



An Error Analysis of English Article Usage (A, An, The, and Zero Article) in Translation Tasks by Advanced EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the usage errors of English articles (a, an, the, and zero article) in translation tasks among advanced Indonesian EFL learners. Utilizing a quantitative error analysis approach, the research involved 21 students from the English Education Department. Findings reveal that addition errors (64.4%) were the most prevalent, followed by substitution errors (33.3%) and omission errors (2.2%). Despite expectations, differences in accuracy between 5th and 7th semester students were minimal, indicating persistent first language interference in article usage. Students perceived English articles, particularly the zero article, as moderately difficult, primarily due to the absence of an article system in Indonesian. The study highlights the need for more comprehensive instruction focusing on the functional and phonetic aspects of articles to improve learners' grammatical accuracy in translation.

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Introduction

Grammar accuracy is a crucial component in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it plays a significant role in ensuring effective and meaningful communication. Accurate grammar allows learners to convey their intended messages clearly and minimizes the risk of misunderstanding (Corder, 1981). Even when learners possess adequate vocabulary, inaccurate grammatical structures may obscure meaning. Therefore, a systematic understanding of grammar is essential to support functional language use and effective communication in EFL contexts.

In the process of second language acquisition, errors are considered a natural and inevitable phenomenon. Error analysis serves as an important tool for identifying learners' linguistic difficulties and understanding their interlanguage development. By analyzing learners' errors, teachers can gain insight into which grammatical aspects require further attention and provide more targeted instruction. Moreover, learners often form hypotheses about grammatical rules based on their exposure to the target language. Through feedback and correction, these hypotheses are gradually refined, leading to improved grammatical accuracy over time.

Grammar accuracy also plays a vital role in assessment and learning evaluation. It is commonly used as an indicator of learners' language proficiency and progress. Comparing learners' language output with standard grammatical norms enables educators to identify gaps in learners' knowledge and design appropriate pedagogical interventions. In addition, increased grammatical accuracy can enhance learners' confidence and motivation, encouraging them to use the language more actively and effectively.

Supporting this perspective, Mamatoyibov (2024) emphasizes that grammar functions as the structural foundation of effective communication in EFL learning. A solid command of grammar allows learners to express ideas precisely and coherently, reducing ambiguity in both spoken and written communication. For example, the accurate use of verb tenses is essential for conveying intended meanings. This highlights that achieving fluency in a foreign language requires a balance between grammatical accuracy and natural language use.

Despite years of formal instruction, many EFL learners continue to experience difficulties in using English articles accurately. Common problems include the omission of articles, the overuse of certain articles, and the incorrect selection of a, an, or the. These errors are not limited to beginner or intermediate learners but are also frequently found among advanced EFL learners, who are expected to demonstrate higher grammatical competence. This persistent misuse indicates that English article usage remains a problematic area in EFL learning and warrants further investigation.

Previous studies have shown that article-related errors are particularly prevalent among Indonesian EFL learners. Kaharuddin (2013) reported that errors in English article usage accounted for 17.5% of the total errors produced by high school EFL learners in Makassar City. Similarly, Sabrina et al. (2023), who analyzed learners' translation tasks using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy, identified omission as the most dominant error type. Their findings also revealed that first language (L1) interference plays a major role in article misuse, as Indonesian does not have an article system equivalent to English. Consequently, learners tend to omit articles or apply them inaccurately when translating from Indonesian into English. In addition, limited linguistic knowledge further contributes to errors such as misinformation and misordering.

Although error analysis has been widely discussed in second language acquisition research, many studies focus on grammatical aspects such as verb tenses, prepositions, and sentence structure. Relatively few studies specifically examine errors in English article usage within translation tasks, particularly among advanced EFL learners. Most existing research emphasizes free writing or sentence construction, leaving a gap in understanding how learners apply article rules when translating from Indonesian into English. Therefore, a focused investigation of English article errors in translation tasks is necessary to enrich the existing literature.

Based on these considerations, this study seeks to address the following research questions: (1) What types of errors do advanced EFL learners make in using English articles (a, an, the, and zero article) in translation tasks? (2) Which type of article error occurs most frequently? and (3) What are the possible causes of these errors?

The findings of this study are expected to contribute both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this research aims to enrich the field of error analysis by providing deeper insights into English article usage among advanced EFL learners in translation contexts. Practically, the results may assist English teachers in identifying common article-related errors and developing more effective teaching strategies to improve learners' grammatical accuracy, particularly in the use of English articles.

Method

This study employed a quantitative research design using an error analysis approach to examine the use of English articles (a, an, the, and zero article) in translation tasks produced by advanced EFL learners. A quantitative approach was chosen because the study focused on identifying the frequency and types of article errors based on numerical data collected from students' responses.

The participants of this study were 21 students from the English Education Department. The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile Responden (Demographic Profile)

Category	Group	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Semester	5 th Semester	10	47.6%
	7 th Semester	11	52.4%
Gender	Male	1	4.8%
	Female	20	95.2%
Total		21	100%

As shown in the table 1 the participants consisted into two groups: 10 students from the 5th semester (47.6%) and 11 students from the 7th semester (52.4%). Most of the participants were female (95.2%), while only one student was male (4.8%). This distribution helps the researcher compare article usage between lower and higher semester students.

This study used a structured test distributed through Google Forms as the research instrument. The test consisted of translation items and multiple-choice questions focusing on the use of English articles (a, an, the, and zero article). The Google Form link was shared with the participants, and all responses were automatically collected and organized for quantitative analysis.

The data analysis was conducted through several steps. First, all students' responses were carefully examined to identify errors related to English article usage. Second, the identified errors were classified into four categories: omission, addition and substitution of article. Third, the frequency of each error type was calculated to determine the most dominant errors. Finally, the results were interpreted and discussed by relating them to relevant theories and findings from previous studies.

Finding And Discussion

This section presents the results and findings of the study based on the data collected through a Google Form questionnaire. The findings focus on students' errors in using English articles, including the types of errors, their frequency, and students' perceptions of difficulty. The data are presented in the form of tables and figures to provide a clear overview of the results. So, the results of the study can be detailed as follows :

Distribution of Errors Based on Categories

Table 2. Type of Error

Type of Error	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Definition
Addition	29	64.4%	Adding an unnecessary article (a, an, or the) where a zero article is required.
Substitution	15	33.3%	Choosing the wrong article, such as using "a" instead of "an" incorrectly.
Omission	1	2.2%	Leaving out an article that is grammatically necessary in the sentence.
Total Errors	45	100%	

Based on the analysis, the most dominant type of error committed by students is addition, which accounts for 64.4% of the total mistakes. This is followed by substitution at 33.3%, and omission at only 2.2%. These results indicate that students have a strong tendency to insert articles before nouns, even when the sentence grammatically requires a zero article. The high frequency of addition errors proves there is significant interference from the students' belief that every English noun must always be preceded by an article. According to the data in Table 2, this unnecessary addition is the most prominent error pattern. This suggests that students feel an obligation to place a, an, or the before nouns even when the context does not require them, such as with city names or abstract nouns. Substitution errors are also quite significant, particularly with words that have tricky pronunciations. On the other hand, omission errors, where an article is completely left out, are very rare in this study.

Comparison of Accuracy between 5th Semester and 7th Semester Students

The table below compares the accuracy of English article usage between 5th semester and 7th semester students. This comparison is intended to show whether students' level of study influences their ability to use English articles correctly, with higher semester students expected to demonstrate better accuracy.

Table 3. Comparison Semester

Semester	Total Students	Total Errors (Q1-Q8)	AVERAGE Errors per Student
5 th Semester	10	23	2.3
7 th Semester	11	22	2.0

Table 3 presents a comparison between students in their fifth and seventh semesters. Surprisingly, the data reveals that both groups have a very similar level of accuracy when it comes to article usage. The seventh semester students recorded an average of roughly two errors per person, which is almost identical to the performance of the fifth semester students.

This suggests that having more time in university does not automatically eliminate grammatical interference from the students' first language. It shows that article usage remains a complex challenge for Indonesian learners regardless of their academic year, as they still tend to carry over Indonesian sentence patterns into their English writing.

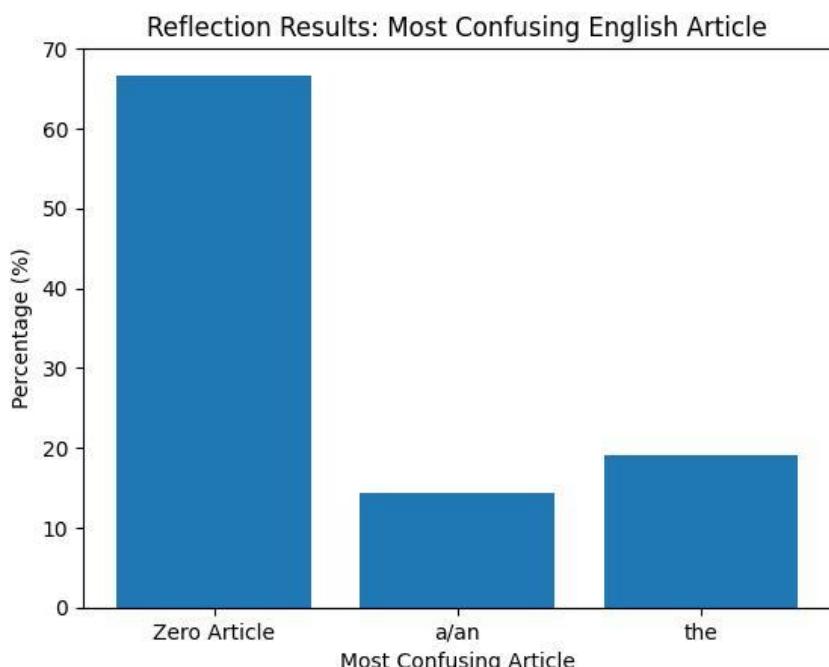
Students' Perceptions of Difficulty (Self-Reflection)

The following table and figure present students' self-reflection results regarding the difficulty of English article usage. The data highlight which article type is considered the most confusing and the main reasons behind students' errors, providing additional insight into learners' perceptions and the influence of first language interference.

Table 4. Perception of difficulty

Question	Most Frequent Answer
Difficulty Scale (1-5)	3 (Moderate)
Most Confusing Article	Zero article
Main Reason for Error	L1 Interference (Indonesian language)

Table 4 presents students' perceptions regarding the difficulty of using English articles. The results show that most students consider English articles to be moderately difficult. Among the four types of articles, the zero article is perceived as the most confusing. This difficulty may be caused by the absence of an article system in Indonesian, which leads students to rely on their first language when using English. As a result, learners often omit articles or use them incorrectly. These findings indicate that first language influence plays an important role in students' difficulties with English articles and contributes to the errors found in their written and translated texts.



The figure illustrates students' reflections on the most confusing type of English article. The results show that the zero article is considered the most confusing by the majority of

students, approximately 67% of the total respondents. In contrast, fewer students reported confusion with the indefinite articles a/an, while the definite article the was considered moderately confusing.

This finding supports the results of the error analysis, which revealed that addition errors related to the zero article were the most frequent. The high level of difficulty associated with the zero article may be explained by the absence of an article system in Indonesian. As a result, students tend to add articles even when they are not required in English because they struggle to distinguish when an article should or should not be used.

Furthermore, the lower percentage of confusion with a/an suggests that students may have a basic understanding of indefinite articles, although errors still occur in specific contexts. The definite article the presents moderate difficulty, possibly due to its complex usage related to specificity and shared knowledge between speakers and listeners.

Overall, this reflection data confirms that first language interference plays a significant role in students' difficulties with English articles, particularly the zero article. The findings indicate the need for more explicit instruction and practice focusing on article usage in context, especially for forms that do not have direct equivalents in the learners' first language.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that even advanced EFL learners still struggle with the complexities of English article usage. The data indicates that errors are not random but follow specific patterns influenced by the students' native language. Among the various types of mistakes identified, omission and addition errors stand out as the most frequent. These issues are particularly evident in sentences requiring the zero article, where students often feel compelled to insert an article because they lack a similar system in Indonesian. The results also show that while seventh semester students generally perform with higher accuracy than those in the fifth semester, the difference is not as significant as one might expect. This suggests that length of study alone does not guarantee a full mastery of articles.

The findings highlight the persistent role of first language interference in second language acquisition. Since Indonesian does not use articles to mark definiteness or genericity in the same way English does, learners tend to carry over their native linguistic habits into their translations. Furthermore, the substitution of "a" for "an" in words starting with a silent "h" confirms that many students still rely on spelling rather than phonological sounds. Based on these results, it is recommended that English instructors move beyond basic grammar rules and focus more on the functional and phonetic aspects of articles. Providing more contextual practice, especially regarding the zero article and specific phonological exceptions, could help students bridge the gap between their conceptual understanding and practical application in translation tasks.

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