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Advanced NNS Teachers' Different Error Patterns on English Articles Depending on a Task Type

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Even high advanced language users make English article mistakes for various reasons. In this study, English article usage of thirteen non-native-speaking EFL teachers in the online forums of two graduate courses was examined in order to identify their patterns of recurring article errors. Based on their error patterns in the online forums, a cloze test was specially developed and administered. Most non-native-speaking participants showed similar levels of performance in the online forums and on the cloze test but demonstrated different error patterns depending on a task type, suggesting multiple patterns of article usage errors among advanced learners. The participants made the most errors misusing the zero article where either the indefinite article or the definite was obligatory in the online forums. On the other hand, the error percentages in zero-for-the or zero-for-a contexts were increased on the cloze test and the participants tended to overuse the definite article instead of the indefinite article or the zero article. Analyses of the syntactic environments of the article errors were provided to explain the differences depending on the task types and pedagogical implications for advanced learners on the basis of the analyses are also provided.

[English articles/grammar education/error analysis]

I. INTRODUCTION

Knowing the characteristics and the most predictable areas of English article errors can assist language learners in reducing the number of future errors. So far, numerous researchers (Agnihotri, Khanna & Mukherjee, 1984; Butler, 1999, 2002; Huebner, 1979, 1983, 1985; Ionin & Wexler, 2003; Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004; Kang, 2002; Kharma, 1981; Kym, 2006; Lee, 1996; Lee, 1997; Lee, 2007; Master, 1990, 1995, 1997, 2002; Park,

2005) tried to identify the most problematic areas of article usage analyzing syntactic, semantic or morphological environments of recurring errors, or possible causes of article errors such as L1 transfer. Most of previous research regarding English articles mainly analyzed beginning level learners' spoken language, so those results were able to predict neither status of advanced learners' article usage nor general patterns of the most recurring article errors. Park's (2005) participants were highly advanced learners but they solely took a cloze test along with an interview. Their error percentages were also relatively high, 61.54%, regardless of their level. Therefore, the current participants, highly advanced English users and former EFL teachers, can shed light on the areas where previous research was not able to explain.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

L1 transfer has provided one of the primary explanations for difficulties in language acquisition, especially for difficulties in article acquisition. For instance, Huebner (1985) finds that beginning-level language learners overuse the definite article and learners whose native languages do not have an article system, also known as [-ART] languages, learn how to use the indefinite article at a slower rate than those whose native languages have articles, [+ART] languages. Besides longer learning time, Park's (1996) study found that [+ART] group, French and German participants, outperformed [-ART] group, Japanese and Korean participants, on a multiple-choice test and error-correction. Plus, Master (1997) claims that the [-ART] group tends not to use the indefinite article until they are certain of the usage. Lee (1996) also found that Korean participants frequently omit an article and she explains the omission of articles with L1 transfer.

In terms of article error patterns, Agnihotri et al. (1984) explored error patterns among beginning-level learners and found that the participants made more article errors in front of nouns in the sentence-initial positions than in the object positions; in addition, more errors occurred when there were more modifying words between an article and a noun.

In order to examine syntactic and morphological environments of article errors, Master (1995) collected written summaries made by Chinese and Japanese M.A. students in a TESOL program at an American university for one semester and gave the participants feedback regarding their article errors. *Zero-for-the* errors, usage of the zero article in obligatory contexts for the definite article, were the most common among the participants. The participants omitted the definite article most frequently in the following three occasions: (1) for ranking adjectives such as *the first* (2) for shared knowledge of

uniqueness such as *the sun* and (3) for nouns that have post modifications such as "*the* book on the table." The participants' article errors generally decreased over the semester, but *zero-for-the* errors increased.

Master (1995) interpreted this phenomenon as a facet of the participants' shared knowledge. The writers stopped using the definite article because they assumed that the readers, their classmates and the professor, knew the situations being talked about. Regarding the decreased number of errors, Master claims that overall article errors decreased due to the effectiveness of his feedback on the participants' article errors on their written summaries. The participants seemed to become aware of their errors after the feedback and tried to reduce the article errors.

Robertson (2002) found that Chinese speakers tend to omit the article and the error percentage was 22%. He explains the errors with the following three principles:

> (1) a syntactic principle of 'determiner drop,' whereby an NP with definite or indefinite reference need not be overtly marked for [±definiteness] if it is included in the scope of the determiner of a preceding NP;
> (2) a 'recoverability' principle, whereby an NP need not be marked for[±definiteness] if the information encoded in this feature is recoverable from the context; and
> (3) a 'lexical transfer principle,' whereby some of these learners are using demonstratives (particularly this) and the numeral one as markers of definiteness and indefiniteness respectively. (Robertson, 2002, p. 135)

As the principles did not explain all error patterns, Robertson (2002) claims that Chinese speakers whose native language does not have grammatical features with overt morphosyntactic realization have difficulty acquiring features of definiteness and referentiality.

Researchers (Kang, 2002; Park, 2005; Lee, 2007) have investigated advanced learners' language usage as the results often show the most resilient types of errors even after they reached a certain level. Park (2005) finds that Korean speakers of English have difficulty using the indefinite article and the zero article in a context of Referential indefinites, which have a specific reference without hearers' knowledge, and in a context of Nonreferentials, which do not have a specific reference nor hearers' knowledge. Park's participants were advanced learners whose average TEPS score was 855.13 (equivalent to 613 on PBT TOEFL or 257 on CBT TOEFL) but they tend to do use an article where no article is required. The accuracy rates depending on an article type were 74.44 % (the), 67.93% (a), 56.29% (average percentage of the zero article: the zero article with plural nouns, 72.01%; and the zero article with uncountable nouns, 47.40%) and 47.52% (the null article). She concluded that Korean learners of English are good at using the definite article due to the

effect of instruction but they need to learn the use of the indefinite article and the zero article.

Kang (2002) also administered a Grammaticality Judgment (GJ) test to two Korean speakers of English who were graduate students at a Canadian university in order to examine Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (FFFH), which claims that second or foreign language learners cannot acquire second language categories that their native languages do not have. As she predicted, the results show that English articles which are not present in Korean are absent in their interlanguage. The participants have a perfect score in contexts of Definite-Specific and Indefinite-Nonspecific but they overgeneralized use of the definite article in the context of Indefinite-Specific showing 90% of accuracy. They also had difficulty differentiating between uncountable mass nouns and countable nouns. As a result, the mean percentage of correct rate on mass nouns was 75%. Kang's (2002) GJ test does not include questions about the zero article nor the null article and the participants were asked to judge whether use of an article is "correct" or "incorrect." Therefore, they may or may not have similar difficulty using the zero article like Park's (2005) participants.

On the other hand, Lee (1997) collected a spontaneous written composition from 49 freshmen in a Korean university. Her participants tended not to delete both the definite and the indefinite article. She considered linguistic and social variables such as article placement and gender in the data analysis. Lee found that males deleted articles more than females and there was no difference between deletions rates of the definite article and the indefinite article.

Ha (2006) and Ha and Han (2006) examined intermediate Korean college students' article error patterns both in online chat and on the grammatical judgment test. The participants' error patterns were different depending on the task type; during chatting, they tended to delete articles and more errors occurred in the grammatical judgment test. Ha claims that the task type was a significant factor that contributed to the differences between the results. Kharma's (1981) and Mizuno's (1985) studies support this claim; their participants tried to avoid using the indefinite article when they were not certain of the exact usage, and their frequencies of indefinite article errors differed depending on the task types. The informants in Kharma's (1981) research made the fewest errors using indefinite articles in short essays while the indefinite article errors on the cloze test were the most frequently occurring error type. Suh (2007) also collected data from email writing and discourse completion test and found that the participants requested differently depending on the task types. Even though Suh's study did not focus on article usage in various

writings, this conclusion shows that learners' language usage differs depending on the data-gathering instrument.

In the current research, highly advanced non-native speaking language teachers' error characteristics in regard to English articles both in written online forums and on a follow-up cloze test were investigated by examining their article usage in order to observe: (1) whether there is a unified error pattern or an area where the participants made the most article errors in the online forms and on a cloze test; (2) whether there is a difference in error frequencies and in error patterns between two tasks; (3) whether a certain syntactic or morphological environment contribute to occurrence of the errors; and (4) whether there are differences in error patterns or frequencies even among the participants with a similar proficiency level namely, high advanced.

III. METHOD

Thirteen near-native level NNS language teachers' article usage in online forums of two graduate courses at an American university as well as their performance in a cloze test was examined in this research. Each course required a weekly face-to-face meeting plus participation in online discussion. Six NNS participants attended both courses and seven NNS participants attended one of the two courses.

1. Participants

All NNS participants were Ph.D. students majoring in language education in a large university in the U.S.A. All NNS participants had studied English grammar or conversation for at least ten years from junior high school to college in their home countries mostly through grammar- and lecture-based instruction. The half of NNS participants had spent more than five years and the other half had spent between three and five years in English speaking countries pursuing M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in second or foreign language education. These highly advanced NNS English language users' systematic errors are expected to reveal the most recurring errors (Han, 2004), indicating those features which are the most difficult to acquire among language learners.

Participants are from some countries in Asia such as China or Korea and Europe. For confidentiality, participants' nationalities are not discussed in detail and they were often given to the opposite gender. None of their native languages have articles. Their TOEFL scores were at least above 550 out of 677 (Paper Based Test: PBT) when they first arrived in the U.S. After taking a cloze test, most participants stated that they were confident in English grammar. In addition to this confidence, they were highly motivated to make more

progress in English proficiency due to their major and profession as ESL/EFL teachers. Table 1 presents some details of the NNS participants.

Table 1
Background Information of NNS Participants

Participants[1]	Adam	Beth	Cathy	David	Eric	Frank	Greg	Hillary	Ivan	Jane
Been to US (months)	57.5	96	36	41	33	68	33	56	43	79
Years Studying English	15	22	18	16	12	10	10	10	13.5	20
TOEFL Score[2]	550-600	Over 650	240-[3]260	550-600	Over 650	600-650	600-650	253	600-650	600-650
TWE Score	3.5	5	4	4.5	5.5	N/A[4]	N/A	5.5	4.5	N/A

2. Data Collection

In the data collection procedure, messages in the online forums of two consecutive courses were collected. The same instructor taught both courses and used the same hybrid course structure, which required weekly online forum participation in advance of weekly face-to-face meetings. Before classroom meetings, students were expected to finish their readings and to post their opinions about assigned readings in the online forums. As the participants assumed that the other classmates had read the assigned articles, they rarely summarized the readings but shared their opinions or criticized the assigned articles. The course website did not provide a *delete* or *edit* function, so the author of a posting could not delete or edit a posting after uploading one. Their messages were sorted by week and by participant in the current research. Nine NNS participants attended the first course and ten NNS participants attended the second course. About a total of 300 messages were selected and analyzed in order to examine the most frequently recurring article error patterns. In addition to the observation of online forums, the participants took a cloze test (Appendix A) in Spring of 2006 after the two courses ended. After taking the cloze test, the

[1] For confidentiality, English pseudonyms were randomly assigned to both males and females often giving the opposite gender to both NS and NNS participants. NNS participants' specific teaching years were not reported for the same reason.
[2] The participants were asked to check a box indicating a range below 500, between 500 and 550, between 550 and 600, between 600 and 650, and above 650. They took these tests before they first arrived in the U.S. or other English speaking countries. so their proficiency was expected to be higher than the scores when they attended the courses and took the cloze test. These scores are only provided to give you an outline of the participants' proficiency.
[3] Some of the participants only took CBT, providing only that score.
[4] Some of the participants did not have a TWE score.

participants had a chance to explain reasons of their choices on the test but this interview part is not discussed in details in the current paper.

3. Data Analysis

The second step was data analysis after deleting the identification of the NNS participants; the researcher highlighted every context where an article was obligatory including the zero article and asked another NS coder to judge whether their usage in the highlighted contexts was correct or not. Typos or obvious misspellings such as *tthe* for *the*, and stylistic differences between NNS and NS participants were not counted as errors as long as they were grammatical in Standard American English. Repetition of the same errors was counted as one error. For example, ten definite article errors for *Internet* in ten different contexts were counted as one error.

The cloze test was used in addition to the written online forums of two consecutive courses because different types of tasks can elicit different performances from participants (Ha, 2006; Ha & Han, 2006; Han, 2004; Kharma, 1981; Mizuno, 1985; Selinker, 1989, cited in Long, 2003; Suh, 2007). In the current research using different tasks was necessary in order to examine the frequency of article errors depending on a task and the existence of avoidance strategy. Frequencies of errors and error patterns in the online forums and on the cloze test were compared to check whether there was a difference in error frequencies and in error patterns between the tasks.

The cloze test of the current research was composed of three paragraphs, constructed on the basis of the participants' errors in the online forums. In this way, the participants had a chance to explain their own article choices for items similar to their error patterns in the online forums. The cloze test contains more questions about the definite article because it was the most frequently recurring article error type in the online forums of the participants. Nine participants (four participants refused to take the test even though they gave the researcher permission to use their written data) took the cloze test after the two courses were ended.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Similar to Agnihotri et al.'s (1984) beginning-level informants, the NNS participants of this research also made article errors in the following environments: (1) the sentence-initial position; (2) complex noun phrases; and (3) usage of an *of* phrase. These environments contributed to occurrence of article errors but article error percentages of the advanced-

level participants in this research were much lower than those of Agnihotri et al.'s (1984) beginning-level informants. Even though the NNS participants' article errors did not decrease over the two-semester time period, the comparison between beginning-level participants in the previous research and the NNS participants in the current research implies that language learners' article errors decrease as their proficiency improves.

1. Article Errors in the First Course

Nine NNS participants attended the first course. Total occurrences of article obligatory contexts and total numbers of errors per articles were calculated in order to find article error percentages. In the online forums of the first course, most of the nine NNS participants showed similar levels of proficiency in general even though there was a considerable gap between the participant with the lowest percentage of article errors, 1.84%, and the participant with the highest percentage of article errors, 9.65%. The participants' overall error tendencies were similar as well; with the exception of two participants, the other participants' most frequently recurring error was to omit either the indefinite or the definite article. Table 2 presents that zero-article errors occurred the most frequently because all definite and indefinite article errors occurred due to the participants' misusage of the zero-article in the contexts where either the definite or the indefinite article was required.

TABLE 2

Article Error Distribution in the First Course (%) (NNS Participants, N=9)

	Articles in Standard American English		
Participants' Article Usage	The	a/an	Ø
The	**94.60**	0.23	1.54
a/an	0	**89.54**	0.34
Ø	5.41	10.23	**98.11**

The NNS participants did not make a lot of errors between the definite and indefinite articles, *the-for-a* and *a-for-the* errors, 0.23% and 0% respectively; however, they made the most errors misusing the zero article in contexts where the indefinite article was obligatory, *zero-for-a* errors, and where the definite article was obligatory, *zero-for-the* errors, even though they made the fewest errors in obligatory contexts for the zero article. Huebner (1985) claims that language learners tend to overuse the definite article, but most participants in the first course of this research did not have the overuse tendency.

2. Article Errors in the Second Course

Ten NNS participants of the present research attended the second course; six NNS participants took both the first and the second courses. Table 2 presents the results of error occurrences per article error type in the second course.

Table 3
Article Error Distribution in the Second Course (%) (NNS Participants, N=10)

	Articles in Standard American English		
Participants' Article Usage	The	a/an	Ø
The	**95.76**	0.60	0.96
a/an	0.09	**90.12**	0.26
Ø	4.24	9.28	**98.79**

In the online forums of the second course, the error percentages of more than half of the participants who took both courses were not better than those in the first course. This result leads to a conclusion that the participants' article errors did not generally decrease in the passage of time. The overall error tendency in the second course was similar to that in the first course most; errors in both courses were *zero-for-the* or *zero-for-a*. Some NNS participants tended to overuse the definite article, but their overuse was not consistent throughout the two courses. For example, a few participants tended to overuse the definite article for the obligatory zero article in the first course, but they did not overuse the definite article in the second course. Another participant also showed some fluctuation; Jane's error percentage in *the-for-zero* errors was 4.92% in the second course but her error percentage in the same error type in the first course was 2.52%. On the other hand, her error percentage in *zero-for-the* errors was 2.44% in the second course but her error percentage in the same error type in the first course was 8.86%. These participants did not consistently overuse the definite article throughout the time periods and their error percentages did not decrease.

3. Article Errors on the Cloze Test

The error types on the cloze test were more diverse than those in the online forums which tended to cluster around *zero-for-a, zero-for-the* or *the-for-zero* errors. The participants still made a lot of *zero-for-the* errors but on the cloze test, the percentages of *the-for-a* and *the-for-zero* errors were higher than that of *zero-for-a* errors. Table 4 shows error percentages per error type on the cloze test by all nine NNS participants who took the test.

Table 4

Error Percentages per Error Type on the Cloze Test (NNS Participants only, N=9)

	Articles in Standard American English		
Participants' Article Usage	The	a/an	Ø
The	**72.22**	17.17	9.33
a/an	5.56	**74.75**	3.56
Ø	22.22	8.08	**87.11**

In addition to errors related to the definite article, the participants' indefinite article errors seemed to be due to the failure to judge noun countability. Difficulties in judgments between proper nouns and unique common nouns and between countable and uncountable nouns were connected to the most frequent error patterns, omission of either the indefinite or the definite article. The participants tended to make a noun plural to avoid using the singular form when they were not sure of noun countability. This tendency made the article-usage ratio of the indefinite article lower than that of native speakers of English. The participants sometimes tended not to pay attention to usage of the indefinite article in the writing of the online forums and the highest error percentage of *zero-for-a* supported this claim; the participants even incorrectly omitted the indefinite article for nouns that were commonly used as countable nouns such as *question* or *program*.

The participants' performance in the online forums was not correlated to performance on the cloze test. For example, one of the participants, Beth's error percentage was only 0.42% in the online forums of the second course, but her performance on the cloze test, 18.75%, was similar to that of David, who made the most errors in the online forums of the first course. The error percentages on the cloze test were fairly high compared to those in the online forums but Beth's error percentage on the cloze test was one of the highest among the participants.

The higher error percentage on the cloze test is because the questions were based on the participants' most recurring errors in the online forums. Most participants generally showed consistent proficiency levels between the online forums and the cloze test even though their individual article error patterns on the cloze test were different from those in the online forums. The participants rarely made article errors when choosing between usage of the definite article and usage of the indefinite article in the online forums, but they made errors when choosing between the definite article and the indefinite article on the cloze test. The participants did not tend to overuse the definite article in the online forums; however, they made *the-for-a* and *the-for-zero* errors on the cloze test, 17.17% and 9.33% respectively, while they continued to make *zero-for-the* and *zero-for-a* errors on the cloze test, 22.22% and 8.08% respectively. Based on the data, it is concluded that the

participants' error patterns were different, depending on the task type, i.e. free writing or a cloze test.

Kharma (1981) argues that ESL/EFL learners are often inclined to use the definite article for every blank where the indefinite or the zero article is required. The advanced NNS participants in this research generally omitted the definite article for plural nouns and unique common nouns such as *the Internet* or *the Earth* in the online forums while some participants overused the definite article for first-mentioned common nouns such as *intellectual properties, a modern trend, cyber space* or *computer-assisted learning* in the online forums. They made such errors because they might assume that these common nouns were unique common nouns.

4. General Error Patterns in the Online Forums

The most frequent errors in the online forums occurred in the *zero-for-the, zero-for-a* or *the-for-zero* types. Errors in the online forums were categorized into seven error types to find generalizable error environments that contributed to the occurrences of article errors. The following lists are representative examples of the errors of each type. The example phrases in each error type were taken out of full contexts. Some examples can be hard to decide whether it is grammatically correct without the contexts, but the article usages were incorrect in the contexts. Below, multiple causes were often involved in one error rather than a single factor. First, errors related to missing definite articles were analyzed.

Error Type 1: Missing *the* in front of unique common nouns

(1) Both websites use *the* MOO technology

(2) I have different experiences with the graphics on *the* listening part of *the* computer-based TOEFL

(3) I bring technology into *the* English curriculum

(4) Disputes such as *the* Napster case occur

The definite article was frequently absent with unique common nouns which indicated a specific entity this type of errors was common in the online forums. Most participants were confused by whether they needed the definite article for unique common nouns such as *the MOO technology, English curriculum* or *the Napster case.* Some participants stated that they did not need the definite article if the first letter of a following noun was capitalized they assumed that all nouns with capital letters were proper nouns that did not require the definite article.

In addition to missing definite article in Error Type 1, incorrect usage of the definite article also occurred frequently. The following lists are representative examples of the errors.

Error Type 2: Incorrect assumptions on specificity
(1) They mostly referred to (the) language acquisition
(2) Technology can speed up (the) language learning
(3) This is also closely-related to (the) validity
(4) They are (the) visual learners
(5) It has nothing to do with (the) Oncourse

Nouns in examples 2.1) and 2.2), *language acquisition* and *language learning*, were common terms among language educators, so the familiarity might contribute to their error occurrences; the writers assumed that the readers, fellow scholars, knew the terminology that they were referring and that the terms need to be specified, so they used the definite article. This tendency is contrary to omission of the definite article whenever the participants saw a capital letter. The class was discussing validity of research and visual learners in that week, but errors in examples 2.3) and 2.4) occurred when the participants used the definite article for first-mentioned nouns.

Errors in examples 2.1) to 2.5) occurred without involvement of syntactic environments, but some definite article errors occurred due to syntactic environments, especially the existence of a modifying phrase. Some of the participants mis-generalized [+specific] with the existence of a modifying phrase and added the definite article when a noun was modified by an adjective or a prepositional phrase as in 2.5). Previous research (Agnihotri et al., 1984; Master 1997) claims that the existence of an *of* phrase contributes to overuse of the definite article, so definite article errors related to an *of* phrase was examined in Error Type 3. The list of errors related to an *of* phrase follows.

Error Type 3: Misusage of the definite article in front of an *of* phrase
(1) All *(the)* three groups of the project are in level 1
(2) They eliminated the possibility of *(the)* word cognition
(3) He discussed the concept of *(the)* L2 proficiency as a limitation

Overuse of the definite article in front of a prepositional phrase was a common error type in previous research and same type of errors also occurred in the current research. During the interview after the test, some participants stated that they automatically used the

definite article for a noun phrase followed by an *of* phrase, because they thought that the noun phrase was defined by the preposition phrase; they sensed specificity based on the presence of a preposition phrase.

As well as the post-modification of an *of* phrase, misusage of the definite article in an *of* phrase occurred more frequently than in front of the prepositional phrase as in 3.2) and 3.3). Errors in examples 3.2) and 3.3) were not expected because language learners tended not to use the definite article in a prepositional phrase such as in "by bus." In examples of 3.2) and 3.3), familiarity of the words in the course discussion might have played a role in the occurrence of the errors regardless of the existence of the prepositional phrase.

Some overuse of the definite article occurred due to the existence of a prepositional phrase, but most unnecessary definite article errors in the online forums did not have pre- or post-modifying phrases that contributed to occurrences of errors. Plus, in the online forums, omission of the definite article was more common than overuse of the definite article in the context of an *of* phrase the participants often omitted the definite article before or in the prepositional phrase. The list of the examples follows.

Error Type 4: Effect of an *of* phrase: a missing article before or after an *of* phrase
(1) I would not worry about it in *the* case of a 20 year-old
(2) *The* different background knowledge of the test-takers
(3) I have different experiences with the graphics on *the* listening part of *the* computer-based TOEFL
(4) Keypals seem to perfectly fit the 5Cs of *the* National Standards
(5) A virtual environment is not built on *a* real status of ability

The participants omitted an article before or in an *of* phrase in contrast with overuse of the definite article in front of the prepositional phrase in Error Type 3. The participants' overall error pattern in the online forums of both the first and second courses was usage of the zero article instead of the definite article or the indefinite article, so it was hard to say that they made errors only because of the existence of an *of* phrase. As seen in example 4.5), the participants also omitted the indefinite article in front of an *of* phrase, so the participants omitted either the definite or the indefinite article regardless of the existence of an *of* phrase. In addition to the effect of the proximity of a prepositional phrase, other factors seemed to contribute to the occurrences of the errors. For example, the participants might not have used the definite article because they thought that the noun in example 4.2), *knowledge*, was not countable or was modified by two adjectives. They also might have omitted the definite article in example 4.4) because of either the plural form or the capital letter of the noun, *National Standards*. These factors possibly played a role as a cause of the errors.

As briefly explained in example 4.4), the participants tended not to use the definite article with plural nouns. The relationship between plural nouns and a missing definite article is explained in Error Type 5.

Error Type 5: Missing *the* with the plural
(1) It is a place for avoiding *the* usual learning obstacles
(2) It's interesting to see *the* different responses
(3) The instructor can be motivating for *the* students
(4) On *the* try game webpages, there are nine categories
(5) I agree with the utopian position that suggests *the* Internet facilities

The definite article was frequently omitted with a plural noun. The participants assumed that they did not need a determiner with a plural noun just as they did not have to use the indefinite article with a plural noun. Errors in examples 5.1) and 5.2) seemed to occur due to the plural nouns, but article errors often seemed to have several causes. For example, the errors in examples 5.3), 5.4) and 5.5) might have several explanations for the causes; the noun phrases in 5.3) and 5.4) had a preposition in front of the definite article, so the existence of the prepositions could contribute to the occurrences of errors. The noun in 5.5), *Internet*, had a capital letter which could make the participants assume that they did not need the definite article. In sum, definite article errors seemed to have multiple causes.

Error Types 1 to 5 focused on errors of the definite article and Error Type 6 and 7 on indefinite article errors. Errors of the definite articles did not seem to be related to noun countability while noun countability seemed to play a role in error occurrences of the indefinite article. Error Type 6 summarizes errors of the indefinite article related to noun countability.

Error Type 6: The indefinite article errors related to countable/uncountable nouns
(1) *A* virtual environment gives you more opportunities
(2) *A* dial-up modem has almost always had this problem
(3) The findings support *a* comparability between the CBLT and the PBLT
(4) Two parties of language exchange have *a* different history
(5) I used *a* telephone dialing connection
(6) There is *a* problem arising
(7) I do not have experience of teaching *a* foreign language other than English
(8) They did not have time to develop *a* technology-based English lesson
(9) Test-takers are evaluated by *(a)* computer software

(10) You can't expect to have *(an)*AI (artificial intelligence) like the one in a film
(11) Such *(a)* research

Missing indefinite articles shown in examples 6.1) to 6.8) was a more frequent type of errors than unnecessary indefinite articles shown in examples 6.9) to 6.11). Three categories are listed to explain missing and unnecessary indefinite articles in Error Type 6: (1) effect of the sentence-initial position—missing indefinite articles in the sentence-initial position was a very frequent type of article errors in the forums; (2) failure to judge noun countability correctly—some nouns could be used both countably and uncountably; and (3) failure to use an article—the participants tended not to use the indefinite article everywhere regardless of noun countability even for common countable nouns such as *problem* or *lesson.*

With regard to the sentence-initial position, the participants omitted the indefinite article for nouns in examples 6.1) and 6.2) in the online forums. Missing definite article was rare in the sentence-initial position but missing indefinite article was frequent in the sentence-initial position. Participants might have omitted the indefinite article in examples 6.1) and 6.2) due to the influence of the sentence-initial position as well as the participants' failure to judge noun countability correctly.

Misdetection of noun countability resulted in occurrence of the article errors in 6.9) to 6.11). The participants obviously considered *research* in example 6.11) as a countable noun and used the indefinite article when they wanted to say *one study.* They also thought that *AI (artificial intelligence)*in example 6.10) and *software* in example 6.9) were countable, so they used the indefinite article. The participants made errors because they failed to judge noun countability, but they omitted the indefinite article even for common countable nouns such as *problem* or *lesson.* Considering their advanced proficiency level, they knew that the nouns were countable, so the errors were made because they failed to use an article in front of a noun. The participants omitted the indefinite article as often as native speakers of English did. Instead, they made nouns plural so as not to use the indefinite article. Related to the failure to detect noun countability, the participants made errors frequently on using plurals or misuse of plurals. Such errors are also explained in Error Type 7.

Error Type 7: Number errors/ Missing plural '—s'
(1) A relatively much larger sample*(s)* is needed
(2) I have never used email*(s)* in my class
(3) As a researcher and language teacher*(s)*, I can see the potentional
(4) There is little interactivit*(ies)* involved
(5) Some editing software*(s)* are available

The most common error pattern in this section was the disagreement in numbers. An example of disagreement was "a researcher and language *teachers*" in 7.3). Besides, the participants tended avoid using the indefinite article by using *some* or other determiner-like phrases. For example, the participants used "some editing softwares" in 7.5) revealing that they thought *software* could be countable.

Close examinations of the errors in the online forums showed that missing definite articles were closely related to specificity and uniqueness of nouns, and overuse of the definite article was connected to the participants' failure to detect specificity. The indefinite article errors were correlated to difficulty of determining noun countability and the participants' general tendency not to use an article in the sentence-initial position. As Agnihotri et al. (1984) claim, the existence of an *of* phrase and the subject position seemed to influence article errors, but the percentage of the errors was not as large as they claim. Multiple factors seemed to be involved in an error rather than a single factor causing an error. For example, missing definite article in "5Cs of *the* National Standards" could occur due to the combination of the existence of an *of* phrase, the capital letters and the plural nouns.

Also, different factors might have contributed to errors for each article; definite article errors occurred due to misdetection of specificity and indefinite article errors occurred due to the sentence-initial position or misjudgment of noun countability. Noun countability certainly seemed to play a role in the occurrence of the errors, and NNS participants tended to make nouns plural, so as not to use the indefinite article. Previous researchers claim that language learners tend to avoid using an article by using the definite article, but the NNS participants of the current research avoid using an article by making a noun plural rather than using the definite article. In the online forums, the participants made the most errors by omitting either the definite or the indefinite article, and the occurrence of the indefinite article was noticeably low.

V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Selinker (1972) claims that 'native speaker level' means 95% of correct English use. Based on his claim, the NNS participants in the current research show native-like proficiency in using English articles with 95.82% of correct article use in the first course and 96.39% in the second course. It was found that a few participants tended to overuse the definite article, but most participants made the majority of errors in *zero-for-the* and *zero-*

for-a types contrary to the claim in previous research, overuse of the definite article (Huebner, 1983, 1985). The accuracy rate of the zero article use was 56.29% among Park's (2005) participants, highly advanced level learners, but the percentage of current participants' correct use related to the zero article was around 98% in both courses.

In the online forums of the first course, most of the nine NNS participants showed similar levels of proficiency in general and the participants' overall error tendencies were similar as well; the participants' most frequently recurring error was to omit either the indefinite or the definite article. In the online forums of the second course, the error percentages of more than half of the participants who took both courses were not better than those in the first course. This result indicates that the participants' article errors did not generally decrease in the passage of time, two semesters. The overall error tendency in the second course was similar to that in the first course most errors in both courses were *zero-for-the* or *zero-for-a*.

Some participants in this research overused the definite article when they were not sure whether or not a noun was a proper noun or a unique common noun. All participants generally had similar problems in determining usage of the definite article between proper nouns and unique common nouns. The participants did not have a difficulty between the definite article and the indefinite article in the online forums but they made errors between them on the cloze test which proved that language learners perform differently depending on a task type.

Ha (2006) and Ha and Han (2006) explain participants' different performance depending on a task type with the types of activities, meaning-focused activity and form-focused activity. Their participants deleted more articles during chatting because they mainly focused on the meanings and deleted less articles in a GJ test because they paid more attention to the forms. However, in this research, more deletion of articles took place on the cloze test while the participants tended to use more definite articles where either the indefinite article or the zero article was obligatory. The increased percentage of zero article deletion implies that the types of following nouns, either countable or noncountable, or either proper nouns or unique common nouns, play more significant role to choose an article than the types of activities do. Or the different results are due to the participants' different proficiency levels. The increased overgeneralization of the definite article on the cloze test shows that the participants tend to use the definite article when they pay more attention to the forms.

Park (2005) claims that advanced Korean Learners of English need to learn use of the zero article and Kang's (2002) results indicate importance of form-focused instruction. Kang suggested two pedagogical implications; (1) explicit grammar instruction explaining different structures between L1 and L2 with negative feedback and (2) chances to produce what they have learned and to receive timely feedback. Kym's (2006) study also proves

that form-focused instruction helps a Korean six grader to decrease article errors. Even though Kym's participants are much younger than the current participants, effectiveness of form-focused instruction to young learners as well as to adult learners proves that it is important for language learners to expose to this type of instruction from the beginning.

Researchers such as Agnihotri et al. (1984), Whitman (1974), McEldowney (1977) and Master (1990, 1995, 1997, 2002) suggested that learners need to memorize structural cues and grammatical rules related to English articles. Many ESL/EFL students have memorized grammatical rules as the researchers suggested but the participants demonstrated how this knowledge does not transfer to practice. The more the participants solely relied on syntactic environments to determine an article, the more article errors they made. Participants who tried to determine specificity considering meanings of proceeding nouns as well as syntactic environments demonstrated a lower error percentage of English articles. Therefore, focus on form which focuses on meaning-based activities with attention to form is suggested instead of focus on forms and rote memorization of grammatical rules. For further research, studies on more developed various focus on form activities will help teachers to teach students English articles.

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APPENDIX A
Cloze Test

On this paper write a missing article (a, an, the, or Ø) next to the number of the space in the passage. If no word is needed, write a dash (—) or Ø. After you finish this test, you will receive the original texts in order to compare with your choices. We will discuss the differences between your answers and the original texts; please explain the rationales of your usage after the comparison.

Example:
When he was (1)_____ boy, he wanted to become (2)_____doctor, but he didn't have (3)_____ necessary intelligence. He is studying (4) _____ engineering.
Answer: (1) a, (2) a, (3) the (4) – or Ø

1. (1) _____ Notable development in (2) _____ past year that demonstrates

(3) _____ maturity of our IT organization (4) _____ OnCourse. (5) _____ OnCourse software system is (6) _____ Internet-based course environment, developed in 1998 at (7) _____ IUPUI by (8) _____ Advanced Information Technology Lab in (9) _____ collaboration with (10) _____ Center for (11) _____ Teaching and Learning.

(12) _____ OnCourse provides (13) _____ comprehensive platform for creating, using, and maintaining (14) _____ Web-based teaching and (15) _____ learning environments.

II. Every applicant for (16) _____ freshman admission must be (17) _____ high school graduate from (18) _____ high school accredited by (19) _____ regional accrediting association (such as (20) _____ Southern Association of (21) _____ Colleges and Schools) (22) _____ Georgia Accrediting Commission, or (23) _____ Accrediting Council for (24) _____ Independent Study, or from (25) _____ public school regulated by (26) _____ school system and (27) _____ State Department of (28) _____ Education.

(29) _____ High school students who receive (30) _____ "Certificate of (31) _____ Attendance" do not satisfy (32) _____ graduation requirements. In addition, to gain (33) _____ regular admission to (34) _____ Augusta State University, (35) _____ applicant must have completed (36) _____ entire College Preparatory Curriculum (CPC) in (37) _____ high school.

III. Many ESL/EFL students take (38) _____ TOEFL and (39) _____ GRE every year to enter (40) _____ universities in (41) _____ English speaking countries. (42) _____ Earlier model of (43) _____ CALL system featuring (44) _____ exchange of (45) _____ emails, was created in order to assist (46) _____ test preparation, but from (47) _____ perspective of (48) _____ cognitive science, (49) _____ drawback of using only (50) _____ email in (51) _____ virtual learning environment was (52) _____ less motivation compared to (53) _____ current software using (54) _____ multi-media, including (55) _____ video clips and (56) _____ games. (57) _____ Current Internet-based test preparation programs for (58) _____ TOEFL listening comprehension test are entertaining, which reflects (59) _____ motivation issue for (60) _____ younger generation. Most of this advanced technology requires (61) _____ high speed Internet connection.

Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Level: Advanced Adults

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