Patterns of English Article Use by L1 Swahili-speaking Learners of EFL in Tanzania

Gerald Eliniongoze Kimambo*

Abstract

Using English articles correctly is noticeably difficult for non-native speakers of the language. Several competing perspectives attempt to address such difficulty. Whereas some perspectives hold that non-target-like performance on articles stems from learners accessing both the definiteness and specificity settings of the Article Choice Parameter, others hold that such performance stems from misanalysing English articles as adjectives. This debate necessitates further research. Accordingly, this paper sets out to determine which non-target-like aspects –between substitution and omission ones – L1 Swahili-speaking learners are producing more, whether their substitution of articles stems from accessing both definiteness and specificity settings, and whether their omission of articles results from misanalysing English articles as adjectives. Thirty-five learners of English participated in a picture description task. Results indicate that they substitute articles more frequently than omitting them. They also fluctuate between definiteness and specificity. The data do not provide evidence for misanalysing English articles as adjectives.

Key words*: English articles, substitution and omission, non-target-like, definiteness and specificity, L1 Swahili*

Introduction

The English article system is one of the most difficult aspects for non-native speakers of English. Although much research has been done on the acquisition of articles, many issues still need to be addressed. There have been several perspectives on the L2 acquisition of articles. For instance, some earlier studies were grounded in Bickerton's (1981) semantic model (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1987; Thomas, 1989). Findings show that both L1 and L2 learners of English overuse *the* in indefinite specific contexts; besides, their production is characterised by the omission of articles at the initial stages of acquisition. Later on, new perspectives emerged upon closer inspection of the data and findings of earlier studies (Ionin, et al., 2003, 2004; Trenkic, 2007; Tryzna, 2009) and led to debates on what exactly the source of L2 learners' non-target-like performance with respect to articles is and on what processes characterise L2 learners' use of articles.

---

*Lecturer, Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, P.O. Box 35040 Dar es Salaam, Email: kimambog@udsm.ac.tz

Some researchers argue that non-target-like performance in article usage by L2 learners is due to accessing more than one parameter setting simultaneously during the initial stages of interlanguage (IL) development. Specifically, learners with L1s which do not have articles learning L2 English are assumed to fluctuate between the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter (ACP) by associating the definite article with specificity and the indefinite article with non-specificity (Ionin, Ko and Wexler, 2004; Sarko, 2009; Tryzna, 2009). Definiteness and specificity are parametric settings available to all natural languages. Accordingly, some parallel relationship of definiteness and specificity exists between L1 Swahili and English. This relationship is illustrated later in describing the theoretical framework.

Other researchers hold that the omission of L2 inflectional morphemes does not imply that L2 learners have not acquired the correct abstract syntactic representation for the L2, but rather that the learners cannot map them to the correct overt morpho-syntactic representation (Lardière, 2005; Robertson, 2000; White, 2003). This phenomenon is referred to as the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH).

Besides, others argue that incorrect article usage results from a grammatical deficit. Some of these scholars hold that only features and categories that are in the learner's L1 will be accessible to them in L2 acquisition beyond the critical period. If the L1 and L2 are different, then, the learner will not be able to reset the parameter to its target L2 setting beyond the critical period (Hawkins and Chan, 1997; Hawkins, 2001). Another view associated with the Syntactic Misanalysis Account (SMA) is that L2 learners whose L1s do not have articles omit articles in the L2 because of incorrectly analysing them as adjectives (Trenkic, 2007, 2008). The following part describes the theoretical account guiding the present study.

Theoretical Framework

Article systems in the world's languages denote either definiteness or specificity. For instance, the English article system distinguishes what is definite from what is indefinite, whereas the Samoan article system distinguishes what is specific from what is non-specific (Hawkins, 2004; Lyons, 1999). From these observations, Ionin et al. (2004) proposed the ACP to account for errors of substitution among learners of L2s with articles.

The Article Choice Parameter

A language that has two articles distinguishes between them in one of the following ways:

i)   The definiteness setting: Articles are distinguished based on definiteness.

ii)   The specificity setting: Articles are distinguished based on specificity   (Ionin et al., 2004:12).

The following tables show clearly the two settings of the ACP.

Article Groupings Cross-linguistically

Table 1(a): By definiteness (e.g. English) Table 1(b): By specificity
(e.g. Samoan)

	+Definite	-Definite			+Definite	-Definite
+Specific	*The*	*a/an*		+Specific	*le*	
-Specific				-Specific	*se*	

(Ionin et al., 2004:13)

As presented in the tables above, on the one hand, Table 1(a) shows that the English article system distinguishes between what is definite and what is indefinite. This means such articles do not make (non-)specificity distinctions in English. On the other hand, Table 1(b) shows that the Samoan article system distinguishes between what is specific and what is non-specific. Likewise, such articles cannot make (in)definiteness distinctions in Samoan.

If one assumes that L2 learners access both settings of the ACP, as Ionin et al. (2004) do, then L2 learners are expected to fluctuate between the definiteness and specificity settings of the ACP while acquiring articles. Due to this, the FH was proposed.

The Fluctuation Hypothesis

a)   L2 learners have full access to UG principles and parameters.

b)   L2 learners fluctuate between different parameter settings until the input leads them to set the parameter to its appropriate value.   (Ionin et al., 2004:16)

This hypothesis stems from the assumption that learners have full access to the definiteness and specificity settings of the ACP. Learners with L1s without articles are expected to produce substitution errors in using articles. For example in English, when the learners access the specificity setting, they would use *the* in

indefinite specific [–def, +spec] contexts and *a(n)* in [+def, -spec] contexts; this means the FH was proposed under the assumption that L2 learners associate *the* with specificity and *a(n)* with non-specificity. Additionally, if they access the right setting, they would not fluctuate. They would, therefore, use *the* for definite referents and *a/an* for indefinite referents. The FH predicts that L2 learners' errors are systematic and that they reflect possible UG parameter settings. Therefore, the learners would fluctuate between definiteness and specificity during their initial stages of IL development until they get sufficient L2 input for them to switch the parameter to the required setting.

Pongpairoj (2007) and Trenkic (2008), however, noted that the material for testing the FH was routinely operationalised for specificity. Speakers in the test items revealed acquaintance with the referent rather than "the intent to refer" (Trenkic, 2008:3). Trenkic noted that Ionin et al. (2004) incorrectly conflated the intent to refer with information explicitly stated by the speakers. Consequently, Trenkic (2008) remarks that the findings of all the previous studies were highly affected by the way specificity was operationalised in their study (see also Jian (2013), for some findings supporting Trenkic (2008)). Besides, Trenkic suggested that Ionin et al. (2004) could use an oral production task to test their hypothesis for oral production, as well.

Furthermore, Tryzna (2009) re-examined the basic constructs of Ionin et al.'s (2004) ACP and presented evidence that it is problematic. The scholar re-examined the evidence used to propose the ACP, specifically that the *le* and *se* articles in Samoan encode specificity and non-specificity respectively. This means both can occur in both definite and indefinite contexts in Samoan. Tryzna's (2009) field study on Samoan articles revealed that, while the specific article *le* can occur in both definite and indefinite contexts, the non-specific article *se* is limited to indefinite contexts. Eventually, Tryzna (2009) proposed "a reduced ACP" because Ionin et al.'s (2004) ACP overgeneralises the scope *of se* while empirical data showed that it cannot occur in non-specific definite contexts. The scholar then proposed a reduced ACP whereby the FH should be examined when L2 learners use *the* interchangeably with *an* only in [-def, +spec] contexts as shown in the following table:

Table 2: The Fluctuation Hypothesis for Learners with [−ART]L1s (Ionin et al., 2004; Tryzna, 2009)

DP Type	Specificity Setting (e.g. Samoan)	Definiteness Setting (e.g. English)	L2-English FH	
Non-specific indefinite	*Se*	*a*	*A*	
Specific indefinite	*Le*		*a*	*The*
Definite		*The*	*The*	

Moreover, it is worth noting that the ACP does not account for article omission. Consequently, Trenkic (2007) offered a Syntactic Misanalysis Account (SMA). This account holds that, in languages without articles, (the semantic class of) determiners (e.g. articles) are treated as adjectives (Trenkic, 2007). Accordingly, learners with such L1s approach a [+ART] L2 without the category 'determiners' but with the category 'adjectives' in mind. Assuming that there is no access to UG in adult L2 acquisition, the SMA holds that such learners will not be able to acquire the new syntactic category 'determiner' (including articles). Therefore, they are expected to misanalyse articles as adjectives, by omitting articles before adjectives in the L2's noun phrase. The following part describes the realisation of definiteness and specificity in Swahili, the L1 of the respondents in this study.

Definiteness and Specificity in Swahili
The realization of definiteness and specificity in Swahili lies at the interface between morpho-syntactic and semantic-pragmatic domains. According to Lyons (1999), languages without articles rely on the context of interaction to realize definiteness and specificity. Besides, Swahili uses morphosyntactic elements such as subject markers, personal pronouns, and word order to realize definiteness and specificity, as exemplified below.

To begin with subject markers, the following example is illustrative:
(1) *Mwanafunzi mtiifu a*-li-amk-a mapema. *A*-li-wahi shuleni
Subject   SM-*past*-wake   up-FV   early.   SM-*past*-arrive
adverbial
'*An obedient student* woke up early. *He/she* arrived early at school.'

The SM *"a"* in the example above makes the anaphoric reference to *Mwanafunzi mtiifu* 'An obedient student', who has been mentioned

previously, hence definite. Note also the differences in the positions of adjectives between English and Swahili. That is, whereas the English adjective precedes the noun, the Swahili adjective follows the head noun.

Apart from subject markers, personal pronouns can also realise definiteness in Swahili as shown in the following example.

> (2) *Mvulana na msichana mdogo* wanasoma. *Wao* ni wadadisi
> '*A boy and a young girl* are studying. *They* are curious.'

In the example above, *Wao* 'They' refers to both the boy and the young girl mentioned previously. In line with the preceding example, the adjective in Swahili occurs post-nominally whereas in English it occurs pre-nominally. Other strategies the language uses to realize definiteness (and specificity) are demonstratives, proper nouns, and object markers (Dryer, 2005a, 2005b; Lyons, 1999; Ndomba, 2017 & Seidl and Dimitriadis, 1997). Ndomba (2017), for instance, provides specific pieces of evidence showing that the Swahili prenominal demonstrative functions akin to the definite article in English.

Syntactically, Swahili uses word order to realize definiteness. The canonical word order of Swahili is SVO. In (3) below, the object is indefinite; it is in its canonical position. When the object is topicalised, as in (4), it becomes definite (Vitale, 1981).

> (3) Mwanamke a-me-nunu-a gari zuri   (SVO)
>   woman   SM-prf-buy-FV car beautiful
>   'A/the woman has bought a beautiful car'

> (4) Gari zuri, a-me-li-nunu-a mwanamke   (OVS)
>   Car beautiful SM-prf-OM-buy   woman
>   'A/the woman has bought the beautiful car'

Considering the description above, two main differences between Swahili and English are noticed. First, Swahili does not have articles. It relies on morphosyntactic elements and the context of interaction to realise definiteness. Second, whereas adjectives in English occur in the pre-nominal position, adjectives in Swahili occur in the post-nominal position. Therefore, this paper seeks to find out whether L1 Swahili learners' use of articles reflects the Fluctuation Hypothesis or the Syntactic Misanalysis Account. More specifically, the paper seeks to determine which type of errors the learners produce more frequently, whether they fluctuate between the definiteness and specificity settings of the Article Choice Parameter

or whether they misanalyse English articles as adjectives. Accordingly, it addresses the following research questions:

1. Which type of errors, between substitution and omission ones, are learners producing more frequently?

2. Which parametric setting determines the choice of articles by the L1 Swahili-speaking learners of EFL?

3. What role does adjectival modification play in the omission of articles?

The Study
Participants
The study employed 35 L1 Swahili-speaking secondary school learners of English as a foreign language in Tanzania. These learners were recruited from three public secondary schools in the Dar es Salaam region.

Data Collection
To collect data, the researcher used three instruments: a language background questionnaire (LBQ), the Oxford Quick Placement Test (Syndicate U.C.L.E, 2001), and a picture description task (PDT). The PDT required the learners to communicate information depicted in a series of pictures (COST Action IS0804)[8] to a person who does not have access to them. Figure 1 exemplifies the task.
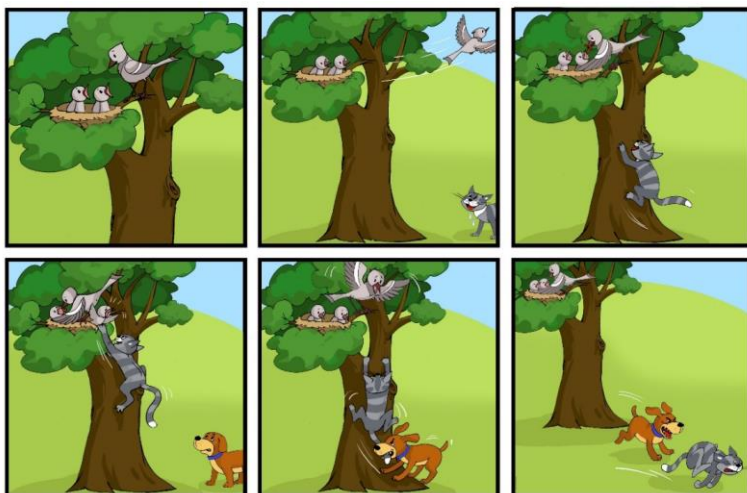

Figure 1: One of the sets of pictures used in the PDT

The researcher administered this task immediately after gaining useful insights into their levels of English proficiency. To prepare the task, the researcher followed the guidelines recommended in COST Action IS0804 (n.d.:59*ff*.). He inserted the pictures into three envelopes so that the learner would assume that the researcher does not know which story the learner has selected. By allowing both the participants and the researcher to look at the same referents, the participant would have used *the* in their first mention of referents. For instance, he/she would start with "The mouse" from the beginning because they know that the researcher has also seen it. Before asking the learners to describe the pictures, the researcher instructed them in Swahili –their L1.

Data Analysis
In data processing, the researcher recorded, transcribed and coded the first two of each learner's three descriptions. Therefore, there were 70 transcripts. He categorised the transcripts according to the learners' levels of proficiency. Thereafter, he removed articles from the transcripts and left only blank spaces before nouns.

In selecting the experimental items, the researcher excluded formulaic and idiomatic expressions since these are acquired as whole chunks of language. He also excluded co-occurrence errors (Chan, 2019:3) – learners' use of both a definite and an indefinite determiner together (such as *"the another child…"*).

After identifying the experimental items, the researcher took the transcripts to two English native speaker controls (as "editors") and asked them to add the required article in each blank space where this was appropriate. He gave each editor the 70 transcripts and provided them with the pictures for reference. To guarantee inter-editor reliability, the researcher compared their responses on the 70 transcripts to identify ambiguous/unambiguous referents and definite/indefinite referents. An unambiguous referent is one in which the two editors had the same response, whereas an ambiguous referent is one in which the editors had different responses, as instanced below.

(5) J2RZM: You know (ø) cat love fish.
     You know __the__ cat love fish. NS1
     You know __a__ cat love fish. NS2

  J4JMS: As we know, (ø) dog always like meat.

As we know, ___the__ dog always like meat.
NS1

As we know, ___a__ dog always like meat.
NS2

M4TMR: (ø) cat can survive by eating (ø) rat.

The cat can survive by eating __the__ rat.
NS1

The cat can survive by eating __a__ rat.
NS2

The referents in the three examples above are all acceptable in English since they are generic. In the generic context, both *the* and *a* are acceptable for singular entities. Besides, the zero article '*Ø*' is acceptable for plural/mass entities. Such ambiguous referents were excluded in identifying cases of the substitution of articles by the learners because the independent variables for testing the FH were the parametric variations of definiteness and specificity (cf. Bless and Higson-Smith, 1995:134). In contrast, the referents were included in identifying cases of the omission of articles since the independent variable was adjectival modification, but not definiteness and specificity.

The researcher then calculated inter-editor reliability to determine the extent to which the data collected effectively represent the variables of the study (McHugh, 2012). The total number of experimental items in the data was 1,969, and the editors agreed in terms of their response on 1,931 of these items. The editors thus only differed on 38 items, making the inter-editor reliability 98.1%.

In coding the data, the analysis focused on referring expressions. The researcher examined the use of *the, a/an* and *Ø 'the omission of articles'* in the first mention and previously mentioned contexts. The analysis considered all and only singular common nouns to have clear contexts where the learners might omit articles. Then, the data were analysed statistically using STATISTICA.

The task had two major contexts: definite and indefinite. Considering that specificity involves having a particular referent in mind (Fodor and Sag, 1982; Lyons, 1999), all the referents in the task were specific. Consequently, the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH) was examined in this task by looking at the use of *the* interchangeably with *a* only in the first mention/[–def, +spec] context. The researcher looked at the following determiner contexts: (i) *the* where *the* should

be, (ii) *the* where *a* should be, (iii) *a* where *a* should be, (iv) and *a* where *the* should be (see Zdorenko and Paradis (2008), for a similar analysis). Then, he compared their overall percentage scores on the correct use, incorrect substitution and incorrect omission of articles. In the case of their omission of articles, he compared their percentage of omission in adjectivally modified noun [ART+ADJ+N] contexts with their percentage of omission in non-adjectivally modified noun [ART+N] contexts (cf. Trenkic, 2007). The following part presents the learners' PDT data and discusses the results of their analysis.

Results

Substitution and Omission of English Articles

Recall that the picture description task required each participant to describe series of pictures to the experimenter, who could not see them. The researcher recorded these descriptions and transcribed them. Thereafter, he identified all instances of the experimental items for this study in each of the descriptions. As explained above, coding focused on the use of *the*, *a(n)* and ø '*the omission of articles*' before singular common nouns.

As pointed out previously, 1,931 instances relevant to definite and indefinite contexts were produced in the 70 transcripts. Among them, 1,574 instances (81.5%) were definite and 357 instances (18.5%) were indefinite. In the 1,574 definite instances, 1,207 (76.7%) were correctly supplied with *the,* 251 (15.9%) were incorrectly substituted with *a(n)* and 116 (7.4%) were incorrectly omitted. As for the 357 indefinite instances, 155 (43.4%) were correctly supplied with *a(n),* 137 (38.4%) were incorrectly substituted with *the* and 65 (18.2%) were omitted. The smallest number of article-instances found in one transcript was 12 and the largest number of article instances found was 53. On average, each transcript contained approximately 28 article-instances.

To determine the learners' accuracy in article use, the researcher first calculated their percentage scores for the correct use, incorrect substitution and incorrect omission of the definite and indefinite articles taken together. He wanted to see whether the learners would more often incorrectly substitute articles than incorrectly omit them.

Table 4: Overall Article Use by the Learners

Group	N	Category	Percentage
Learners	35	Correct use	70.5%
		Incorrect substitution	20.1%
		Incorrect omission	9.4%

As the table above indicates, the 35 learners' overall performance on articles in the PDT shows that they had not yet mastered the English article system, since their performance had not reached the level of 90% accuracy.[9] In addition, these learners substituted articles more frequently than omitting them.

Next, the researcher calculated the learners' percentage scores for the following categories: definite and indefinite contexts, *the* and *a(n)* in the indefinite specific context, the association of *the* with specificity, and the omission of articles in adjectivally modified noun contexts versus non-adjectivally modified noun contexts. A one-way between-categories ANOVA was conducted. It showed that the percentages for the different categories were significantly different, $F_{(19,646)} = 54.78$, $p < 0.01$.[10] A pairwise LSD follow up test was run to determine specifically which categories were different from each other. To begin with, the overall percentages of the use of *the* and *a(n)* are presented separately.

Table 5 presents the results of the pairwise comparisons of the learners' article use in the different definite contexts.

Table 5: Article Use in the Definite Context

Group	n	Category	Mean %	Mean diff.	p-value
Learners	35	Correct *the*	74.2%	56.5%	0.0000**
		Incorrect substitution	17.7%		
		Correct *the*	74.2%	66.1%	0.0000**
		Incorrect omission	8.1%		
		Incorrect substitution	17.7%	9.6%	0.0591*
		Incorrect omission	8.1%		

---

[9] See Nel (2015), Southwood and Van Dulm (2012) and Zdorenko and Paradis (2007) for argumentation for setting 90% as the level at which one can regard learners' performance as (near) native-like.

[10] A p-value lower than 0.05 is taken to indicate significance.

As can be seen in this table, the learners' data indicate that their accuracy in the definite context is relatively high – they correctly used *the* in 74.2% of the required instances, which is significantly more often than incorrectly omitting or incorrectly substituting the article ($p < 0.01$ in both cases). Moreover, the learners' incorrect substitution of articles (in 17.7% of instances) occurs significantly more frequently than their incorrect omission of articles (in 8.1% of instances) in this context. The following extracts exemplify the learners' use of articles in the three categories referred to above.

(6) [Definite contexts]: *Controls supplied 'the'.*
    i. Correct use of *the*
        J3HZI: There is a rat… *the* rat is…. *[Anaphoric context]*
        M4TMR: When the cat try to catch the bird, the dog catch *the* tail of the cat and throw him down. *[Associative context]*

    ii. Incorrect substitution
        [*Anaphoric contexts*]
        J2KFK: I can see the boy coming along the road… *A* boy is wearing a dark blue trouser.
        B1SSA: On that small bush, there was a butterfly. *A* butterfly was feeding from the flower.

        [*Encyclopaedic context*]
        J3KWC: Ok. I can see there is a nice sea in *a* mainland.

    iii. Incorrect omission of *the*
        [*Anaphoric context*]
        B4ESB: But the pouch was left down and the dog go… and that pouch was have a sausage that was eaten by *ø* dog.

        J3SNJ: He was have basket and ball, and inside of the basket, there are fish. Then, we see that the boy that he was *ø* basket and *ø* ball …

Table 6 presents the learners' use of articles in the indefinite context. It also focuses on the correct use, incorrect substitution and incorrect omission of *a(n)*.

Table 6: Article Use in the Indefinite Context

Group	*n*	Category	Mean %	Mean Diff.	*p*-value
Learners	35	Correct *a(n)* Incorrect substitution	43.0% 39.1%	3.9%	0.4400
		Correct *a(n)* Incorrect omission	43.0% 17.9%	25.1%	0.0000**
		Incorrect substitution Incorrect omission	39.1% 17.9%	21.2%	0.0000**

Table 6 above shows that the difference between the frequency of the correct use of the indefinite article (43%) and the incorrect substitution of the indefinite article (i.e. the use of *the* where *a* is required) (39.1%) is not significant. In contrast, the difference between the frequency of the correct use of the indefinite article and the incorrect omission of the article (17.9%) is significant ($p < 0.01$). As for their incorrect use of articles, the learners substituted the indefinite article (in 39.1% of cases) significantly more frequently than they omitted it (in 17.9% of cases) ($p < 0.01$). This pattern concurs with their use of the definite article presented in Table 5: in both cases (i.e. in definite as well as indefinite contexts), the learners used the incorrect article more than twice as frequently as they omitted the article. What is more, the results in the two tables show more frequent incorrect substitution than incorrect omission. The following extracts exemplify the learners' use of articles in the indefinite context:

(7) [First mention (indefinite) contexts]: *Controls supplied 'a'.*
    i.   Correct use of *a(n)*
        B2JKM: At the first picture, it shows that *a* dog is chasing *a* cat.
        J2BNN: There was a small cat looking at *a* yellow butterfly.
        M4TMR: There is a big tree with *a* nest of birds.

ii. Incorrect substitution
B3HNS: The two birds were sitting within *the* nest while…
J4JMS: In this piece of picture, I see *the* little animal and *the* butterfly.
M4MAO: At the first picture, we see *the* tree …

iii. Incorrect omission of *a(n)*
B2LJA: I can see that there is the dog and the tree with *ø* good necklace.
M2AAJ: I see *ø* tree, *ø* dog, *ø* mouse and houses and *ø* man.
M2ASN: This picture, it show *ø* green place and *ø* goat and *ø* young goat.

Table 7 presents the results of the comparison between the omission of articles in definite versus indefinite contexts.

Table 7: Omission of *the* and *a(n)*

Group	*n*	Category	Mean %	Mean Diff.	*p*-value
Learners	35	Incorrect omission of *the*	8.1%	9.8	0.0544*
		Incorrect omission of *a(n)*	17.9%		

As can be seen in Table 7, the learners incorrectly omitted *a(n)* significantly more frequently than they incorrectly omitted *the* (cf. White, 2003). These results suggest that their use of the indefinite article was more non-target-like than their use of the definite article. The learners' difficulty in using the indefinite article correctly was clearly visible when their overall accuracy on *the* and *a(n)* was compared as illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8: Overall Accuracy in the Use of *the* and *a(n)*

Group	*n*	Category	Mean %	Mean Diff.	*p*-value
Learners	35	Correct *the*	74.2%	31.2%	0.0000**
		Correct *a(n)*	43.0%		

The results reported in the table above show that the learners' performance on the definite article (correct use in 74.2% of instances) was significantly better (*p* < 0.01) than their performance on the indefinite article (correct use in 43% of instances). The reasons for this difference in performance on the two articles will become clear later in the discussion of findings.

The Effect of Specificity on Article Use

Table 9 compares the use of *the* and *a(n)* in the indefinite specific context. This comparison is necessary to test the prediction made by the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH) that learners will use the definite article and the indefinite article to roughly the same extent in the first mention [–def, +spec] context because they fluctuate between the definiteness and specificity settings of the Article Choice Parameter (ACP).

Table 9: Use of *the* and *a(n)* in the [–def, +spec] context

Group	*n*	Category	Mean %	Mean Diff.	*p* value
Learners	35	Incorrect *the*	39.1%	3.9%	0.4400
		Correct *a(n)*	43.0%		

The results reported in the table indicate that the use of *the* and *a(n)* in the [–def, +spec] context is fairly similar (39.1% versus 43%) –the difference between them is not significant. Item analysis was also conducted, and this also indicated that the learners used *the* at roughly the same rate as they used *a(n).* The following examples from the data are illustrative.

(8)   [*Indefinite specific contexts*]: *Controls supplied 'a'.*
      B2IOB: From the first picture, we are seeing *the* dog was chasing *a* rat.
      B2LJA: I can see that there is a big tree and *the* small house.
      J3SNJ: In a first picture… I see *the* dog, *a* rat and… tree.
      M4TMR: There is a big tree with *a* nest of birds … and *the* cat was coming …
      M3TAK: There are some dog see *a* cat who around near *the* tree.

The prediction of the FH (Ionin 2003; Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004) is thus borne out in the learners' performance in that they clearly fluctuated between the definiteness and specificity settings of the ACP in their production of articles.

The Effect of Adjectival Modification

Table 10 presents the PDT results in terms of the omission of articles in adjectivally modified nouns versus non-adjectivally modified nouns, to test the Syntactic Misanalysis Account (SMA), which holds that L2 learners with L1s without articles [–ART] misanalyse English articles as adjectives. Consequently, they are predicted to omit articles more frequently before adjectivally modified nouns than before non-adjectivally modified nouns.

Table 10: The Omission of Articles between ART+N and ART+ADJ+N Contexts

Group	n	Category	Mean %	Mean Diff.	p-value
Learners	35	ART+N	9.8%	1.0%	0.8434
		ART+ADJ+N	8.8%		

The results presented in Table 10 suggest that adjectival modification does not affect the rate of article omission by Swahili-speaking learners of EFL, as the article was omitted to roughly the same extent in adjectivally modified nouns (8.8%) as in non-adjectivally modified nouns (9.8%) (leading to a p-value of 0.8434). However, these results should be viewed with caution as most learners –especially those with low English proficiency –completely avoided employing adjectives before nouns. There were very few instances of 'ART+ADJ+N' in the data, making up only 7% of the total number of nouns produced. The majority of the learners used adjectives in the post-nominal position, especially in *wh-* and appositive clauses as modifiers of nouns, as illustrated in the extracts in (9) below.

(9)   B3HNS: Those birds were in colour, *white colour.*
       J2BNN: He was carrying his balloon, *which is yellow in colour.*
       M1HSA: I see a dog *with yellow colour in her neck, which is blue in colour.*
       M1HSA: There is a crow, *which is black in colour.*

Their avoidance of the use of adjectives before nouns might be a result of the post-nominal position of adjectives in Swahili and it is thus highly likely that it is due to transfer from their L1 Swahili. The prediction above that the 35 learners would omit articles more frequently in adjectivally modified nouns than in non-adjectivally modified nouns was not supported by the PDT data. This pattern of

omission provides no evidence that adjectival modification plays a role in learners' article use.

In summary, the PDT data yielded the following: First, the learners incorrectly substituted articles more frequently than incorrectly omitting them. Second, they used *the* more accurately than *a(n)*. Third, there were more omissions of *a(n)* than of *the*. Fourth, the learners used *the* and *a(n)* interchangeably in the [–def, +spec] context –they fluctuated between definiteness and specificity. Fifth, adjectival modification did not show impact on the learners' frequency of article omission; rather, the transfer of the L1 Swahili bare NP structure seems to have led the learners to omit articles. These are discussed in detail below.

Discussion

This part expands on the observed higher accuracy for *the* than for *a(n)*, the fluctuation between definiteness and specificity, the association of *the* with specificity, and the omission of articles between adjectivally and non-adjectivally modified nouns. In addition, it discusses the comparison between the learners' incorrect substitution and incorrect omission of articles, and 'directionality.'

To begin with the comparison between the accuracy on *the* and *a(n)*, the data show that the learners are more accurate in the use of *the* than of *a(n)*. The indefinite article seems to be more taxing, something which Lardière (2005) argues is because this article has more complex semantic conditions than *the*. Number or the mass/count distinctions need to be adhered to in using the indefinite article. In contrast, the definite article occurs freely with singular, plural, count and mass nouns. In part, this difference in complexity thus contributed to the more frequent occurrence of non-target-like performance on the indefinite article than on the definite article. Similar results are also reported in Lee (2013) and Morales-Reyes and Soler (2016).

In the light of the comparison between *the* and *a(n)* above, it makes sense to discuss 'directionality', described as the noted tendency of learners of L2 English to use *the* more frequently and more accurately than *a* (García-Mayo, 2009). The results in the present study show that the learners' frequency and accuracy of using articles reflect 'directionality.' This finding concurs with García-Mayo (2009), among her lower intermediate group, and with Haiyan and Lianrui (2010), Kamal (2013), Lardière (2004), Master (1987), Robertson (2000), White (2003), Xia and Yan-xia (2015) and

Zdorenko and Paradis (2008). In line with the explanation given in the preceding paragraph, Lardière (2004), for example, says that the 'directionality' effect is caused by the differences in feature specifications bundled up with each article. For example, while *the* denotes 'definiteness', *a(n)* denotes 'singularity' and 'indefiniteness'. Consequently, Lardière argues that the more features are bundled up with a morpheme, the more difficult it is for an EFL/ESL learner to master it.

As for the incorrect use of articles, the learners demonstrated more incorrect substitution of articles than the incorrect omission of articles. They produced substitution errors more frequently than omission errors. Most research on the acquisition of morpho-syntax, in particular, of grammatical morphology, shows that many EFL/ESL learners tend to acquire grammatical morphology more quickly in the nominal domain than in the verbal domain (Paradis, 2007). Grounded in this observation, it is reasonable to assume that such EFL/ESL learners (correctly or incorrectly) supply more morphemes in the nominal domain than in the verbal domain. Contrary to the verbal domain, where L2 learners are noted to produce more omission errors than substitution errors, in particular for finite verbal morphology (see, for instance, Ionin and Wexler (2002) and Paradis (2005)),[11] in the nominal domain, the Swahili-speaking EFL learners in the present study produce more article substitutions than article omissions.[12] In part, these results support the observation that L2 learners produce fewer omission errors in the nominal morphology (when compared to the omission errors in the verbal morphology). The substitution and omission of articles are discussed further, respectively, in the following two paragraphs.

Regarding the substitution of articles, the data do not provide evidence for the association of *the* with specificity. The learners did not use *the* (the wrong article) significantly more than *a(n)* (the right article) in the [–def, +spec] context. These results partly concur with those reported in Master (1987) and Thomas (1989). The Swahili-

---

[11] However, this pattern is not always the case. Prévost and White (2000), for instance, noted that the learners in their study made more substitution than omission errors in verbal morphology. They then argue that this is because these learners had already acquired the relevant underlying structures but had not yet mastered the correct suppliance of overt morphemes –what they referred to as the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (MSIH).

[12] In line with this observation, in her study on the frequency of and variability in errors in the use of English prepositions, Catalán (1996:179) reports that her respondents incorrectly substituted prepositions (11.88%) more than incorrectly omitting them (3.71%).

speaking learners overused *the* in [–def, +spec] contexts but did not use *the* more than *a(n)* in these contexts. The use of *the* and *a(n)* in the [–def, +spec] contexts was similar. These results suggest that the learners accessed both settings of the ACP. Accordingly, they (incorrectly) fluctuated between definiteness and specificity. These results support Ionin et al.'s (2004) FH.

Concerning the omission of articles, more omissions are noted in the indefinite context than in the definite context. Results show *a(n)* was omitted more frequently than *the* by the Swahili-speaking EFL learners. Again, the difficulty in the use of *a(n)* also explains why more omissions are noted for this article. In contrast, the learners' frequency of omission of *the* was very limited. What is more, since the learners in the present study did not omit articles more in the adjectivally modified nouns than in the non-modified nouns, these results do not support the Syntactic Misanalysis Account (Trenkic, 2007, 2008, 2009). In part, these results are due to the occurrence of Swahili adjectives in the post-nominal position (cf. Arıbaş & Cele, 2019). Thus, the learners seemed to transfer their bare NP structure of Swahili to English.

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine patterns of English article use by L1 Swahili-speaking learners of EFL. It attempted to see whether the learners' use of articles is consonant with Ionin et al.'s (2004) FH or Trenkic's (2007) syntactic misanalysis account. Spoken data were collected from 35 Swahili-speaking learners of EFL, who participated in a PDT. Results indicated that the indefinite article manifested as more non-target-like than the definite article. Substitution errors were also more frequent than omission errors. This pattern reflects 'directionality', as reported in most previous studies. As for the incorrect use of articles, the learners demonstrated more incorrect substitution and less incorrect omission. Considering the substitution of articles, the data do not provide evidence of the association of *the* with specificity. Regarding the omission of articles, more omissions were noted in the indefinite context than in the definite context. Moreover, the learners fluctuate between the definiteness and specificity settings of the ACP. Concerning the omission of articles, the learners omitted them since they mainly relied on the context of interaction. Since the data indicated that the learners produced very few instances of adjectivally modified nouns, a further study can compare the use of articles in adjectivally and non-adjectivally modified noun contexts among beginner, intermediate, and advanced level learners to determine the effect of

proficiency on the use of English articles and adjectives in these contexts.

References

Arıbaş, D. Ş. & Cele, F. (2019). Acquisition of Articles in L2 and L3 English: The Influence of L2 Proficiency on Positive Transfer from L2 to L3. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*: 1–18.

Bickerton, D. (1981). *Roots of Language*. Ann Arbor MA: Karoma Publishers.

Bless, C. & Higson-Smith, C. (1995). *Fundamentals of Social Research Methods: An African Perspective* (2nd Edition). Lusaka: Juta and Co Ltd.

Catalán, R. M. J. (1996). Frequency and Variability in Errors in the Use of English Prepositions. *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies*, 17: 171–187.

Chan, A. Y. W. (2019). Typology and Contexts of Article Errors: Investigation into the Use of English Articles by Hong Kong Cantonese ESL Learners. *IRAL - International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*: 1–31.

COST Action IS0804, Language Impairment in a Multilingual Society: Linguistic Patterns and the Road to Assessment. Available at http://www.bi-sli.org/index.htm

Dryer, M. S. (2005a). Definite Articles. In M. Haspelmath et al. (eds.) *The World Atlas of Language Structures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 154–157.

Dryer, M. S. (2005b). Indefinite Articles. In M. Haspelmath et al. (eds.) *The World Atlas of Language Structures*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 158–161.

Fodor, J. D. & Sag, I. A. (1982). Referential and Quantificational Indefinites. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 5: 355–398.

García-Mayo, M. del P. (2009). Article Choice in L2 English by Spanish Speakers: Evidence for Full Transfer. In M. del P, García-Mayo & R. Hawkins (eds.) *Second Language Acquisition of Articles: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Implications*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company: 13–36.

Haiyan, L. & Lianrui, Y. (2010). An Investigation of English Articles Acquisition by Chinese Learners of English. *Chinese Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 33(3): 15–31.

Hawkins, J. (2004). *Efficiency and Complexity in Grammars*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hawkins, R. (2001). *Second Language Syntax: A Generative*

Introduction. Oxford: Blackwell.

Hawkins, R. & Chan, C. Y-H. (1997). The Partial Availability of Universal Grammar in Second Language Acquisition: The 'Failed Functional Features Hypothesis.' *Second Language Research*, 13: 187–226.

Huebner, T. (1983) *A Longitudinal Analysis of the Acquisition of English*. Ann Arbor, MA: Karoma Publishers.

Ionin, T. (2003). The Interpretation of 'the': A New Look at Articles in L2-English. In B. Beachley, A. Brown & F. Conlin (eds.) *Proceedings of the 27th Boston University Conference on Language Development*. Somerville MA: Cascadilla Press: 346–357.

Ionin, T., Ko, H. & Wexler, K. (2004). Article Semantics in L2 Acquisition: The Role of Specificity. *Language Acquisition,* 12(1): 3–69.

Ionin, T., Ko, H. & Wexler, K. (2003). Specificity as a Grammatical Notion: Evidence from L2-English Article Use. In G. Garding and M. Tsujimura (eds.) *Proceedings of the West Coast Conference on Formal Linguistics*. Somerville MA: Cascadilla Press: 245–58.

Ionin, T. & Wexler, K. (2002). Why is "is" easier than "-s"?: Acquisition of Tense/Agreement Morphology by Child Second Language Learners of English. *Second Language Research*, 18(2): 95–136.

Jian, S. (2013). An Empirical Research of Chinese Learners' Acquisition of the English Article System Based on Syntactic Misanalysis Account. *English Language Teaching*, 6(4): 56–63.

Kamal, S. (2013). A paper on English Article Accuracy of EFL Learners: An Investigation. *Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes*, 1(1): 21–28.

Lardière, D. (2004). Knowledge of Definiteness despite Variable Article Omission. In A. Brugos, L. Micciulla and C. E. Smith (eds.) *Boston University Conference on Language Development 28 Proceedings*. Somerville MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project: 328–339.

Lardière, D. (2005). On Morphological Competence. In L. Dekydspotter, A. Liljestrand and R.A. Sprouse (eds.) *Proceedings of the 7th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference*. Somerville MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project: 178–192.

Lee, J. (2013). The Effects of Discourse Types on the Use of English Articles by Korean Learners of English: Oral vs. Written

Narratives. *English Language Teaching*, 6(8): 33–44.

Lyons, C. (1999). *Definiteness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Master, P. (1987). A Cross-sectional Interlangauge Analysis of the Acquisition of the English Article System. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of California.

McHugh, M. (2012) Interrater Reliability: The Kappa Statistic. *Biochemia Medica*, 22(3): 276–282.

Morales-Reyes, A. & Soler, I. G. (2016). Transfer and Semantic Universals in the L2 Acquisition of the English Article System by Child L2 Learners. *Language Acquisition*, 23(1): 57–74.

Ndomba, R. G. (2017). The Definite Article in Swahili. *Journal of Linguistics and Language in Education*, 11(2): 22–44.

Paradis, J. (2007). Early Bilingual and Multilingual Acquisition. In P. Auer & L. Wei (eds.) *Handbook of Multilingualism and Multilingual Education*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter: 15–44.

Paradis, J. (2005). Grammatical Morphology in Children Learning English as a Second Language: Implications of Similarities with Specific Language Impairment. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 36(3): 172–187.

Pongpairoj, N. (2007). Are L2 English Article Choices UG Regulated? In N. Hilton et al. (eds.) *CamLing 2007: Proceedings of the Fifth University of Cambridge Postgraduate Conference in Language Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge Institute of Language Research: 213–220.

Prévost, P. & White, L. (2000) Missing Surface Inflection or Impairment in Second Language Acquisition? Evidence from Tense and Agreement. *Second Language Research,* 16(2): 103–133.

Robertson, D. (2000). Variability in the Use of the English Article System by Chinese Learners of English. *Second Language Research*, (2): 135–172.

Sarko, G. (2009). L2 English Article Production by Arabic and French Speakers. In M. del P, García-Mayo & R. Hawkins (eds.) *Second Language Acquisition of Articles: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Implications*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company: 37–66.

Seidl, A. & Dimitriadis, A. (1997). The Discourse Function of Object Marking in Swahili. *Chicago Linguistic Society*, 33: 373–387.

Syndicate, UCLE. (2001). *Quick Placement Test (Version 2)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomas, M. (1989). The Acquisition of English Articles by First- and

Second-Language Learners. *Applied Psycholinguistics*, 10: 335–355.

Trenkic, D. (2009). Accounting for Patterns of Article Omissions and Substitutions in Second Language Production. In M. del P. García-Mayo & R. Hawkins (eds.) *Second Language Acquisition of Articles: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Implications*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company: 115–143.

Trenkic, D. (2008). The Representation of English Articles in Second Language Grammars: Determiners or Adjectives? *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 11(01): 1–18.

Trenkic, D. (2007). Variability in Second Language Article Production: Beyond the Representational Deficit vs. Processing Constraints Debate. *Second Language Research*, 23(3): 289–327.

Tryzna, M. (2009). Questioning the Validity of the Article Choice Parameter and the Fluctuation Hypothesis: Evidence from L2 English Article Use by L1 Polish and L1 Mandarin Chinese Speakers. In M. del P. Garcia-Mayo & R. Hawkins (eds.) *Second Language Acquisition of Articles: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Implications*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Vitale, A. (1981). *Swahili Syntax*. Dordrecht: Foris Publications Holland.

White, L. (2003). Fossilization in Steady State L2 Grammars: Persistent Problems with Inflectional Morphology. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 6(2): 129–141.

Xia, Z. & Yan-xia, D. (2015). An Investigation of the Misuse of English Articles of Chinese English Learners. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 12(8): 575–582.

Zdorenko, T. and Paradis, J. (2008). The Acquisition of Articles in Child Second Language English: Fluctuation, Transfer or both? *Second Language Research*, 24(2): 227–250.