermediate group at 14%. Confusion errors were also higher in the lower intermediate group at 21% compared to the upper intermediate group at 11%. Unnecessary insertion errors were more common in contexts where learners used the article 'the' where no article was required. Confusion errors were as a result of substitution of 'the' for 'a'/'an' and 'a'/'an' for 'the'. There were also cases of use of demonstratives, possessives and locative prepositions instead of 'the'. This was most frequent in context I and II(+ definite +specific) where use of 'the' was required.

**Table 6.** Types of Systematic Errors of the Composition Task

Group	Total number of article errors	Percentage	Types of article errors	frequency	Percentage
Lower intermediate	233	61%	Unnecessary insertion	83	22%
			Omission	70	18%
			Confusion	80	21%
Upper intermediate	152	39%	Unnecessary insertion	58	15%
			Omission	52	14%
			Confusion	42	11%
	385	100%			

**Table 7.** Summary of the Type of Errors

Group	Error type	Task							
		Multiple choice Task		Story-telling task		Composition Task		Total number of errors by type and group	
	<b>Total number of errors by task</b>	225		512		385			
		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Lower Intermediate	Omission Errors	30	3%	105	9%	70	6%	205	18%
	Unnecessary insertion errors	30	3%	45	4%	80	5%	155	14%
	Confusion errors	70	6%	120	10%	69	9%	259	23%
Upper intermediate	Omission Errors	35	3%	75	6%	52	5%	162	15%
	Unnecessary insertion errors	25	2%	67	6%	58	3%	150	13%
	Confusion errors	35	3%	100	9%	56	6%	191	17%
								1122	100%

From Table 8 the following facts emerge: The highest number of errors are confusion errors at 450

(40%) followed by omission errors at 367 (33%) and lastly unnecessary insertion errors at 305 (27%).

**Table 8.** Error Arrangement from the Most to the Least Frequent by Type

Lower Intermediate	Upper Intermediate		Total	
Confusion errors	273	23%	177	16%
Omission Errors	205	18%	162	14%
Un-necessary Insertion of articles	158	14%	150	13%
			450	40%
			367	33%
			308	27%

**Table 9.** Summary of Article Errors by Type

Error type	Multiple Choice Task				Story-Telling Task				Composition Task				Total Freq	%
	Group Lower intermediate		Upper intermediate		Group Lower intermediate		Upper intermediate		Group Lower intermediate		Upper intermediate			
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
Omission of 'a'	10	1%	5	0.5%	30	3%	12	1%	20	2%	10	1%		
Omission of 'an'	5	0.5%	5	0.5%	20	2%	13	1%	20	2%	10	1%		
Omission of 'the'	20	2%	25	2%	55	5%	50	5%	30	3%	32	3%		
Unnecessary insertion of 'a'	0	0%	0	0%	14	1%	12	1%	20	2%	16	1%		
Unnecessary insertion of 'an'	10	1%	10	1%	3	0.3%	15	1%	0	0%	0	0%		
Unnecessary insertion of 'the'	20	2%	15	1%	28	3%	40	4%	63	6%	42	4%		
Substitution of 'a' for 'the'	25	2%	10	1%	20	2%	20	2%	13	1%	6	0.5%		
Substitution of 'an' for 'the'	10	1%	5	0.5%	10	1%	10	1%	7	0.6%	6	0.5%		
Substitution of 'the' for 'a'	10	1%	10	1%	30	3%	20	2%	7	0.6%	5	0.5%		
Substitution of 'the' for 'an'	15	1%	10	1%	20	2%	16	1%	11	1%	6	0.5%		
Substitution of 'a' for 'an'	5	0.5%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	5	0.5%	0	0%		
Substitution of 'an' for 'a'	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%		



Substitution of demonstratives and possessives for 'the'	-	-	-	-	30	3%	25	2%	20	2	14	1%
Substitution of locative prepositions for 'the'	-	-	-	-	10	1%	9	1%	6	0.5%	5	0.5%

The findings from table 10 reveal that for these learners the most frequent article error is the omission of the definite article 'the' and the least frequent article

error is the unnecessary insertion of 'an'. The second frequent article error is overuse of 'the'.

**Table 10.** Error arrangement from most common to least common

	Frequency	Percentage
Omission of the definite 'the'	212	19%
Overuse of the definite 'the'	208	18%
Substitution of demonstratives pronouns for 'the'	94	10%
Substitution of 'a' for 'the'	91	8%
Omission of 'a'	87	8%
Substitution of 'the' for 'a'	82	7%
Substitution of 'the' for 'an'	78	7%
Omission of 'an'	73	7%
Unnecessary insertion (Overuse) of 'a'	62	6%
Substitution of 'an' for 'the'	48	4%
Unnecessary insertion of 'an'	38	3%
Misuse of locative prepositions	30	3%
Substitution of possessives pronouns for 'a'	19	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1122</b>	<b>100%</b>

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The objective of this study was to investigate the systematic errors among Luhya L1 learners in the course of English article system acquisition. This study yielded quite important findings related to the acquisition of English Article System by Luhya L1 learners. First of all, in this study the use of articles by learners from two different proficiency levels were examined and effects of definiteness and specificity to their article choice were investigated guided by FH. In addition use of articles was examined in other areas guided by Full Transfer/Full Access hypothesis.

According to fluctuation hypothesis it is predicted that L2 English errors should come in two types: overuse of 'the' with specific indefinites and overuse of 'a' with non-specific definites. These predictions were to a large extent confirmed by the findings in this study. However errors of article misuse were also evident in other contexts which could not be explained by fluctuation hypothesis. Arguing that all errors cannot be sufficiently accounted for by the fluctuation hypothesis alone, Zdorenko and Paradis, (2006) posit that the FH was formulated to account for article misuse not omission. Based on this argument, this study also incorporated the Full Transfer/Full Access (FT/FA) hypothesis (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996) to help account for other types of acquisitions patterns outside the realm of the FH such as omissions. Consequently the following types of systematic errors emerged in the data: Confusion errors (overuse, substitution), omission errors and unnecessary insertion of articles.

## Confusion Errors

Evidence from the study reveal that the highest number of errors were confusion errors; they account followed by omission errors. The least number of errors were unnecessary insertion of articles.

The findings of this study reveal that most of confusion errors involved fluctuation between the definite and indefinite articles. The rate of substitution was high across the board. Confusion errors involving fluctuation between definite and indefinite articles lead to overuse. Cases of confusion errors were predominant in [+definite – specific] contexts and [– definite +specific] contexts. In these contexts the definite 'the' and the indefinite 'a' were substituted for each other as learners were confused as to which article should be used in (+definite-specific) contexts and (–definite +specific) contexts leading to overuse of 'the' or 'a'. Other studies with similar findings include Ekiert, 2004; Ionin & Wexler 2003; Atay, 2010; Snape 2005; El Wefwarlli 2013). In these studies overuse of articles tended to arise from learners inability to use articles appropriately in (+definite – specific) and (– definite + specific) contexts. Atay (2011) in her findings points out that cases of overuse are predominant in [+definite – specific] contexts and [– definite +specific] contexts. In these contexts the definite 'the' and the indefinite 'a' are substituted for each other. This finding however differs from the findings of Kimambo (2016) who reported that the rates of fluctuation for L1 Swahili – speaking learners varied according to their levels of English proficiency. In his study the elementary group

fluctuated between definiteness and specificity but the intermediate group did not fluctuate as they used the English article system in line with the definite setting of the ACP.

Apart from fluctuation cases where learners fluctuated between the definite and indefinite articles, the study revealed substitution of articles with demonstrative pronouns, possessive pronouns and locative prepositions. In the story-telling and composition tasks, learners were not limited in their choices of articles in specific contexts nor were they conditioned to use articles as they were in the multiple choice task as a result certain patterns of article misuse not evident in the multiple choice task emerged. Learners tended to use demonstrative and possessive pronouns, and locative prepositions in their writings to express specificity rather than use articles. Consequently demonstrative pronouns, and locative prepositions were used inappropriately in contexts where 'the' was required and possessive pronouns were used inappropriately where 'a' was required. This was evident in context I [+ definite + specific] and II [+ definite + specific] and (-definite +specific) Substitution of demonstratives, possessives and locative prepositions was as a result of Luhya L1 influence. In Luhya language demonstratives and locative prepositions are used to mark specificity and definiteness. This partly explains why in this study we have a much higher number of confusion errors as compared to the rest of the errors. This also demonstrates that the learners' L1 semantic notions play a role in the process of article acquisition though not a positive role for Luhya L1 learners. According to Full Access /Full Transfer hypothesis, in L2 acquisition the learner uses his L1 as a starting point, consequently he transfers all the L1 grammar on to L2 initially (full transfer) In addition learners have full access to even those properties of UG which are absent in their L1 grammar ("full access") (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1994, 1996). Use of demonstratives and possessive pronouns was employed by learners in the studies of Trenkic (2007) and Lardiere (2001) to realize definite referents. However in Lardiere's study demonstratives and possessive pronouns had a positive effect; Lardiere argued that her subject Patty was accurate with the definite article 'the' as a result of influence from her first language in which demonstratives are used to realize specificity. It may be possible that use of demonstratives and possessive pronouns has a positive effect in the learners' accurate use of the definite 'the' but this study has not established this. Results related to substitution errors are in line with previous studies (El Wefarlli, 2013; Atay, 2010; Butler, 2002; Ekiert, 2007; Crompton, 2011 ) The findings of the study of white (2003) are contrary to these studies as they revealed that 'the' and 'a' were not used interchangeably rather they were omitted in some contexts.

### Omission errors

The results of the study show that the second highest frequent errors in the study were omission errors. The findings reveal that learners omitted articles in contexts where they were required at considerably high percentages. It is also noted from the data that omission of 'the' ranked the most frequent error. It was evident in contexts of cultural use, in contexts where NPs had been mentioned in an earlier discourse and the NPs were plural countable nouns and non-count nouns. In other words omission of 'the' was most frequent in non-generic contexts. Omission of 'a' ranked second to omission of 'the'. Omission of 'a' was most frequent in environments where the NPs were pre-modified or were abstract nouns where the notion of countability was quite confusing to learners. The indefinite 'an' was the least omitted error. Perhaps one could attribute this to its infrequent occurrence. It was also omitted in environments where NPs were pre-modified. The findings also reveal that the lower intermediate group also had a higher percentage of omission errors compared the upper intermediate group.

The findings of various studies have reported omission errors. Among these studies include studies that were guided by the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH). Researchers who based their studies on this hypothesis were interested in finding out the reasons for omission of articles by L2 learners of English among other things. Some of these researchers were: (Trenkic, 2009; Sarko, 2009; Lardiere 2005; Crompton, 2011). Trenkic in his study reported that omission errors were evident where NPs were modified by adjectives and further noted a higher rate of omission errors among the lower proficiency group. The findings of this study concurs with Trenkic's finding. However although in the current study, there was evidence of omission of articles in contexts where NPs were pre-modified by adjectives there is no evidence that this was because the learners were analyzing adjectives as articles as was the case in Trenkic's study of Serbian learners for the obvious reason that in the learners' Luhya L1 adjectives occupy post-nominal position unlike Serbian language where adjectives occur pre -nominally. Therefore omission of articles before adjectivally modified NPs could be attributed to the notion of bare nouns in their L1. Kimambo's study (2016) however showed omission errors were not occasioned by nouns which were pre -modified by adjectives. He attributed this to learners' Swahili L1 in which adjectival modification occurs in post-nominal position. But he also cautioned that Swahili learners of English L2 tend to avoid using articles with pre-modified nouns. The learners in this study have had an earlier exposure to English compared to their Tanzanian counterparts in Kimambo's study therefore they could be trying to use language ambitiously; take a learner who wrote *I did household chores in organized manner* and *On Christmas day I was woken up by bubbling stream nearby..* The Syrian

Arabic group in Sarko's study made lots of omission errors. According to Sarko, they transferred the bare form of NPs for indefiniteness leading to omission errors. In the current study, some of the omission errors were also occasioned by the fact that in the learners' Luhya L1, the NPs are mostly bare. In some of their utterances one could discern direct translation of a bare NP. Lardiere (2005) in her study of her only subject Patty's use of articles also reported omission errors and noted that they resulted from her transfer of Mandarin an (-ART language) which was the L1 of her subject on to English. Paradis' findings are also in line with the findings of the current study since he reported that omission errors were most commonly produced by learners whose L1 lacked articles. Parish and Thomas (1989) reported overgeneralization of 'ø' in contexts where 'a' and 'the' were required and in their studies, this was more frequent in [-ART] group than in [+ART] group. Thomas (1989) therefore attributed the omission of 'a' and 'the' to interference of learners' L1. Master (1987) reported similar findings and agrees with Thomas that overgeneralization of 'ø' is largely due to transfer of learners' L1 on to the target language. Atay, (2011) in her study of Turkey learners whose Turkey L1 is article-less also reported frequency of omission errors and like this study the highest percentage of omission was in [+definite +specific] context. El Wefarlli, (2013) also reported omission errors but unlike the present study, her findings revealed a higher percentage of omission of indefinite articles and she attributed this to lack of indefinite articles in the Libyan learners' Arabic L1. This is interesting because Luhya L1 learners lack all articles including the indefinite articles yet for the Luhya learners the highest omission errors occurred with the omission of 'the'. Perhaps the explanation could be that Arabic which is the L1 of her subjects has the definite article therefore learners in her study were more comfortable with the definite 'the'

### Unnecessary Insertion Errors

The least frequent errors in all the three tasks are errors of unnecessary insertion errors.. Data analysis shows that learners inserted the definite 'the' and the indefinite 'a'/'an' where a zero article was required. Unnecessary insertion of article errors led to over production of some articles resulting in overuse. Since their L1 lacks articles, frequent use of articles may not be common in their output. However for the cases of unnecessary insertions, the article that was frequently fixed where it was not required was the definite 'the' leading to what could be described as overuse of 'the' and what Heubner (1983) and Master (1997) refer to as '*the flooding*'. From the data it is also observed that there were cases where learners inserted 'a'/'an' in contexts where a zero article was required. This was evident in all the three tasks. Insertion of 'a' and 'an' were however in lower proportions compared to insertion of 'the'

From the results it is observed that 'the' is the most overused in contexts where 'ø' is required. Unnecessary insertion of 'the' has been documented in many studies in literature: Heubner's study revealed 'the' overuse in the early stages of acquisition in all contexts.; El Wefarlli, (2013) observed frequency of 'the' in contexts where NPs were generic uncountable nouns followed by generic plural countable nouns. Ionin and Wexler (2003), reported overuse of 'the' in specific indefinite contexts. Other studies with similar findings include: Shalaby, 2014; Butler, 2000; Hawkins 2006; Fen & Lu, 2001; Kaku, 2006; Kim & Lakshmanan, 2009; Ionin *et al.*, 2003, 2004; Zdorenko & Paradis, 2007a, 2007b.

The overuse of 'the' in contexts where 'ø' is required is fairly intriguing in this particular study. The study anticipated that since learners lack articles in their L1 their use of 'ø' article would pose less problems but contrary to this expectation learners overused 'the' in contexts where 'ø' was required in considerable proportions. Based on the findings of the study of Heubner (1983) it is argued by some researchers that in the early stages of language learning, use of 'the' in [+SR+HK] contexts is an unmarked feature for an L2 learner and that after an L2 learner has successfully learned using 'the' in [+SR+HK] contexts, they tend to over-generalize the rule to all contexts (Heubner 1983; Master, 1997). This leads to 'the' overuse. Furthermore, learners are mostly exposed to the definite 'the' input as compared to other articles and this explains why they tend to overuse 'the'. In addition, in most text-books for secondary schools in Kenya, the definite 'the' is given more prominence than the 'ø' article. Learners may therefore over-generalize the use of the definite and use it incorrectly in contexts where it is not required. From the responses of 16 of the teachers who participated in this study it was apparent that they concentrated on the definite 'the' and the indefinite 'a'/'an' and paid little attention to the zero and null articles. Most of them did not even seem to understand the concept of the 'zero article' and so did their students. Lakshmanan, (2009) posits that the selection of specificity setting for the definite article could also be a result of the input. Atay, (2010) argues that due to the frequency bias in the input, L2 learners of English associate the definite article with specificity.

The results also revealed that the number of errors vary in relation to the level of proficiency it implies that the lower the level of learners the higher the number of errors and the higher the learners advance the less the number of errors.

In this study learners told a story by looking at picture prompts. This was therefore an oral performance and it was poor. This could be attributed to the fact that oral skills are generally given less prominence compared to writing and other skills in language pedagogy. The spoken language often exhibits linguistic characteristics which are informal rather than

academic. Therefore, learners' spoken corpora were characterized by typical spoken English; full of pauses and repetitions, full of fillers and fragmented sentences. This notwithstanding has implications for language teachers. The implication for language teachers is that they should revisit their treatment of oral skills and try to use a variety of approaches in teaching the oral skills to find out which ones work better for them. More importantly they should re-examine the time they devote to writing skills and oral skills and try to balance so that writing skills are not emphasized at the expense of oral skills.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the errors Luhya L1 learners make during the acquisition of the English article system. The study concludes that Luhya L1 learners make systematic errors in the course of learning the English article system.

## Recommendations

- a) Teachers should use an eclectic strategy and method in teaching articles. This will help them employ both communicative language teaching activities which will be meaning-based and at the same time employ a rule-based approach which will help learners to improve their ability to use articles more accurately.
- b) Teachers should ensure that learners receive comprehensible input through classroom activities such as role play, debates and language games, extra-linguistic information and library lessons etc. This will expose learners to more of the target language than their L1.

## REFERENCES

1. Anusu, M., Barasa, P.L., & Omulando, C.A. (2014). Challenges Teachers Face in the Use of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach in the Teaching Listening and Speaking Lessons in Lugari District, Kenya. *International Journal of Science and Research* 3, Issue 9, September 2014.
2. Atay, Z. (2010). *Second Language Acquisition of the English Article System by Turkish Learners: The Role of Semantic Notions*. (Master's Thesis, Middle East Technical University.)
3. Butler, Y.G. (2002). *Second Language Learners' Theories on the Use of English Articles: An Analysis of the Metalinguistic Knowledge Used by Japanese Students in Acquiring the English Article System*. University of Pennsylvania: GSE Publication. Retrieved from [https://repository.upenn.edu/gse\\_pubs](https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs).
4. Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen Freeman, D. (1999). *The Grammar Book*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
5. Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen Freeman, D. (1983). *The Grammar Book: an ESL/EFL Teachers' Course*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle
6. Crompton, P. (2011). Article Errors in English Writing of Advanced L1 Arabic Learners: The Role of Transfer, *efl Journal*, 13 (1)4-34.
7. De Villers & de Villers. (1973). A cross sectional Study of the Acquisition of Grammatical Morphemes in Child Speech. *Journal of Psycholinguistics Research* 2(3) 267-278.
8. De Villers, J.G., & de Villers, P.A. (1978). *Language Acquisition* Harvard University press.
9. DeKayser, M.R. (2005). What makes Learning Second Language Grammar Difficult? A Review of Issues. *Language Learning*, 55 ( 1), 1- 25.
10. Ekiert, M. (2004). *The Acquisition of the English Article System by Speakers of Polish in ESL and EFL Settings*. Teachers' College Columbia University *Working Papers in TESOL & Applied Linguistics* 4(1).
11. Ekiert, M. (2007). *The Acquisition of Grammatical Marking of Indefiniteness with the Indefinite Article a in English*. Teachers' College Columbia University *Working Papers in TESOL & Applied Linguistics*, 7, 1-43.
12. El Werfalli, I. (2013). *The Acquisition of the English Article System by Libyan Learners of English: A Comparison between Deductive Teaching and Textual Enhanced Input Strategies*. Doctoral Thesis, University of Northumbria. Retrieved from <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/21602>
13. Goad, H., & White, L. (2009). Prosodic transfer and the representation of determiners in Turkish-English interlanguage, in Snape, N., Leung, Y.I. & Sharwood-Smith, M. (eds.). *Representational deficits in SLA: Studies in honor of Roger Hawkins*. Amsterdam. 1-26.
14. Gunzhao, S. (2016). *The Acquisition of English Articles by second Language Learners: The sequence, Differences and Difficulties* Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244016635716>.
15. Hawkins, J.A. (1978). *Definiteness and Indefiniteness*. London: Croom Helm.
16. Hawkins, J.A. (2006). Accounting for English Article Interpretation by L2 Speakers. *EUROSLA Yearbook*, 6(1), 7-25. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
17. Huebner, T. (1985). *A longitudinal Analysis of the Acquisition of English*. Ann Arbor: Karoma
18. Huebner, T. (1985). System and Variability in Interlanguage Syntax. *Language Learning* .35, 141-63.
19. Ionin, T. (2003). *Article Semantics in Second Language Acquisition*. Doctoral dissertation, MIT
20. Ionin, T., & Wexler, K. (2003). The certain uses of the in L2-English. In J.M. Liceras et al., editors. *Proceedings of the 6th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference*. Cascadilla Press, 150-60.

21. Ionin, T., Ko, H., &Wexler, K. (2004). Article semantics in L2 acquisition: The role of
22. Ionin, T., Zubizarreta, M. I., & Maldonado, S.B. (2008). Sources of Linguistic Knowledge in the Second Language Acquisition of English Articles *Lingua* 118(4), 554-576
23. Kaku, K. (2006). Second Language Learners' Use English Articles; A Case Study of Native Speakers of Japanese. *Ottawa Papers in Linguistics* (34) 63-74
24. Kim, K., & Lakshmanan, U. (2009). The Processing Role of the Article Choice Parameter in Garcia-Mayo,M.P.& Hawkins R.(eds) Second Language Acquisition of Articles.:Empirical Findings and Theoretical Implications.Amsterdam:John Benjamin Publishing Company,87-113.
25. Kimambo, G.E. (2016). *The Acquisition of (In) definiteness in English as a Foreign Language by Tanzanian LI Swahili Secondary School Learners.*(Doctoral Dissertation, Stellescope University).Retrieved from Stellenbosch University <https://scholar.sun.ac.za>.
26. Ko, H., Perovic, A., Ionin T., & Wexler, K. (2008). Semantic Universals and Variation in L2 Article Choice.Retrieved from [http://ling.snu.ac.kr/ko/publications/Papers/Koetal\\_GASLA09\\_proceedingspdf](http://ling.snu.ac.kr/ko/publications/Papers/Koetal_GASLA09_proceedingspdf).
27. Lakshmanan, U. (2009). Child second language acquisition of syntax. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*,17, 229–301.
28. Lardiere, D. (2004).Knowledge of definiteness despite variable article omission. In Brugos A., Micciulla, L. and Smith, C.E., editors, *BUCLD 28 Proceedings*. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press, 328–39.
29. Master, P. (1987). A Cross-linguistic Interlanguage of the Analysis of the Acquisition of the English Article System. Unpublished doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
30. Master, P. (1997).The English Article System: Acquisition, *Function and pedagogy System*, 25,215-232.
31. Parrish, B. (1987). A New Look at Methodologies in the Study of Article Acquisition for Learners of ESL. *Language Learning* 37, 361–83.
32. Sarko, G. (2009). L2 English Article Production by Arabic and French Speakers. In Mayo, M.P.G, Hawkins, R (Ed.), *Second Language Acquisition of Articles: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Implications*,37-66. John Benjamin Publishing Amsterdam.
33. Schwartz, B., & Sprouse, R. (1996).L2 cognitive states and Full Transfer/Full Access model.*Second Language Research*,12, 40–72.
34. Shalaby, A. (2014).*English and Arabic Medium of Instruction and Second Language Acquisition of the English Article System by ESL Arab Sophomores in Sharjah.* (Masters Dissertation, The British University, Dubai.) Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/28404800/English\\_and\\_Arabic-Medium\\_of\\_instruction\\_and\\_Second\\_Language\\_Acquisition](https://www.academia.edu/28404800/English_and_Arabic-Medium_of_instruction_and_Second_Language_Acquisition)
35. Snape, N., Leung, I. K., &Ting, H.C. (2006). Comparing Chinese, Japanese and Spanish speakers in L2 English article acquisition: evidence against the fluctuation hypothesis? In Grantham O'Brien, M., Shea, C. and Archibald, J., editors, *Proceedings of the 8th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference (GASLA 2006)*. Somerville Specificity: *Language Acquisition*12, 3–69.Students. *The case of Burkina Faso*. Doctoral Dissertation University of Illinois. Retrieved from <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/handle/214/8017>
36. Thomas, M. (1989).The acquisition of English articles by first- and second language learners of English. *Applied Psycholinguistics*,10, 335–55.
37. Trenkic, D. (2008). The Representation of English Articles in Second Language Grammars: Determiners or Adjectives? *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 11 (1), 1-18.
38. Trenkic, D. (2009). Accounting for Patterns of Article Omission and Substitution in Second Language Production in Mayo, M.P.G, and Hawkins R. (Ed) *Second Language acquisition of Articles. Empirical Findings and Theoretical Implications* (115-143).John Benjamin Publishing Amsterdam.
39. White, L. (2000).“Second Language Acquisition from Initial to Final State” In Archibald. Editor, *Second Language Acquisition and Linguistic Theory. Oxford Blackwell Publishers*, 130 -154.
40. White, L. (2003a). Fossilization in steady state L2 grammars: Persistent problems with inflectional morphology. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 6(2), 129–141.
41. White, L. (2003b). Second Language Acquisition and universal Grammar. From initial to steady state. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
42. White, L.(2003). Second Language Acquisition: From Initial to Final State. Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/26296401/Lydia\\_white\\_second\\_language\\_Acquisition\\_and\\_Univ\\_BOOKFi](https://www.academia.edu/26296401/Lydia_white_second_language_Acquisition_and_Univ_BOOKFi) on 17/10/2019.
43. White, L. (2003). Second Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
44. Zdorenko, T., & Paradis, J. (2007).The Role of the First Language in Child Second Acquisition of Articles in Belikova, A. (Eds) *Proceedings of the Second Conference of Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition*,
45. Zdorenko, T., & Paradis, J. (2011). Articles in Child L2 English and L2 Acquisition meet at the Interface. *First Language* 32(1-2):38-62