

*Analysis of the Use of English Article by Mongolian Students:  
On the Cases of GMIT Students*

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**Abstract**

This study addresses the challenges faced by Mongolian learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners trying to master the English article system, given the absence of definite and indefinite article grammar in the Mongolian language. Data for this study was collected over a 10-year period from the entrance exam writing materials of 560 students who took the entrance exam for the German-Mongolian Institute for Resources and Technology. The research utilizes Surface Structure Taxonomies (SST) to identify types, frequencies, and sources of definite and indefinite article errors in essay writing. The study reveals that the predominant issue is the misapplication of the definite article "the" and the frequent omission of articles, constituting 83.7% of total errors. L1 interference significantly influences the second language acquisition process, hindering learning. The research recommends an SST for error identification and advocates increased practical writing composition and feedback to address these challenges.

Keywords: Definite Article, Indefinite Article, Omission, Addition, Substitution, Mis-Ordering, Surface Structure Taxonomies

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## **Introduction**

The acquisition of the English article system poses challenges for both native and non-native speakers. This complexity is heightened for speakers of L1 languages lacking articles, as observed in Mongolian.

This study explores challenges for Mongolian EFL learners in mastering English articles due to the absence of article grammar in Mongolian. It employs Surface Structure Taxonomies to identify types, frequencies, and sources of article errors in essay writing. This study explores errors in article usage among Mongolian EFL learners, highlighting the impact of L1 interference. The Transfer Theory, associated with Noam Chomsky's universal grammar, is considered, acknowledging the role of previously acquired linguistic knowledge in new language learning.

## **Error Analysis**

Error analysis is crucial in language learning, allowing the identification, classification, and understanding of learners' mistakes. This systematic approach aids teachers in reinforcing teaching strategies. The study categorizes errors into substitution, insertion, omission, and transposition, shedding light on interference and Interlingua sources of errors.

## **Literature Review**

Extensive research on the L2 acquisition of articles has been conducted, emphasizing cultural challenges and discourse types. The current study incorporates models by Goto Butler (2002), Huebner (1983), and Thomas (1989) to classify errors. English articles' simple morphology poses difficulties, especially for learners from languages with different article systems. Ekiert (2004) worked with Polish learners; Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004) studied Russian and Korean learners; Snape (2005) studied Japanese speakers; Wong & Quek (2007) studied Chinese and Malay speakers; Ionin et al (2009) studied Russian learners; Master, P (1987, 1995, 1997) studied on Teaching and learning English article for Turkish speakers and there may well be other studies that have yet to be widely publicized.

The study explores the grammatical structure of Mongolian and its differences from English in article usage. English has definite ('the'), indefinite ('a' and 'an'), and zero articles, while Mongolian relies on demonstratives and morphology for reference. These linguistic differences contribute to errors among Mongolian EFL learners.

The study finds a major problem: misusing "the" and omitting articles (83.7% of errors) among Mongolian EFL learners. L1 interference hampers learning. Recommendations include using SST for error identification and emphasizing practical writing with feedback to tackle these challenges.

## **Research Methods**

Data collection involved 1060 sentences written by Mongolian students during an entrance exam for a university engineering course. Error identification, categorization, and frequency analysis were conducted using Surface Structure Taxonomy (SST) and models by Huebner and Thomas.

## Results and Discussion

Analysis revealed that 83.7% of errors were omissions, while addition and substitutions constituted 8.5% and 7.8%, respectively. The study discusses the implications of each error type, and their sources, and recommends language teaching strategies for intermediate learners with Mongolian as their native language.

In conclusion, this study contributes valuable insights into the challenges faced by Mongolian EFL learners in acquiring the English article system and proposes practical recommendations for language teaching improvement.

## Findings and Discussion

The assessment tasked students with producing a short descriptive text comprising 250 words, selecting one of three provided topics. Error analysis followed the procedure outlined by Ellis (1997), categorizing errors into four distinct types: omission, addition, misinformation, and mis-ordering. The analytical process involved four key steps: identification, description, explanation, and evaluation of errors.

The initial phase focused on identifying errors within the students' texts. Subsequently, the errors were meticulously described, elucidating the specific nature of each occurrence. To provide a comprehensive understanding, the researcher then delved into explaining the identified errors, shedding light on the reasons behind their manifestation. The final step involved evaluating the errors, employing a systematic approach to gauge their significance and impact on language proficiency.

### 1. Errors of Omission

The analysis of written samples revealed that omission errors, specifically the omission of the definite article 'the' and indefinite articles 'a/an' where obligatory, constituted the most frequent errors, accounting for 83.7% of the 1060 errors in total. Within the category of omission errors, the omission of the definite article 'the' emerged as the most prevalent, with 431 instances. Additionally, 195 errors were related to the omission of the indefinite article 'a,' and 39 errors were attributed to the omission of the indefinite article 'an (see Table 1). These findings underscore the significance of addressing omission errors in English article usage among Mongolian EFL learners.

Error Types	Number of errors	Percentage
Omission the	654	73.64%
Omission a	195	21.95%
Omission an	39	4.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>888</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1: Distribution of Omission Errors

The prevalence of omission errors highlights a specific area of challenge for learners, particularly in mastering the use of definite and indefinite articles. Addressing these errors is crucial for enhancing the overall proficiency of Mongolian EFL learners in English article usage.

In accordance with findings by Hikmah (2020), omission errors occur when learners lack the necessary grammatical form required in a sentence, leading to the omission or deletion of the essential element. This phenomenon is indicative of a deficit in incorporating the requisite components for a well-structured sentence. The absence of an item that is essential to the sentence formation characterizes omission errors.

No.	Incorrect sentence	Correct sentence	Explanation	Goto Butler (2002), Huebner (1983), Thomas (1989)
1.	Engineer is (...) amazing major.	Omission an	In this sentence indefinite article an is omitted before the word 'amazing' which starts with vowel sound. Major is generic noun. So, the correct sentence must be: Engineering is <b>an</b> amazing major.	Type 1 [-SR,+HK] Generic nouns
2.	In (...) street, at (...) mall, at (...) office all people are using their phones.	Omission the Omission the Omission the	In the first sentence: The word "Street" is specific noun requiring the definite article "the" to be written. In <b>the</b> street, at <b>the</b> mall, at <b>the</b> office all people are using their phones.	Type 2 [+SR, +HK]
3.	I think letter has (...) real meaning.	Omission a	In this sentence real is defining the 'soul' which starts with constant sound. So, the correct sentence will be: I think letter has <b>a</b> real soul.	Type 4 [-SR, -HK]
4.	In (...) 1980s UB where was (...) little town had number of buildings, cars, and computers.	Omission the Omission a	Before singular and generic noun little town consonant word indefinite article 'an' must be used. In 1980s UB where was <b>a</b> little town had number of buildings, cars, and computers. The correct sentence must be: In the 1980s UB was a little town with few buildings, cars, and computers.	Type 5 [-SR, +HK] Type 1 [-SR, +HK]
5.	That all reason why people think modern technology is making us less sociable.	Omission the	It is a specific reason and referential definite <b>Those are the reasons</b> why people think modern technology is making <b>us</b> less sociable.	Type 2 [+SR, +HK]

Table 2: Errors of Omission

## 2. Errors of Substitution

Substitution errors accounted for the least frequent errors by far in this study representing only 7.8% (80 errors). It is much lower than errors of omission and insertion. The errors of substitution made by the students who misuse the definite article ‘the’ was 55 (68.75%), the substitution of ‘a’ was 16 (20 %), and the substitution of ‘an’ was 9 (11.25%).

No.	Incorrect sentence	Error Type	Explanation	Goto Butler (2002), Huebner (1983), Thomas (1989)
1.	My friend had <b>(a)</b> e-mail friend.	Substitute an	Instead of an, the student use a for the vowel sound noun ‘e-mail’. It is likely they mistook the indefinite article ‘a’ for a vowel sound letter. My friend had an e-mail friend.	Type 1 [-SR, +HK]
2.	If I were <b>(the)</b> mayor of Ulaanbaatar, I would change the transportation system.	Substitute a	The students chose ‘the’ instead of ‘a’ for mayor and the phrases for 1 <sup>st</sup> subjunctive conditional ‘If I were a...’ He/she applied zero article before mayor as the word starts with consonant sound. If I were <b>(a)</b> mayor of Ulaanbaatar,	Type 5 Idioms
3.	Learning <b>(the)</b> language seven for a month or two would definitely benefit me both in school and even for a month or two months would definitely benefit me both societies.	Substitute zero article	It is talking about general things not particular language. Learning <b>a language</b> in school and society.	Type 1 [-SR,+HK] Generic nouns
4.	If I join <b>(a)</b> university, I will be (...) best student.	Misinformation the Omission the	It is particular and clear to hearer and calls for a specific rather than general reference: If I join <b>the</b> university, I will be <b>the</b> best student.	Type 2 [+SR, +HK] Type 2 [+SR, +HK]
5.	I read <b>(a)</b> little text with, while has <b>(a)</b> information about engineers ability.	Misinformation the	It is talking about specific and hearer knew the text and information is uncountable abstract noun. So, there is no indefinite article is	Type 2 [+SR,+HK]

			needed. Therefore, that the correct sentence will be: I read <b>the</b> little text with while it has some information about engineer's ability.	
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Table 3: Errors of substitution

Within the spectrum of errors identified in this study, a notable category involves substitution errors, exemplified by instances such as 'a email friend.' Here, students inaccurately replaced the correct indefinite article 'an' with 'a.' This highlights a consistent pattern where learners tend to substitute 'a' incorrectly instead of the appropriate 'an.' Another manifestation of substitution errors is evident in the sentence: 'Learning the language even for a month or two would definitely benefit me both in school and even for a month or two months would definitely benefit me both society.' In this case, a student erroneously replaced the zero article 'Ø' with 'the,' deviating from the correct usage: 'Learning the language even for a month or two would definitely benefit me both in school and society.' This observation resonates with the findings of Snape (2005), who documented instances of students substituting the indefinite article 'a' for the definite article 'the.'

### 3. Errors of Addition

In this investigation, insertion errors constituted the second-highest proportion, accounting for 8.5% (90 errors) of the total 1060 errors analyzed. Students frequently inserted the indefinite articles 'a' and 'an' before abstract, mass, proper nouns, and non-count nouns, with a higher frequency than the definite article 'the.' In the English article system, it is grammatically incorrect for 'a' and 'an' to precede plural and non-count nouns. Nevertheless, participants in our study consistently made this choice, particularly by placing 'a' before non-count nouns, especially abstract nouns.

Instances such as 'a physics,' 'an information,' 'an education,' 'a unique major,' and serve as evidence of a divergence from the established principles governing article usage in the English language. In English, the indefinite articles 'a/ an' specifically denote 'one' and should only be used before singular count nouns. However, examples like 'an awesome player' indicate a deviation where 'an,' a variant of 'a,' precedes a word starting with a vowel sound. While the selection of indefinite articles typically depends on the singular noun category, irrespective of adjectives modifying the noun, there appears to be a certain degree of conformity to phonological principles in the use of articles, at least at the early developmental stage of learning the article system. This suggests that novice writers may establish phonological associations sooner than semantic associations when learning the article system.

Other instances, such as 'the Nalaikh,' 'a university,' 'an information,' and 'the Mongolia,' represent further deviations from the established principles of the English article system. Despite contextual cues indicating the null (Ø) article, participants randomly inserted 'a' and 'the' in front of these nouns and adjectives. Even with the provided context and writing prompts, intermediate English learners in this study demonstrated a lack of awareness and understanding regarding the accurate use of articles, as evidenced by these instances. This finding resonates with Lee's (2013) research, which found that beginners, despite contextual support, exhibited a low accuracy rate in the use of English articles in written discourse. Lee concluded that, overall, accuracy in the use of English articles was higher in written

narratives compared to oral narratives (p.40). This suggests that such errors persist beyond the beginner stage and continue to be a challenge even for intermediate learners.

No.	Incorrect sentence	Correct sentence	Explanation	Goto Butler (2002), Huebner (1983), Thomas (1989)
1.	Engineering is (an) unique major other than any majors we see nowadays.	Addition an	Major is mass noun and it doesn't take article. It is talking about generic thing. Engineering is unique major other than any majors we see nowadays. The correct sentence must be: Engineering is <b>a</b> unique major from other majors we see nowadays.	Type 1 [-SR, +HK]
2.	If you guys built a new road to the Nalaikh with mountain road maybe that's very helpful for people's time.	Addition the	Nalaikh is a proper noun and uncountable noun therefore there is no article is needed. If you guys build a new road to <b>Nalaikh</b> with mountain road maybe that's very helpful for people's time. The correct sentence must be: If you guys build a new road to the Nalaikh with mountain road maybe that's very helpful for people's time.	Type 1 [-SR, +HK] Generic nouns
3.	In <b>(the)</b> Mongolia the highest contamination is in <b>(the)</b> Ulaanbaatar city.	Addition the	In this sentence, before the proper and uncountable noun, indefinite article musn't be used.	Type 1 [-SR,+HK]

Table 4: Errors of Addition

### Errors of Mis-Ordering

In the context of this study, mis-ordering errors, as defined by Hendrawaty (2018), refer to the erroneous placement of a morpheme or a collection of morphemes within an utterance. Such errors occur routinely for both L1 and L2 learners, manifesting in constructions previously acquired. This type of error is characterized by the accurate sequencing of some elements but with inaccuracies in their placement.

<b>Incorrect sentence</b>	<b>Correct sentence</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
But it can be anything, the skills are uncountable.	But it can be anything, the skills are <b>countless</b> .	The students in this case mixed up the correct use of the word. Countless implies that there are a vast number of skills, but they can still be individually counted. It does not mean that skills are uncountable in the grammatical sense; rather, it emphasizes the abundance of skills.
But on the other hand, it cost money much.	But on the other hand, it costs <b>much money</b> .	After “it” pronoun cost must add “s” simple present tense and then it is grammatically correct.
My mother and father are both an entrepreneur, celling part of car.	My mother and father are both entrepreneurs, selling <b>parts of cars</b>	My mother and father are both plural subjects following compliment noun. The plural “s” should be added due to grammar issue. In addition instead of writing selling the student made a spelling mistake.
It is (an) interesting and excited work.	It is interesting and exciting job.	The students mixed up the phrases’ “work” and “job.”

Table 5: Errors of Mis-ordering

### Examples of Article Usage Errors

Instances of article usage errors were identified in other sentences studied. In one example the student wrote "Individuals could use environmentally friendly products to decrease (the) global warming" An inappropriate use of 'the' before 'global warming' was observed. Since 'global warming' is an abstract noun, it does not require a definite article. The correct sentence reads: "Individuals could use environmentally friendly products to decrease global warming."

In a second example a student wrote "That is a mountain in suburbs," the use of 'a' before 'mountain' is incorrect as the sentence refers to a specific mountain in the suburbs. The correct sentence is: "That is the mountain in the suburbs."

A third example was "I think a most appropriately chance to own these abilities is at school," demonstrates the incorrect use of 'a' before 'most.' As 'most' is a superlative in a noun phrase, it should be accompanied by the definite article 'the.' The accurate sentence is: "I think the most appropriate chance to own these abilities is at school."

The final example was "If I got (a) opportunity to study abroad with scholarship there is no doubt I will stay here in Mongolia," This illustrates the need for 'an' before 'opportunity' due to the word's initial vowel sound. The correct sentence reads: "If I get an opportunity to study abroad with a scholarship, there is no doubt I will not stay here in Mongolia."



No	Type of the error	Error Frequency	Error Percentage
1.	Omission	888	83.7
2.	Addition	90	8.5
3.	Misinformation	82	7.8
	<b>Total</b>	1060	100%

Table 6: Proportion of the errors

### Addition Errors Analysis

A comprehensive examination of addition errors in the analyzed data revealed a total of 90 instances. Among these, 44 sentences out of 90 involved the addition of the indefinite article 'a,' while 40 sentences out of 90 exhibited the addition of the definite article 'the.' Additionally, 6 out of the total 90 errors involved the addition of the indefinite article 'an.'

### Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussions in this research, it can be concluded that students at the German Mongolian Institute for Resources and Technology (GMIT) engineering program in Mongolia, who participated in the writing test, continue to exhibit errors in the use of English articles within descriptive texts. Three main types of errors were identified: omission errors were the most frequent, accounting for 83.7% (888 out of 1060); insertion errors followed by 8.5% (90 errors); and misinformation errors constituted 7.8% (82 errors) of the total errors.

The errors happen because Mongolian doesn't have definite and indefinite articles. Instead, we use determiners like "this," "these," "that," and "those" to do the job of English articles. Also, we use the number "one" as a stand-in for the indefinite article "a/an." The main reasons for making these errors are the learners' proficiency levels and their basic understanding of English articles, along with the methods used in teaching.

Identifying common mistakes and challenges early on through pre-tests and post-tests is crucial for understanding the underlying issues. Implementing techniques such as writing descriptive texts and providing constructive feedback on English article usage is effective in error elimination. Additionally, addressing language differences between L1 and L2, along with teaching the nuances of English articles using models like Huebner (1983) and Thomas (1989), enhances students' knowledge.

Regular writing tests facilitated through platforms like Google Forms, accompanied by explanations for identified errors, serve as valuable tools for error reduction and interactive learning. Employing appropriate teaching methods, utilizing authentic materials, and offering consistent support for error correction in compositions contribute to effective language acquisition. Sequentially teaching English articles in context, starting from smaller linguistic units to larger paragraphs, allows learners to progressively enhance their comprehension of article usage. By adopting these strategies, educators can create a comprehensive learning environment that focuses on grammar, integrates practical writing exercises, and provides targeted support for learners, ultimately fostering a stronger understanding and application of English articles.

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