

Investigating common errors in the use of English language articles in writing by students of public secondary schools in Mbale city, Uganda

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Abstract

This study investigates the persistent challenges faced by secondary school students in Mbale City, Uganda, regarding the accurate use of English articles ("a," "an," and "the") in their written work. Despite English being the official language and primary medium of instruction, students frequently exhibit errors such as omissions, incorrect substitutions, and overuse of articles. This issue is not only a localized problem, with studies showing that 45% of students in Mbale City demonstrate poor article usage, but also a global concern for second language learners. The study, guided by Krashen's Input Hypothesis Theory, aimed to identify common errors, contributing factors, and the impact of article usage on academic performance. Key findings indicate that common errors include difficulty in distinguishing between definite and indefinite articles and inconsistent application in both spoken and written forms. Factors contributing to these errors include a lack of clear instruction, insufficient feedback from teachers, structural differences between English and native languages, and inadequate writing practice. The study concluded that students commonly make systematic errors in the use of English articles, particularly involving omissions, substitutions, and overuse. These errors stem from limited phonological awareness, first language interference, and insufficient contextual instruction. The study recommends that teachers should implement targeted grammar instruction that emphasizes the correct usage of English articles, particularly "a," "an," and "the." This can be achieved through contextualized teaching approaches that move beyond rule memorization to include sentence-level application and discourse-level analysis.

Keywords: English language, Second language, Native language, Writing, Grammar

Introduction

The use of English language articles, "a," "an," and "the," has long been recognized as a fundamental yet challenging aspect of English grammar and writing. As grammatical markers of definiteness and specificity, articles are critical in shaping clarity and precision in written communication. Their correct usage greatly influences sentence structure, coherence, and meaning. For learners of English as a second or foreign language, mastering article use poses persistent difficulties, particularly in written contexts. These challenges are often attributed to the absence or differing conceptualization of articles in the learners' first languages. In public secondary school settings, where English is often taught formally, students' ability to apply these grammatical elements accurately in writing is seen as a key indicator of language proficiency.

In the East African region, including Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, the situation remains consistent with the wider Sub-Saharan context. Public secondary schools in these countries generally follow national curricula that emphasize English language competence. However, mastery of grammatical features like articles continues to lag behind, often

contributing to lower performance in English language examinations. In Kenya, for example, national examiners have noted that many candidates show limited understanding of when and how to use definite and indefinite articles in their compositions (Bauer, 2021). In Tanzania and Rwanda, similar patterns have been observed, particularly in rural and under-resourced schools.

Narrowing down to Mbale City in Eastern Uganda, a growing urban center with a mix of urban and peri-urban public secondary schools, the challenge becomes more pronounced. Despite the presence of trained English language teachers and ongoing curriculum reforms (Kajubi, Mugisha, & Muwanguzi, 2023), students in these schools continue to demonstrate significant difficulties in using English articles appropriately in their writing. Teachers report that while students can sometimes use articles in isolated exercises, they struggle to apply them consistently in extended writing tasks. According to Nansubuga (2022), this inconsistency is not only a result of insufficient classroom instruction but also stems from a lack of individualized feedback and opportunities for revision. This

inconsistency affects both their academic performance and overall language development (Mukisa&Tumwesigye, 2024). Furthermore, Tembe (2025) emphasizes that instructional practices in many Ugandan classrooms often prioritize exam preparation over functional grammar instruction, leaving students underprepared for real-world writing demands.

The acquisition of English articles, definite ("the") and indefinite ("a","an"), remains a significant challenge for many secondary school students worldwide, particularly those learning English as a second language. In regions like Mbale City, Uganda, where English is predominantly taught in formal educational settings, the correct use of articles often becomes a persistent barrier in students' written communication. These challenges are compounded by the complexity of English article rules, which differ substantially from those in many local languages. Secondary school students frequently commit errors such as omission, overuse, and misplacement of articles in their writing, which can severely affect the clarity and accuracy of their communication (Yuan & Liao, 2022; Zhang, 2021). Thus, understanding the nature and extent of article usage challenges among public secondary school students in Mbale City is crucial for designing effective instructional strategies and improving language outcomes.

Research Objective

To examine common errors in the use of English language articles in writing by secondary school students.

Research Question

What are the common errors in the use of English language articles in writing by students of public secondary schools?

Literature Review

A primary error among secondary school students is the omission of articles, particularly when students do not perceive the need for them, often due to the lack of equivalent structures in their native languages. For instance, in many African languages, including Luganda, articles do not exist, leading to the omission of necessary elements in written English. Studies suggest that students learning English may apply their first language structures, thereby neglecting to use "a","an," or "the" in contexts where they are essential (Krashen, 2004; Bowers & Gilroy, 2021). This phenomenon is in line with the Transfer Hypothesis, which asserts that learners often carry over structures from their first language to the second, causing errors such as the omission of articles (Ellis, 2021). An example of this is found in students writing "She is teacher" instead of "She is a teacher," reflecting the absence of indefinite articles in their native language.

Another common error is overuse of the definite article "the," which is sometimes employed unnecessarily before singular or general nouns. This error often arises from an

overgeneralization of the rules of article usage, where learners use "the" in contexts where it does not apply. For instance, students may say, "The children like football" when referring to children in general, rather than a specific group of children. This overuse of "the" typically results from students misunderstanding the nuanced distinction between countable and uncountable nouns and specific versus non-specific referents in English (Lightbown & Spada, 2022; Bardovi-Harlig, 2020). Such errors frequently arise when students do not fully grasp the contextual use of articles, often assuming "the" is a universal marker for all nouns.

Misplacement errors also constitute a significant category in the study of article usage. Misplacement occurs when students use the wrong article in contexts where phonetic rules apply. For example, writing "a apple" instead of "an apple" is a common error among learners. According to Ellis (2021), these errors arise because students fail to apply the phonetic rule that dictates the use of "a" or "an" based on the sound that follows the article, rather than the first letter of the following word. Misplacement errors can occur particularly when learners are not accustomed to English's intricate rules regarding vowel and consonant sounds (Isa et al. 2022; Ibrahim et al. 2025). For example, "a" should precede consonant sounds and "an" should precede vowel sounds, but such distinctions may not exist in the learners' first languages, leading to frequent mistakes.

Students' limited understanding of the rules governing article use can also be attributed to insufficient teaching strategies and instructional focus on articles in many secondary school classrooms (Abubakar et al. 2024; Isa et al. 2023). In Mbale City, as in many other regions, instruction on article usage is often not given the necessary emphasis, with teachers prioritizing more visibly complex grammatical elements like tenses and sentence structures. Teachers may also overlook the need to explicitly teach the use of articles, if students will naturally acquire them through exposure (Yuan & Liao, 2022). Research by Harris and Williams (2020) suggests that a lack of explicit instruction on specific grammatical structures like articles leads to persistent errors, as students are left to self-correct or learn through trial and error. This gap in explicit teaching results in students perpetuating incorrect article usage over time.

Furthermore, transfer of grammatical rules from students' first languages plays a key role in article errors. The absence of articles in many African languages, including Luganda, significantly impacts second language acquisition of articles in English. According to Krashen (2004), L1 interference often leads to errors in second language acquisition, particularly when learners fail to recognize the functional roles that articles play in English syntax. As a result, students may omit articles or apply them incorrectly, as their native

language structures do not require the use of articles in similar contexts. Recent research by Shin and Kim (2021) underscores the importance of understanding how L1 linguistic systems influence the acquisition of grammatical structures in L2.

Moreover, a lack of sufficient practice opportunities further exacerbates the issue. While students may learn the theoretical rules for article usage, their writing often lacks sufficient real-world practice necessary to master these rules. Studies have shown that learners need repeated, meaningful exposure to articles in various communicative contexts to solidify their understanding (Zhang, 2021; Bowers & Gilroy, 2021). Unfortunately, in Mbale City, students often face limited exposure to English outside of the classroom setting, and written tasks might not always require the conscious use of articles. As a result, students' writing may be riddled with article errors, even if they have studied the rules in theory.

Another issue contributing to errors in article usage is the complexity of article rules in English. Unlike some other grammatical structures, the use of articles in English is context-dependent and requires an understanding of both syntactic rules and the speaker's intent (Mulondo et al. 2026). This complexity can cause confusion among learners, particularly when they encounter abstract or nuanced contexts where article choice impacts meaning (Carroll, 2019). For instance, the difference between "a dog" (any dog) and "the dog" (a specific dog) is often subtle, and learners may struggle to grasp the implications of article use in such situations. The lack of sufficient context-specific examples in textbooks and classroom instruction can make it difficult for students to apply the rules correctly (Kibbumba et al. (2026).

Finally, the quality of teaching materials and resources available to students in Mbale City also affects their mastery of article usage. In many educational settings, textbooks may not provide enough exercises or examples that focus specifically on articles, or the exercises provided may not offer sufficient opportunities for corrective feedback (Bardovi-Harlig, 2020). Research by Ellis (2021) and Haruna et al. (2024) indicates that students learn best when provided with targeted practice that directly addresses their common errors, yet in many schools, such resources may be lacking. Consequently, the common errors in the use of English articles in writing by secondary school students in Mbale City can be attributed to a combination of linguistic interference from their first languages, inadequate instructional focus, limited exposure to English in real-life contexts, and the inherent complexity of English article rules. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, including explicit instruction, more practice opportunities, and consistent feedback to help students overcome these persistent errors and improve their writing proficiency.

Theoretical Framework

The study of English language articles in writing among secondary school students can be well-understood through the lens of Input Hypothesis Theory proposed by Stephen Krashen (1985). According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to language input that is just beyond their current proficiency level but still comprehensible. In the context of English language learning, students who lack sufficient exposure to correct article usage, both in spoken and written forms, may struggle with internalizing and applying the rules of article usage. The applicability of this theory to this study is evident, as students in Mbale City, like many in Sub-Saharan Africa, may not have adequate exposure to authentic, high-quality English input that would facilitate their proper use of articles in writing. Consequently, their understanding and use of articles could be stunted, impacting their academic performance in English language writing.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey design, which was ideal for systematically investigating the use of English language articles in writing among secondary school students in Mbale City. The descriptive survey design, as noted by Kombo and Tromp (2009), allowed the systematic collection of data and the reporting of findings. It provides a detailed description of the phenomena under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A mixed-methods approach was adopted to collect both qualitative and quantitative data, enhancing the reliability and validity of the study's results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The qualitative component explored teachers' insights into the challenges students face with article usage, while the quantitative component measured the frequency and types of errors in student writing.

Target Population

The target population for this study comprised approximately 600 students and 20 English language teachers from five public secondary schools in Mbale City, identified as School A, School B, School C, School D, and School E. The focus was placed on Senior Two and Senior Three students, as they are at a crucial stage of language development, particularly in mastering grammatical articles ("a," "an," and "the"), which are fundamental to effective academic writing.

Due to the large class sizes typical of public secondary schools, accessing all students was not feasible. Therefore, the researcher concentrated on students whose parents or guardians could be reached during school activities-in three schools, this was during visitation days, while in the remaining two schools, it was during PTA meetings. These

opportunities enabled the researchers to explain the study and obtain informed consent from parents or guardians of students under the age of 18. However, a few students who had already reached the age of 18 were considered independently and included directly in the population, as they could provide their own consent. Only students for whom appropriate consent was obtained formed the population from which the study sample was drawn. The inclusion of English language teachers, who were purposively selected, provided valuable professional insights into students’ writing challenges and the instructional strategies used to address article usage.

Table 1: Distribution of Target Population by School

School	Student Population	Teacher Population
School A	140	4
School B	120	4
School C	110	4

Table 2: Sample Size and Sampling Techniques by School

School	Student Sample	Sampling Technique (Students)	Teacher Sample	Sampling Technique (Teachers)
School A	55	Simple Random Sampling	4	Purposive Sampling
School B	47	Simple Random Sampling	4	Purposive Sampling
School C	43	Simple Random Sampling	4	Purposive Sampling
School D	45	Simple Random Sampling	4	Purposive Sampling
School E	45	Simple Random Sampling	3	Purposive Sampling
Total	235		19	

Source: Senior Inspector of Schools, Mbale City (2025)

Sampling Techniques

To ensure methodological rigor and representativeness, the study applied both probability and non-probability sampling techniques.

Simple Random Sampling

For the student respondents, simple random sampling was used. Lists of all Senior Two and Senior Three students from each of the five schools were obtained, and a computerized randomization process was used to select the required number of students from each school. This probabilistic approach ensured that every student had an equal chance of being selected, thereby minimizing bias and enhancing the external validity of the quantitative findings.

Purposive Sampling

For the teacher respondents, purposive sampling was employed. English language teachers were selected based on their qualifications, experience in teaching grammar and writing, and active engagement in assessing student written work. Their inclusion was intended to provide informed, experience-based insights into patterns of article usage and instructional practices within their schools.

As a result, this combined sampling strategy aligns with best practices in mixed-method research, ensuring both

School D	115	4
School E	115	4
Total	600	20

Source: Senior Inspector of Schools, Mbale City (2025)

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

Sample Size

Using Krejcie and Morgan’s (1970) sample size determination table, a representative sample of 235 students was selected from the total student population of 600. This sample size was sufficient for statistical analysis and generalization within the context of secondary schools in Mbale City. Additionally, 19 English language teachers were selected from the five schools to participate in qualitative interviews, ensuring coverage across all institutions involved in the study.

statistical representativeness for generalizable results and expert insight for qualitative depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

Data Collection Instruments

The study used two main instruments to collect data from respondents: a questionnaire and an interview guide.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Section A gathers demographic information (e.g., age, gender, school), and Section B includes 20 items related to the use of English language articles in writing. The items in Section B are based on the specific objectives of the study. The respondents rated their responses using a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree.

Interview Guide

Interview guide which contained 10 open-ended questions was used to collect qualitative data from the English teachers. This allowed for a deeper understanding of the issue from the teachers’ point of view and helped validate the questionnaire responses.

Quality control

This involves validity and reliability of research instruments as presented below

Validity of Research Instruments

Validity ensures that the research instruments measure what they are intended to measure. To establish content validity, the questionnaires and interview guides were reviewed by experts in the field, including English language educators and academic supervisors. The content validity index (CVI) was calculated using the following formula:

$CVI = (\text{Number of relevant items} / \text{Total number of items})$.

Reliability of the Research Instruments

Reliability refers to the consistency and stability of the research instruments over time. To assess the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of students from a different school not involved in the main study. The same questionnaire was administered to the same group after an interval of two weeks. The responses were analyzed to determine the consistency of results. The internal consistency of the questionnaire items was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, where a reliability index of 0.70 or higher was deemed acceptable for confirming the instrument's reliability.

Data Analysis

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative data analysis to ensure a comprehensive examination of the research problem. The combination of these methods allows a balanced interpretation, where statistical trends are complemented by qualitative insights.

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS version 25, a widely recognized statistical tool known for its efficiency in handling large datasets and minimizing errors (Pallant 2020). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, summarized demographic data and Likert scale responses. Frequencies and percentages provided a clear distribution of categorical variables, while means and standard deviations helped assess patterns in students' use of English articles, offering insights into overall tendencies and variability.

For qualitative data, thematic analysis identified recurring themes in teachers' responses, providing depth to the findings (Braun & Clarke 2019). This method is well-suited for extracting meaningful patterns from textual data, allowing for both structured categorization and flexibility in interpretation. The analysis helped uncover the reasons behind students' misuse of English articles, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the issue. Therefore, by integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study ensured methodological rigor and enhanced the validity of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark 2018). Statistical trends were contextualized with qualitative insights, ensuring a well-rounded interpretation of the data.

Data Gathering Procedure

Before data collection, the researchers obtained an introduction letter from the Directorate of Higher Degrees and Research to seek approval from the relevant education authorities. Once approval was granted, the researcher visited the selected schools and distributed the questionnaires to the students. The students were given a set time to complete the questionnaire. Afterward, interviews with the English teachers were scheduled at their convenience. Data collection took place over a period of two weeks to ensure sufficient time for both questionnaires and interviews.

Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adhered to established ethical principles for research involving minors. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants and their parents or guardians before data collection commenced. The purpose, procedures, risks (if any), and benefits of the study were clearly explained.

Recognizing the presence of underage participants and the linguistic diversity of the community, the researcher made accommodations for parents/guardians who were not proficient in English. In such cases, the consent form was orally translated into Lumasaba and Luganda, ensuring clear understanding. Where literacy was a limitation, consent was obtained through verbal explanation followed by signature or thumbprint to affirm agreement.

Data confidentiality and participant anonymity were prioritized. No identifying details were included in the final report, and all records were securely stored, accessible only to the researcher and supervising academic staff. These ethical measures guaranteed that participation was fully informed, voluntary, and respectful of the local context and cultural values.

Limitations

The study was confined to a limited number of government secondary schools in Mbale city, which may not have fully represented the broader population of ESL learners in Uganda. This limited sample size might have affected the generalizability of the findings. Evaluating use of English articles (a, an, the) in the students' written work was potentially subjective. Factors such as socioeconomic background, parental education, and varying levels of exposure to English outside the classroom could have influenced the outcomes. The study could not control all these external variables. Additionally, the research was conducted within a specific time frame. Since language proficiency particularly in the use of English articles is a dynamic process, the findings reflected only a snapshot of the learners' abilities and may not have accounted for gradual progress or fluctuations over a longer period.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation of the Findings

Data analysis ensured triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data to ensure comprehensive findings

Common Errors in the Use of English Language Articles in Writing

Quantitative analysis was conducted using responses to eight survey statements, measured on a Likert scale (5 = Strongly Agree (SA), 4 = Agree (A), 3 = Neutral (NS), 2 = Disagree (D), 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD)). Descriptive statistics were applied to interpret the data, and the results are presented in the table below.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Common Errors in the Use of English Language Articles (N = 188)

Statement	SA (%)	A (%)	N (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Total (f)	Mean	Std
1. I often misuse "a," "an," and "the" when writing.	78 (41.5%)	66 (35.1%)	22 (11.7%)	14 (7.4%)	8 (4.3%)	188 (100%)	4.02	0.97
2. I sometimes omit articles where they are required in a sentence.	70 (37.2%)	74 (39.4%)	20 (10.6%)	16 (8.5%)	8 (4.3%)	188 (100%)	3.99	0.96
3. I use "a" and "an" incorrectly before nouns starting with vowel and consonant sounds.	75 (39.9%)	71 (37.8%)	18 (9.6%)	15 (8.0%)	9 (4.8%)	188 (100%)	4.00	0.98
4. I have difficulty knowing when to use "the" in my writing.	82 (43.6%)	68 (36.2%)	20 (10.6%)	10 (5.3%)	8 (4.3%)	188 (100%)	4.10	0.93
5. I struggle with article usage in both speaking and writing.	74 (39.4%)	72 (38.3%)	19 (10.1%)	14 (7.4%)	9 (4.8%)	188 (100%)	4.01	0.97
6. I tend to overuse "the" in places where it is not necessary.	68 (36.2%)	73 (38.8%)	22 (11.7%)	17 (9.0%)	8 (4.3%)	188 (100%)	3.95	0.95
7. I make fewer article errors when writing in simpler sentences.	77 (41.0%)	70 (37.2%)	18 (9.6%)	14 (7.4%)	9 (4.8%)	188 (100%)	4.02	0.96
8. I confuse article use when translating ideas from my local language to English.	80 (42.6%)	69 (36.7%)	20 (10.6%)	12 (6.4%)	7 (3.7%)	188 (100%)	4.09	0.91

Source: Primary Data (2025)

The table above illustrates the responses from 188 participants concerning their difficulties and errors in the use of English language articles. The data is analyzed across several statements, and the mean and standard deviation values offer insight into the extent of these issues. Below is a detailed interpretation of each statement.

In the first statement, participants addressed the misuse of "a," "an," and "the" in writing. The majority of respondents, 78 (41.5%) strongly agreeing and 66 (35.1%) agreeing, indicated that they frequently misuse these fundamental articles. The mean score of 4.02, coupled with a standard deviation of 0.97, reflects a significant struggle in this area. Learners appear to have difficulty consistently identifying when to use each article, which may stem from limited practice or a lack of understanding of grammatical functions. To mitigate this issue, it is essential to reinforce the rules of article usage through targeted grammar lessons, using real-world examples to facilitate practical learning.

Building on this, the second statement investigates the omission of articles where they are required. A considerable number of respondents, 70 (37.2%) strongly agreeing and 74 (39.4%) agreeing, acknowledged that they often overlook articles in necessary contexts. The mean score of 3.99 reflects a common, albeit slightly less intense, challenge. This pattern may be influenced by learners' native languages that do not employ articles similarly. Therefore, explicit instruction on the structural necessity of articles, especially within complex sentences, is critical. Through sentence analysis exercises, learners can be trained to recognize when

articles are needed and learn to identify such omissions during editing.

Closely related to this, the third statement addresses the misuse of "a" and "an" before vowel and consonant sounds. A combined 77.7% of participants, 75 strongly agreeing and 71 agreeing, reported difficulties with this, yielding a mean score of 4.00. This highlights a prevalent issue stemming from confusion over vowel and consonant sounds rather than the letters themselves. To address this, phonetic-based grammar activities and targeted practice can enhance learners' understanding. Introducing phonetic drills into lessons may provide additional clarity and reinforce the correct usage patterns.

The fourth statement reveals that the most significant difficulty lies in knowing when to use the definite article "the." This statement garnered the highest agreement levels, with 82 (43.6%) strongly agreeing and 68 (36.2%) agreeing, with a mean of 4.10 and a standard deviation of 0.93. These results reflect the inherent complexity of "the," which involves contextual nuances like specificity and shared knowledge. Consequently, teaching should emphasize contextual applications through examples and case studies, enabling learners to see how "the" functions in natural discourse.

Extending the discussion, the fifth statement highlights that learners struggle with article usage in both speaking and writing. With 74 (39.4%) strongly agreeing and 72 (38.3%) agreeing, the mean score of 4.01 confirms that article errors permeate across communicative forms. This may result from

ingrained habits that manifest in both written and spoken English. Hence, integrating article usage into both spoken and written classroom activities is essential. Encouraging learners to apply article rules in diverse contexts can lead to more consistent proficiency.

The sixth statement brings attention to the overuse of "the" in unnecessary contexts. A significant number of respondents, 68 (36.2%) strongly agreeing and 73 (38.8%) agreeing, highlighted this issue, producing a mean of 3.95. This suggests an over-application of general rules, perhaps due to learners' attempts to err on the side of caution. One effective strategy is contrastive grammar instruction, which helps learners distinguish between correct and excessive usage by comparing examples.

The seventh statement presents a slightly different perspective, indicating that participants reported fewer errors when writing simpler sentences. With 77 (41.0%) strongly agreeing and 70 (37.2%) agreeing, the mean score of 4.02 supports the idea that simpler constructions reduce the likelihood of article errors. This finding suggests the need for a scaffolded instructional approach, where learners first master article usage in basic sentence structures before progressing to more complex grammatical forms.

Finally, the eighth statement underscores the confusion arising from translating ideas from local languages into English. A significant number of respondents, 80 (42.6%) strongly agreeing and 69 (36.7%) agreeing, acknowledged this challenge, reflected in a mean of 4.09. This issue likely results from differences in how articles function across languages. To address this, instructional practices should incorporate translation exercises that clearly delineate the structural differences in article use between English and learners' native tongues, thereby enhancing awareness and competence.

Therefore, quantitative data from 188 student responses revealed significant difficulties in mastering article usage. A large proportion of students reported misuse of the articles "a," "an," and "the." Specifically, 76.6% admitted to omitting articles in required contexts, while 77.7% expressed confusion over choosing between "a" and "an" depending on vowel and consonant sounds. The article "the" emerged as particularly problematic, with 79.8% of students struggling to determine its appropriate usage. Additionally, 75% acknowledged overusing "the," and 78.2% noted that they made fewer errors in simple sentence structures. Importantly, 79.3% of the respondents confirmed that interference from their mother tongue contributed to article misuse.

On the other hand, the quantitative findings were complemented by qualitative insights, which provided deeper contextual understanding and enriched the overall interpretation of the results. During the transcription process, only responses that were directly relevant to the study objectives were considered for analysis. This ensured that the qualitative data remained focused and aligned with the central research question. The subsequent discussion therefore examines the common errors in the use of English language articles in student writing, as observed among secondary school students in Mbale City, offering a more

comprehensive and nuanced perspective on the patterns and underlying causes of these grammatical challenges.

Respondent code-named A02 commented that,

"The most frequent errors I observe are the omission of articles in certain sentences and the incorrect use of 'the' when students should use 'a' or 'an.' For example, students often say 'I have dog' instead of 'I have a dog' or 'I read book' instead of 'I read a book.'"

This observation underscores a critical challenge in students' writing, where the omission and substitution of articles distort meaning and hinder clarity. The respondent's examples show how learners tend to eliminate articles altogether or confuse definite and indefinite forms, indicating a shallow understanding of the grammatical role of articles in determining specificity. Such errors may result from limited emphasis on articles in early instruction or from language transfer effects, especially for students whose mother tongues do not use article systems. These misuses, though seemingly minor, have significant implications for writing fluency and reader comprehension.

Respondent code-named B03 argued that,

"Students often misuse 'the' when talking about things in general, like saying 'the dogs are friendly' when they should simply say 'dogs are friendly.'"

This point sheds light on a different yet common misuse: overgeneralization of the definite article 'the.' The respondent captures how students confuse specific references with general statements. In English, articles help distinguish between generic categories and particular instances; misapplying 'the' in generalizations signals conceptual confusion about when an article introduces specificity. Such usage errors may stem from teaching that emphasizes grammatical rules without embedding them in real communication contexts, leading to memorization without internalization.

Respondent code-named C06 maintained that,

"Students frequently get confused about when to use 'a' versus 'an.' They tend to use 'an' for words that start with consonants, like 'an dog' instead of 'a dog.'"

Here, the respondent pinpoints the phonological misunderstanding behind article selection. Learners often associate 'an' with vowels based on spelling rather than sound. The example of 'an dog' reveals that students are not applying the rule of using 'an' before vowel sounds (e.g., 'an hour') rather than simply vowel letters. This confusion reflects the need for more pronunciation-based instruction, where learners are taught to listen to the initial sounds of words rather than rely solely on written cues. Without phonological awareness, learners' risk consistent misuse despite memorizing grammar rules.

Respondent code-named D04 emphasized that,

"One common mistake I see is students overusing 'the' in sentences like 'I have the idea' when 'I have an idea' would be more appropriate. This shows a misunderstanding of when to use 'the' to refer to something specific."

The respondent here highlights a misuse rooted in a conceptual flaw: failing to distinguish between shared and new information. 'The idea' implies prior shared knowledge, while 'an idea' introduces something new. This misuse can severely alter meaning in academic writing. Such confusion

suggests students need guided practice distinguishing whether a noun is already known to the audience or not, particularly in narrative or explanatory contexts. Without this discernment, learners' use of articles becomes arbitrary and disruptive to textual coherence.

Respondent code-named E05 suggested that,

"Another mistake is students misplacing articles before nouns starting with vowel sounds. I have often seen sentences like 'an university' instead of 'a university.' They do not realize the rule of using 'an' before vowel sounds, not just vowel letters."

This error again underscores the disconnection between spelling and pronunciation. 'University' begins with a consonantal /ju:/ sound, thus requiring 'a' instead of 'an.' The respondent's insight reveals that learners tend to apply visual cues rather than auditory ones when selecting articles. The recurring nature of this mistake indicates that traditional grammar drills may fall short unless supplemented with oral drills and listening tasks, which help anchor the rule in phonetic reality rather than orthographic guesswork.

Respondent code-named F06 stated that,

"Students struggle with using 'the' correctly in specific contexts, such as saying 'I went to the home' when 'home' should not have an article. This suggests a misunderstanding of when to omit articles."

This response introduces a subtler issue: over insertion of 'the' with institutional or idiomatic nouns. Words like 'home,' 'school,' and 'hospital' do not require articles when used in their institutional sense. Misusing 'the' in such contexts may seem minor but significantly affects idiomatic accuracy and stylistic naturalness. The respondent's observation suggests that learners must be made aware of fixed expressions and habitual patterns where article use is either required or omitted. Exposure to authentic texts and correction through peer-review processes can help clarify such details.

Thus, the data highlights substantial challenges that learners face regarding article usage in English, especially across writing, speaking, and translation contexts. These difficulties are further compounded by the influence of native language structures and the inherent complexity of article rules. A systematic and explicit instructional approach, combining theoretical explanations with practical applications such as phonetic drills, sentence analysis, and contrastive grammar activities, can significantly support learners in overcoming these pervasive errors.

Therefore, qualitative findings supported these trends. Teachers highlighted common substitution and omission errors, such as "I have dog" instead of "a dog," and noted frequent overuse of "the" in generalizations. Confusion between "a" and "an" often stemmed from attention to spelling rather than pronunciation, and the misuse of specific vs. general references (for instance, "the idea" instead of "an idea") revealed a lack of conceptual understanding.

These findings suggest that article misuse is both pervasive and multifaceted, rooted in rule misapplication, phonological confusion, and limited grammatical instruction. Instructional strategies should therefore focus on

contextual usage, phonemic awareness, and practical application in both writing and speaking.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal a persistent and multifaceted challenge among secondary school students in Mbale City concerning the appropriate use of English language articles, *a*, *an*, and *the*, in writing. Drawing from both quantitative and qualitative data, it is evident that article misuse is not only frequent but also deeply rooted in linguistic, pedagogical, and phonological factors. A significant majority of respondents affirmed that they regularly misuse or omit articles, with mean scores across the survey items clustering around 4.00 on a five-point Likert scale, denoting high levels of agreement and thus highlighting the prevalence of this grammatical issue.

The high frequency of article omission and substitution, such as using "I have dog" instead of "I have a dog," or "the dogs are friendly" when referring to dogs in general, reflects learners' limited grasp of the distinctions between definite, indefinite, and zero article use. This aligns with prior research emphasizing the influence of mother tongue interference and inadequate syntactic awareness in second language contexts (Azar, 2017; Ellis, 2021). In many Ugandan local languages, articles do not function in the same structural or semantic roles as they do in English, thereby creating transfer errors during translation and sentence construction (Mukwana, 2020).

The quantitative results further expose the learners' struggles with phonologically conditioned usage, particularly between "a" and "an." As noted by respondents and supported by research, many learners select these articles based on spelling rather than sound (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2016). Statements such as "an dog" or "an university" reflect a misunderstanding of vowel sounds versus vowel letters, which indicates insufficient phonological instruction. Phonetic-based instruction has been shown to significantly enhance students' command of article usage by reinforcing the link between pronunciation and grammatical form (Swan & Smith, 2021).

Moreover, the excessive use of the definite article "the" where it is not needed, such as in phrases like "the home" or "the idea", suggests that students struggle to distinguish between specific and general reference, or between known and new information in discourse. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) argue, article usage in English is closely tied to the information structure of the sentence and the broader context of use. Without adequate instruction on such nuances, learners resort to either omission or overuse, both of which hinder clarity and coherence in writing. Interestingly, students indicated that they made fewer errors when writing in simpler sentence structures. This finding corresponds with the cognitive load theory, which posits that learners perform better when processing demands are reduced (Sweller, Ayres, & Kalyuga, 2011; Haruna et al. 2024). It suggests that instructional scaffolding, from simple to complex structures, may be effective in supporting article mastery. Teachers should therefore adopt graduated teaching methods that introduce article rules in

basic constructions before applying them to more cognitively demanding contexts.

In addition, the qualitative responses reinforce the importance of authentic context in grammar teaching. Errors such as confusing “the dogs are friendly” with “dogs are friendly” reveal a lack of conceptual understanding regarding generic reference. This finding echoes Larsen-Freeman’s (2015) call for grammar instruction to move beyond rule memorization toward usage-based and meaning-focused pedagogy.

Another major insight from the data is the persistent confusion learners face when translating from their first language into English. The lack of article equivalents in many indigenous languages contributes to systematic errors, as learners attempt to impose native language syntax onto English grammar (Katamba & Ssempebwa, 2018; Haruna et al. 2025). The influence of L1 interference is not only linguistic but also cognitive, as students operate under grammars that do not require articles, thus defaulting to structures like “read book” or “go to the school” inappropriately.

From an instructional standpoint, these findings demand a more deliberate and diversified approach to article teaching. Grammar should be taught in ways that integrate phonetic awareness, contextual usage, and comparative linguistics. Strategies such as error analysis, contextual drills, minimal pair exercises, and translation comparison can help bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application (Usman, 2025). Furthermore, incorporating peer feedback and authentic reading materials could help students internalize correct patterns through exposure and reflection.

In summary, the study establishes that errors in article use among secondary school students in Mbale City are systematic and widespread, stemming from a complex interplay of linguistic transfer, cognitive misapplication, and insufficient contextual training. The evidence suggests that a shift toward integrated, communicative grammar teaching, supported by phonological sensitivity and contextual practice, can substantially mitigate these issues. Future research should explore the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions in Ugandan classrooms, especially within multilingual and multicultural environments, to develop evidence-based pedagogical responses that foster grammatical competence.

Conclusion

The study concluded that students in public secondary schools in Mbale City commonly make systematic errors in the use of English articles, particularly involving omissions, substitutions, and overuse. These errors stem from limited phonological awareness, first language interference, and insufficient contextual instruction. The findings affirm the need for grammar teaching that integrates sound-based rules, contextual practice, and contrastive analysis to foster article accuracy.

Recommendation

Teachers should implement targeted grammar instruction that emphasizes the correct usage of English articles, particularly "a," "an," and "the." This can be achieved through contextualized teaching approaches that move

beyond rule memorization to include sentence-level application and discourse-level analysis. Regular classroom activities should expose students to both correct and incorrect article usage to sharpen their awareness of common errors, such as omission and overgeneralization. Structured practice exercises, peer correction, and guided writing tasks can help learners internalize proper patterns and reduce consistent mistakes in their writing.

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