Error Analysis of Article Usage Among Hausa-English Bilinguals: A Case Study of FCE Zaria Students

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Abstract
The accurate use of English articles (a, an, the) is a persistent challenge for many second language (L2) learners, particularly those whose first languages (L1) lack an article system. Among Hausa-English bilinguals, the absence of grammatical articles in Hausa contributes significantly to errors in English article usage. This study investigates the nature and patterns of article-related errors among 50 NCE 2 students at the Federal College of Education (FCE), Zaria. The problem addressed in this paper is the high frequency of article errors observed in the academic writing of Hausa-speaking students, which hinders their grammatical accuracy and communicative competence in English. To explore this issue, a mixed-methods research design was employed, combining quantitative data from written tests with qualitative data from classroom observations. The written tests included gap-fill exercises, sentence correction tasks, and short essays, while classroom observations captured students' spontaneous spoken and written use of English articles. Data were analyzed through error categorization and frequency analysis. Findings reveal that omission errors (52%) are the most prevalent, followed by substitution errors (31%) and overuse errors (17%). The dominant omission errors are attributed to negative transfer from Hausa, which lacks a formal article system. Substitution errors reflect students' difficulties distinguishing between definite and indefinite contexts, while overuse suggests rule overgeneralization. The study underscores the influence of L1 on L2 acquisition and recommends targeted instructional strategies, including contrastive analysis and contextualized teaching approaches, to enhance article usage proficiency among Hausa-English bilinguals.

Keywords: Article usage, Error analysis, Hausa-English bilinguals, Interlanguage theory, Second language acquisition

Introduction

English, as a second language in Nigeria, plays a crucial role in education, administration, and communication. However, many Nigerian learners, particularly Hausa-English bilinguals, face significant challenges in mastering certain aspects of English grammar, one of which is the use of articles. Articles, which include "a," "an," and "the," are essential in English sentence construction, yet they pose difficulties for learners whose first language lacks a direct equivalent grammatical category (Odlin, 1989). Hausa, a Chadic language widely spoken in Northern Nigeria, does not have a formal system of articles as found in English, which often leads to errors in article usage among Hausa-speaking learners of English (Jibril, 1982).

The study of error analysis is instrumental in second language acquisition, as it helps to identify patterns in learners' errors and understand the linguistic and cognitive processes involved in language learning (Corder, 1967). By examining the specific difficulties faced by Hausa-English bilinguals in article usage, this study contributes to the broader field of interlanguage research and provides insights into the influence of first language (L1) transfer on second language (L2) acquisition.

Importance of Article Usage in English Grammar

Articles are determiners that serve important grammatical and communicative functions in English. They help define specificity, countability, and definiteness in noun phrases, which are essential for clear and precise communication (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). The definite article "the" signals that a noun is known or specific, while the indefinite articles "a" and "an" introduce non-specific or new information (Master, 1997).

For non-native speakers, mastering article usage is essential for fluency and accuracy. Incorrect use or omission of articles can lead to ambiguity or misunderstandings. For example, the sentence *"I saw a boy and a girl. The boy was tall."* correctly uses the indefinite article "a" to introduce new information and the definite article "the" to refer to a previously mentioned noun. A learner unfamiliar with article usage might incorrectly say, *"I saw boy and girl. Boy was tall,"* which lacks specificity and coherence.

Despite their importance, articles are one of the most problematic grammatical elements for English learners, particularly those from linguistic backgrounds where articles are absent or function differently (Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004). For Hausa-English bilinguals, the lack of a direct equivalent in Hausa makes the acquisition of English articles particularly challenging.

Challenges Faced by Hausa-English Bilinguals in Using Articles

The difficulties Hausa-English bilinguals face in article usage stem from several linguistic and cognitive factors. Firstly, the absence of a dedicated article system in Hausa leads to negative transfer, where learners apply L1 structures to L2, resulting in errors (Ellis, 1994). Hausa speakers often rely on context or demonstratives like *wannan* (this) and *wancan* (that) to convey definiteness, rather than using articles as in English (Newman, 2000). This difference causes Hausa learners to either omit articles or use them incorrectly.

Common errors among Hausa-English bilinguals include:

1. **Omission of articles** – e.g., *"I bought book"* instead of *"I bought a book."*

2. **Overgeneralization** – e.g., *"The lions are dangerous"* when referring to lions in general, instead of *"Lions are dangerous."*

3. **Incorrect substitution** – e.g., *"I saw an elephant in the zoo. The elephant was big."* but mistakenly using *"A elephant was big."*

Studies in second language acquisition suggest that article errors are persistent among learners whose native languages do not mark definiteness grammatically (Robertson, 2000). Hausa-English bilinguals often struggle with distinguishing between definiteness and specificity, leading to errors in their use of "a" and "the" (Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004).

Despite the significance of English article usage in effective communication, Hausa-English bilingual students at the Federal College of Education (FCE) Zaria continue to exhibit persistent errors in article application. These errors hinder their academic writing, oral communication, and overall English proficiency. Previous studies have focused on general grammatical errors among Nigerian learners (Bamgbose, 1971; Jowitt, 1991), but there has been limited research specifically analyzing the article usage challenges faced by Hausa-English bilinguals. This study aims to bridge this gap by systematically analyzing article usage errors among FCE Zaria students. It seeks to identify error patterns, their causes, and possible strategies to improve learners' article usage skills.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1) What are the common types of article errors made by Hausa-English bilingual students at FCE Zaria?
2) How does the Hausa language influence the misuse of English articles?
3) What strategies can be employed to enhance article usage among these learners?

The Concept of Error Analysis in Second Language Acquisition

Error analysis is a fundamental approach in second language acquisition (SLA) that examines the linguistic mistakes learners make, with the aim of understanding their sources and implications for language learning. Corder (1967) is credited with establishing error analysis as a significant field in applied linguistics, arguing that errors provide insights into the learning process. According to Corder, errors are not just signs of failure but are evidence of learners' developing linguistic competence. He distinguishes between *errors* (systematic mistakes due to incomplete language learning) and *mistakes* (random slips that learners can self-correct) (Corder, 1971).

Error analysis emerged as a response to contrastive analysis, which assumed that errors were primarily caused by the transfer of structures from a learner's first language (L1) to the second language (L2) (Lado, 1957). While contrastive analysis focused on predicting errors based on linguistic differences between L1 and L2, error analysis recognized that many errors arise internally as learners develop their interlanguage (Selinker, 1972).

James (1998) categorized errors into different types:

1. **Omission errors** – Leaving out necessary linguistic elements (e.g., *"I saw cat"* instead of *"I saw a cat."*).

2. **Addition errors** – Inserting unnecessary elements (e.g., *"He is a very much kind person."*).

3. **Misformation errors** – Using incorrect forms of linguistic elements (e.g., *"I have saw him."* instead of *"I have seen him."*).

4. **Misordering errors** – Incorrect word order in a sentence (e.g., *"What he is doing?"* instead of *"What is he doing?"*).

In second language learning, analyzing errors helps identify patterns and sources of difficulty, guiding educators in developing effective teaching strategies. Given that Hausa does not have an article system comparable to English, a systematic study of Hausa-English bilinguals' errors can shed light on the specific challenges they face and inform targeted pedagogical interventions.

Common Errors in Article Usage Among Non-Native English Speakers

Articles in English (*a, an, the*) play a crucial role in defining the specificity and definiteness of nouns. However, they are a persistent source of difficulty for non-native speakers, particularly those whose first language lacks a similar grammatical category (Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004). Research on article usage errors among second language learners has identified three primary types of errors:

Omission Errors

One of the most frequent errors is the omission of articles where they are required. For example, learners may say *"I bought book"* instead of *"I bought a book."* Such errors are common among learners whose native language does not include articles, such as Russian, Chinese, and Hausa (Master, 1997). The lack of a grammatical equivalent in L1 makes it difficult for learners to internalize article rules in L2.

Overgeneralization Errors

Learners often overgeneralize the use of the definite article "the." For instance, a learner might say *"The lions are dangerous"* when referring to lions in general, rather than the correct form *"Lions are dangerous."* This overuse stems from a misunderstanding of when "the" is necessary, as some learners assume that all nouns require an article (Ionin, Zubizarreta, & Maldonado, 2008).

Incorrect Substitution Errors

Some learners confuse the use of definite and indefinite articles. For example, saying *"I saw an elephant. A elephant was big."* instead of *"I saw an elephant. The elephant was big."* Such errors suggest a lack of understanding of definiteness and specificity, which are central to article use in English (Robertson, 2000).

Several studies have examined article errors among learners of English. Butler (2002) found that Japanese and Korean learners, whose native languages lack articles, frequently omitted them in written and spoken English. Similarly, Chaudron and Parker (1990) observed that Chinese learners tended to overuse "the" in contexts where no article was needed. Given that Hausa also lacks a dedicated article system, it is expected that Hausa-English bilinguals exhibit similar error patterns, making it necessary to analyze their specific challenges.

The Impact of First Language (Hausa) on English Article Usage

First language influence, also known as language transfer, plays a significant role in the acquisition of English articles by Hausa-English bilinguals. Negative transfer occurs when learners apply the grammatical rules of Hausa to English, leading to systematic errors. Since Hausa does not have articles equivalent to "a," "an," and "the," speakers must develop new strategies to understand and use English articles correctly (Newman, 2000).

Omission of Articles Due to L1 Transfer

Hausa speakers often omit articles when speaking or writing in English because their L1 does not require such determiners. Instead, Hausa relies on demonstratives (*wannan* = "this," *wancan* = "that") or contextual information to convey specificity (Jibril, 1982). For example, a Hausa-English learner might say *"He bought car"* instead of *"He bought a car."*

Overuse of "The" Due to Context-Based Definiteness

Since Hausa relies on context rather than grammatical markers for definiteness, learners sometimes overuse "the" when it is unnecessary. For example, they might say *"The education is important"* instead of *"Education is important."* This occurs because Hausa speakers instinctively use context-based definiteness, leading to an incorrect transfer of rules to English (Bamgbose, 1971).

Influence of Hausa Syntax on Article Placement

Hausa syntax differs from English, particularly in noun phrase structure. In Hausa, adjectives and determiners often follow the noun (*littafi mai kyau* = "book that is good"), whereas in English,

determiners precede the noun (*"the good book"*) (Newman, 2000). This structural difference can cause misplacement of articles among Hausa-English bilinguals.

Overview of Grammatical Error Patterns Among Nigerian Learners of English

Recent research on grammatical errors among Nigerian learners of English has provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by students across various educational levels and linguistic backgrounds. These studies have identified persistent issues in areas such as tense usage, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, articles, and lexico-syntactic structures.

For instance, Obiegbu (2018) conducted a corpus-based analysis of educated Nigerian English usage, revealing that while syntactic errors occur, their frequency is relatively low among both younger and older speakers. This suggests a level of proficiency in written English among educated Nigerians, although certain deviations persist.

In secondary education, Maiguero et al. (2021) examined the written productions of Nigerian senior secondary school students, identifying a total of 410 errors. The most frequent errors were tense errors (139 instances), followed by spelling (102), agreement (61), preposition (28), article (28), verb (22), noun (15), and adjective (15) errors.

Similarly, a study focusing on junior secondary school pupils in Awka South Local Government Area found that 36% of the pupils were unable to communicate their thoughts meaningfully. Among the comprehensible scripts, the most common errors included wrong use of tense (22%), spelling errors (13%), errors in word choice (10%), and wrong use of prepositions (7%).

At the tertiary level, Ojetunde (2013) investigated lexico-grammatical errors in Nigerian English, highlighting deviations from standard English that affect language pedagogy and student performance. The study emphasised the need for teachers to focus on standard English to improve learners' proficiency.

Furthermore, Adejare (2025) explored homophonic errors in WhatsApp text messages among Nigerian ESL speakers, finding that 60% of the identified errors were due to deviations from standard British English pronunciation. The study recommended the use of dictionaries to help learners differentiate homophones and use them appropriately.

Collectively, these studies underscore the persistent grammatical challenges faced by Nigerian learners of English. They highlight the influence of first language interference, inadequate exposure to standard English, and the need for targeted pedagogical interventions to address these issues effectively.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two key linguistic theories: Corder's Error Analysis Theory and Selinker's Interlanguage Theory.

Corder's Error Analysis Theory

Corder (1967) introduced error analysis as a systematic method for understanding second language learners' difficulties. He argued that errors are an essential part of language learning, as they provide insights into learners' internal language systems. This theory supports the analysis of Hausa-English bilinguals' article errors by categorizing them into omission, overgeneralization, and substitution errors. By identifying these patterns, educators can develop strategies to correct and prevent them.

Interlanguage Theory

Selinker (1972) proposed the concept of interlanguage, which describes the evolving linguistic system that learners develop as they acquire a second language. Interlanguage is influenced by L1 transfer, overgeneralization of rules, and the gradual refinement of linguistic competence. In the context of this study, Hausa-English bilinguals' errors in article usage represent an interlanguage stage where Hausa linguistic features interfere with English grammar. Over time, as learners receive feedback and refine their understanding, their article usage is expected to improve.

Both theories highlight the importance of studying learner errors as a natural and necessary part of second language acquisition. They provide a framework for analyzing the persistent challenges Hausa-English bilinguals face in mastering English articles and offer insights into how these challenges can be addressed pedagogically.

The literature on error analysis and article usage errors among non-native speakers highlights the significant influence of first language transfer on English acquisition. Hausa-English bilinguals, like other learners whose native languages lack an article system, struggle with article omission, overgeneralization, and incorrect substitution. The theoretical frameworks of Error Analysis and Interlanguage Theory provide a structured approach to understanding these errors and designing effective teaching interventions. Given the persistent challenges in article usage, further empirical research is needed to document error patterns and develop targeted instructional strategies to improve English proficiency among Hausa-English bilinguals.

Methodology
Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative aspect focuses on statistical analysis of article errors, while the qualitative aspect examines the patterns and causes of these errors. A mixed-method approach provides a comprehensive understanding of article usage among Hausa-English bilinguals (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This study holds linguistic, pedagogical, and practical significance. Linguistically, it contributes to the body of knowledge on interlanguage and second language acquisition, particularly in the Nigerian context. It sheds light on the influence of L1 transfer in the acquisition of English articles, which can inform theories of bilingualism and language learning.

Pedagogically, the findings of this study can help English language instructors develop targeted interventions to address article usage errors. By understanding the specific challenges faced by Hausa-English bilinguals, educators can design more effective teaching strategies, such as explicit instruction on articles, contrastive analysis, and contextual practice. Practically, improved article usage enhances students' proficiency in academic writing, spoken communication, and overall language competence. This is particularly important for FCE Zaria students who aspire to become educators, as their mastery of English grammar will influence their future teaching effectiveness.

Population and Sample

The study comprised 50 NCE 2 students from FCE Zaria, selected through purposive sampling. These students registered for GSE 221 a second semester General English course and are Hausa-English bilinguals with prior exposure to English as a medium of instruction. The sample size was sufficient to identify common patterns while ensuring manageable data analysis (Mackey & Gass, 2015).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study is collected through written tests and classroom observations. The written test comprised three sections: gap-fill exercises, which assess students' ability to select the correct article; sentence correction tasks, which identify common article misuse; and short essay writing, which provides insight into students' natural use of articles in extended writing. Additionally, classroom observations are conducted to examine students' spoken and written use of articles in real-life communication. Errors are carefully recorded to identify recurring patterns (McKay, 2006).

For data analysis, errors are categorized based on James' (1998) classification model, which includes omission errors (leaving out necessary articles), addition errors (using articles unnecessarily), misformation errors (substituting incorrect articles), and misordering errors (placing articles incorrectly). A frequency analysis is then conducted to determine the most common errors, their prevalence among students, and general trends in article misuse. This combination of qualitative categorization and quantitative frequency analysis ensures a comprehensive understanding of article errors among Hausa-English bilinguals.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study, focusing on the types of errors in article usage, their patterns and frequency, the influence of the Hausa language, comparisons with previous studies, and the pedagogical implications of these findings. The analysis was based on data collected from 50 NCE 2 students at FCE Zaria through written tests and classroom observations.

Types of Errors in Article Usage

The analysis of students' responses revealed three major types of errors: omission, substitution, and overuse of articles. These errors reflect the learners' struggle with mastering the use of definite (*the*), indefinite (*a, an*), and zero articles in English.

Omission Errors

Omission errors were the most frequent, accounting for 52% of the total errors identified. These errors occurred when students failed to use an article where one was grammatically required. Examples include:

1) *I saw Ø boy in the market.* (instead of *I saw a boy in the market.*)
2) *She bought Ø apple.* (instead of *She bought an apple.*)
3) *They went to Ø school early in the morning.* (instead of *They went to the school early in the morning.*)

The high occurrence of omission errors suggests that students lack awareness of the obligatory nature of articles in English, likely due to negative transfer from Hausa, which does not use articles.

Substitution Errors

Substitution errors accounted for 31% of the errors. These errors involve the incorrect replacement of one article with another. Common patterns observed include:

4) *She is **a** best student.* (instead of *She is **the** best student.*)

5) *He bought **an** book.* (instead of *He bought **a** book.*)

6) *I saw **the** orange car passing by.* (instead of *I saw **an** orange car passing by.*)

Substitution errors suggest partial knowledge of article rules, as students recognize the need for an article but struggle to apply the correct one. This confusion may arise from the absence of definite and indefinite articles in Hausa, leading students to rely on demonstratives (e.g., "wannan" for "this") instead of English article distinctions.

Overuse Errors

Overuse errors made up **17% of the total errors**, occurring when students inserted an article where none was needed. Examples include:

7) *She loves **the** nature.* (instead of *She loves nature.*)

8) *He went to **the** school every day.* (instead of *He went to school every day.*)

9) *She is **the** my sister.* (instead of *She is my sister.*)

These errors indicate that some students **overgeneralize article rules**, incorrectly applying them in contexts where English does not require an article.

Table (1) Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Article Errors

Error Type	Exact Frequency	Percentage (%)
Omission	**26**	52%
Substitution	**15.5**	31%
Overuse	**8.5**	17%
Total	**50**	**100%**

The dominance of omission errors (52%) suggests that students struggle most with recognizing the necessity of articles in English. Substitution errors (31%) indicate confusion about when to use definite versus indefinite articles, while overuse errors (17%) reflect misapplication of rules. These findings highlight systematic patterns of article misuse, reinforcing the need for targeted instructional interventions.

Figure (1) The bar chart below displays the graphic distribution of article errors:
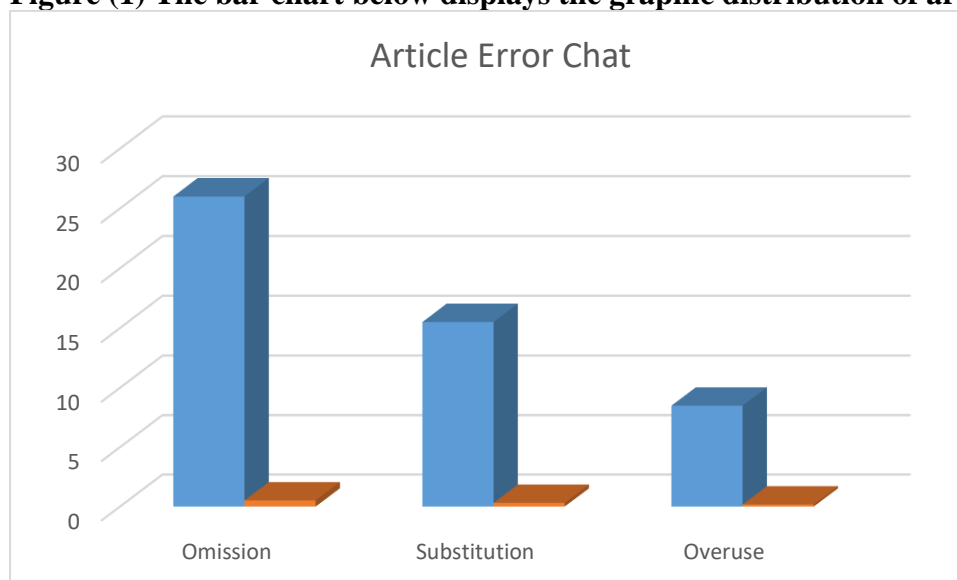
Influence of Hausa Language Structure on English Article Errors

The Hausa language does not have definite or indefinite articles like English does. Instead, it relies on context, demonstratives (e.g., "wannan" meaning "this"), and possessive structures to express specificity. This structural difference leads to negative transfer, where students incorrectly apply Hausa language rules to English.

❖ Omission errors occur because articles are not obligatory in Hausa, making students unaware of their necessity in English.

❖ Substitution errors arise because Hausa speakers use demonstratives (wannan – "this", wancan – "that") to indicate specificity instead of articles, leading to confusion between "a," "an," and "the".

❖ Overuse errors may stem from a misunderstanding of article usage in English, where students attempt to compensate for previous errors by inserting unnecessary articles.

This interference aligns with contrastive analysis theory, which suggests that differences between a learner's first and second language lead to predictable errors (Lado, 1957).

Conclusion

This study examined article usage errors among Hausa-English bilingual students at the Federal College of Education (FCE), Zaria, with a focus on omission, substitution, and overuse errors. Employing a mixed-method approach, data was gathered from 50 NCE 2 students through written tests and classroom observations. The analysis revealed distinct error patterns influenced by the structural differences between Hausa and English.

The most prevalent issue was omission errors (52%), largely attributed to the absence of definite and indefinite articles in Hausa. As a result, students frequently failed to use articles where they were necessary in English. Substitution errors (31%) were also prominent, with students often confusing *a* and *an* or misusing *the* in contexts requiring an indefinite article. Overuse errors (17%) were comparatively less frequent but still notable, as some students inserted unnecessary articles, likely due to overgeneralization of English rules.

A major factor contributing to these errors was L1 influence, as Hausa lacks a dedicated article system. This led to negative transfer, making it challenging for students to intuitively grasp the rules governing English article usage. When compared to studies on Yoruba- and Igbo-English bilinguals, the findings showed a common trend in omission errors, but differences emerged in substitution and overuse errors, indicating that first language influence varies across linguistic groups.

Overall, the study underscores the significant role of first language interference in second language acquisition. It highlights the need for tailored instructional strategies, including explicit teaching of article usage, contrastive analysis, and targeted corrective feedback, to help Hausa-English bilinguals overcome these challenges.

Pedagogical Implications

❖ **Explicit Grammar Instruction:** Given the high incidence of omission errors, teachers should provide direct instruction on the functions of English articles. Lessons should emphasize the differences between definite and indefinite articles and how they signal specificity in English.

❖ **Contrastive Analysis:** Teachers should incorporate contrastive linguistic analysis in the classroom, explaining how Hausa differs from English in article use. This method will help students recognize their errors and avoid L1 interference.

❖ **Context-Based Learning:** Instead of relying solely on abstract grammar rules, students should engage in meaningful communication exercises such as writing tasks, reading comprehension, and spoken dialogues that require correct article usage.

❖ **Error Analysis and Feedback:** Regular error analysis sessions can help students recognize recurring mistakes. Teachers should provide explicit corrective feedback, highlighting errors and guiding students on appropriate corrections.

❖ **Authentic Language Exposure:** Students should be exposed to standard English materials, such as newspapers, novels, and academic texts, to see how articles are naturally used in context.

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