

# L2 Acquisition of THE: Error Type, Error Cause and Negative L1 Transfer

Junling Ou<sup>1,\*</sup> Ming Zhang<sup>2</sup> Siqi Zou<sup>3</sup> Hu Kevin Zhi Wei<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Education, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK

<sup>2</sup>Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, Nanjing, Jiangsu 211100, China

<sup>3</sup>Beijing Normal University - Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, Zhuhai 519085, China

<sup>4</sup>School of Lancaster Catholic High School, Lancaster, Pennsylvania 17601, United states

\*Corresponding author. Email: ml19j3o@leeds.ac.uk

## ABSTRACT

This paper studies the types and causes of Chinese EFL learners' misuse of English definite articles. In this study, 145 undergraduate and graduate English learners and 30 high school students were surveyed online and offline respectively. The questionnaire included judging whether a given sentence is true or false. The results show that many respondents tend to mix and omit definite articles, and adjectives and semantic features have a greater impact on their use errors. It is suggested that the explicit knowledge of English articles should be enhanced, and the use of English articles should be strengthened through formal and systematic teaching.

**Keywords:** second language acquisition, English articles, L1 transfer.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a significant amount of literature showing that acquiring the English system of determiners is problematic for English as a second language learners (L2) [1-4]. L2 English learners often struggle with the use of determiners until late in the learning process, or never achieve native-like levels of success [5]. L1 transfer has a most probable function in the L2 learning of English posts by research compared with and without articles in the first language (L1) contexts[6-7]. There were other sorts of concerns published in the literature but the majority of current research on Chinese students focused on the use of English articles by the students. Their reasons were mainly disregarded for the error in the English article. This report aims to determine the nature of the potential mother tongue influence when acquiring articles in general context by collecting data from L2 learners of English who speak Chinese as their first language (L1). This paper explores the factors that cause mistakes of Chinese learner in using English articles, and makes up for this research gap, so as to understand the existing problems of English learners and put forward some suggestions on the teaching of English articles.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the English article is one of the most frequently available grammatical forms for ESL learners in their content, use of it poses considerable challenges for English students, notably those whose languages have no articles such as Chinese [8]. Also, learners who have papers in their first language exhibit a fluctuating trend in their English article selection[9].

The literature has recorded a variety of ESL errors in the usage of articles. There are three types of typical definite article problems in the study of definite article: the omission of definite article, the confusion of indefinite article and definite article (e.g. *a* for *the*, and vice versa), and the overuse of definite article(definite articles are oversupplied in situations where they aren't needed). Evidence of these types of errors can be found in experiments analysing article results in L2 speakers from a range of L1 contexts using various testing methods and methodologies: Chinese [3], Czech [10], Japanese [11], Korean [12-13] among many others.

Even for increasingly advanced and end-state second language speakers, the definite article is difficult to use. Such studies have yielded a wealth of data and information indicating that many influences are at work. There are many reasons for incorrect use. One of the

most likely reasons of learner problems is the complicated forms in which context is mapped into structure, such as how the is used for generic reference, anaphoric reference, and uniqueness [10]. Noun countability, which is frequently viewed as a fundamental characteristic of the English language system, may often be a reason, since Yoon [14] suppose that second language learners may not be able to describe, clarify, or acquire the perceptual structure of noun countability used by native English speakers. In addition, the appearance of numerals also affects the use of definite articles. In Chinese, there is no article before numerals, but in English, the existence of the indefinite article before the modifier is prompted by adjectival modification of numerals [15]. Similarly, according to Guo and Zhou [16], the premodifier of a noun phrase can affect the use of the definite article, which is also a contributing factor to errors.

The impact of the presence or absence of systemic comparisons of English articles in a learner's native language on acquisition have also been studied. For the bilingual kid who has no article in their mother language, Mede and Gurel [17] observed that cross-linguistic conversion overrode other impacts such as maturation/pragmatic or semantic aspects. Given the variety and seriousness of the issues presented to ESL learners by English texts, in what areas is it particularly important to strengthen our teaching. According to Nation [18], the use of word is very important in word learning, including grammatical functions, collocations and constraints on use. As far as the author knows, there is no research that puts forward constructive suggestions on the teaching of definite article in China based on the wrong factors of definite article use. This research just fills this gap.

**3. RESEARCH QUESTION**

This study includes a questionnaire to investigate the major types of errors in English definite article among Chinese English learners at different proficiency levels, determine the major factors that lead to their use of errors, and put forward suggestions for English

definite article teaching. The research questions designed for the questionnaire are as follows:

- (1) Which definite article mistakes are Chinese students more likely to make?
- (2) Which influencing factor is more likely to disturb students and make them use the definite article incorrectly?
- (3) In the English teaching of basic education, which part of the practice can teachers strengthen to reduce the use of definite article mistakes?

**4. METHODOLOGY**

**4.1 Questionnaire**

The questionnaire included 15 test sentences with error in definite article usage and 10 fillers without any usage of definite article.

Test sentences are selected from the first 15 contexts from spoken or fiction sections on Corpus of Contemporary American English about the usage of "the". Six of them had a definite article, another five of them were without any definite article and the remaining four used indefinite articles ("a" or "an").

According to 3 error types proposed in literature review, each error type should cover 5 questions.

Hence, for the type of "omission of definite article", the definite article in 5 of 6 sentences was omitted (eg, "I don't really know which one of us started the whole robbing thing" was altered into "I don't really know which one of us started whole robbing thing").

For the type of "confusion between definite article and indefinite article", the definite article in the remaining sentence was replaced by an indefinite article and 5 indefinite articles were altered into definite article (eg, "A thick layer of dust had settled on it" was altered into "The thick layer of dust had settled on it")

As for the type of "overuse of definite article", we inserted "the" into 5 sentences without definite article (eg, "Successful in opening fourteen of sixteen windows" was altered into "Successful in opening the fourteen of sixteen windows").

The question quantity for each error type was presented in table 1.

Table1: Error Distribution

Error Type	Question Quantity
Omission	5
Confusion between definite article and indefinite article	5
Overuse	5

We altered these sentences based on following principles:

- 1, To eliminate the interference of other definite article, we ensured each underlined sentence contain a mere one definite article;

- 2, To reduce the interference of misunderstandings about infrequent words or phrases, we replaced them with more frequent items according to frequency of usage.

- 3, To reduce participants' cognitive load, we had shortened the length of each question.

According to 4 influence factors proposed in literature review, we analyzed each test sentence and considered which factor may exert most influence on participants' decision. (eg, the omitted definite article in the underlined sentence: "I was able to find four soldiers on leave in the town, and these I rallied. At the stables, I rent Sir Charles's carriage, a driver, and four more horses for soldiers I found" was influenced by semantic feature.) Fillers were selected from TEM 8 (a proficiency test for English major students in China) and literature works such as *Marrakesh* by Charles Dickens and *Measure for Measure* by Shakespeare. Fifteen test sentences with ten fillers are in random sequence. Participants are asked by "to what extent do you agree or disagree with the underlined sentence from the aspect of grammar" on a six-point scale: +1= 'strongly agree', +2= 'agree', +3= 'somewhat agree', +4= 'somewhat disagree', +5= 'disagree', +6= 'strongly disagree'. We abandoned Likert Scales (a five-point scale) in order to reduce the possibility that some participants would have a preference to choose intermediate choice such as "somewhat agree" and "somewhat disagree". Six-point scale could force them to clarify their attitude towards test sentences.

#### **4.2 Prior study**

Before the final version of questionnaire, we designed a protocol of questionnaire, which included 15 test sentences with error in definite article usage and 15 fillers without any usage of definite article. After designing the questionnaire protocol, we have done online and offline prior studies to test the difficulty and rationality of the questionnaire.

For offline prior study, we sent the questionnaires to a middle school in Beijing, which is a key middle school in Beijing. And the English level of the students in this school is higher than their peers. We randomly selected 15 students in a class and asked them to complete 30 questions in 30 minutes. About online study, we invited 10 participants to do the online questionnaire. Then we asked for their feedback after doing the questionnaire.

After collecting the results of prior study, we found that our questionnaire protocol had following problems:

1. The context in the questions were too long for some Chinese English learners to understand.
2. Several definite and indefinite articles were included in one question

In order to make the questionnaire suitable for participants, the questionnaire was adjusted to address the above problems. Only the contents of spoken English and fictions in the corpus were selected. Moreover, only

one article was set in the question. In addition, appropriate context was added to some questions so that the questions are easier for participants to understand.

#### **4.3 Participants**

We distributed the questionnaire both online and offline.

The online questionnaire was produced and distributed on "wjx.cn", a Chinese questionnaire design, production, distribution website. We disseminated the questionnaire in the form of WeChat circle of friends and WeChat group. There is no limit to the range of participants in the online questionnaire, but through the distribution of the questionnaire, we found that most of the participants are people with bachelor degree. This is because most of our WeChat friends are people with a bachelor's degree. The recommended time to complete the questionnaire is 20 minutes

The participants of the offline questionnaire were the first grade junior middle school students in key classes of a key high school in Nanchang, Jiangxi Province, China. Their English proficiency is relatively high compared to students of the same age. The offline questionnaire was about 20 minutes, which offered them nearly 1 minute a question. Thirty students were able to finish the questionnaires within 20 minutes, and the feedback from the students were interesting—some understood most of the questions and answered them quiet well; but some couldn't fully understand the question. The results of the questionnaires are positive and make an impact on them. It may help them recognized that they have a slight distance from academic knowledge.

A variety of feedback made our questionnaire enrich as well.

### **5. RESULTS**

We collected 145 results in total, including 115 from online questionnaires and 30 from offline questionnaires. In analyzing the results, the average point of each question from online participants and offline participants were calculated respectively. Besides, the average point of each error type and of each influence factor were presented. A higher average point indicates a better acquisition of definite article in a certain context.

#### **5.1 Online results:**

Figure 1 shows the age and gender distribution of our offline test. Female (70) constitute about 60.87% of total participants (115).

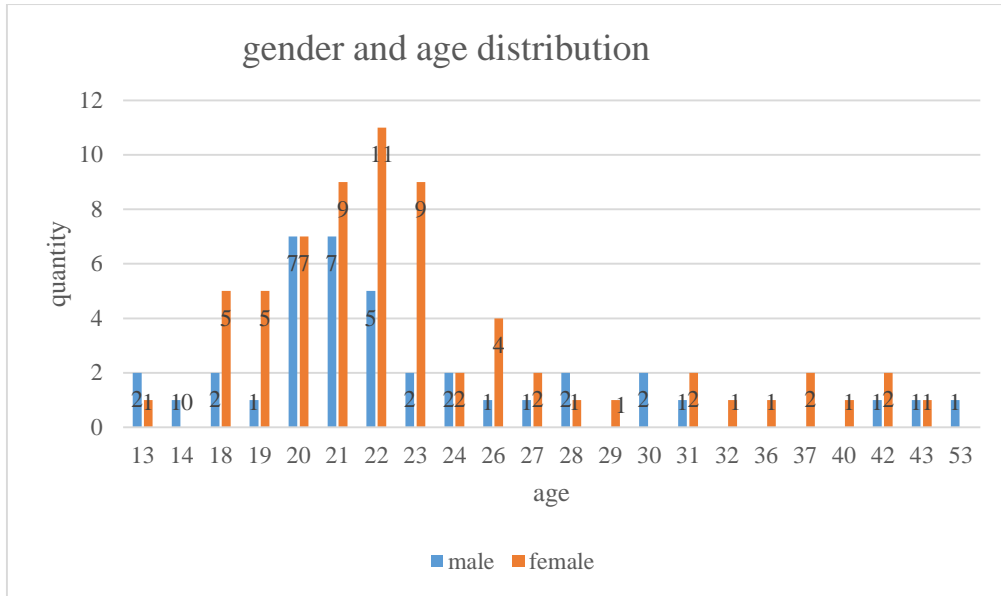


Figure 1 Gender and Age Distribution

As shown in Figure 2, people with bachelor degree constitute the largest proportion of participants(66.96%) and people with master degree constitute 20.87%, as detailed in bar graph 2. Only a few people with junior

high school, senior high school and doctor degree or above in the questionnaire (6.96%, 3.48% and 1.74% respectively).

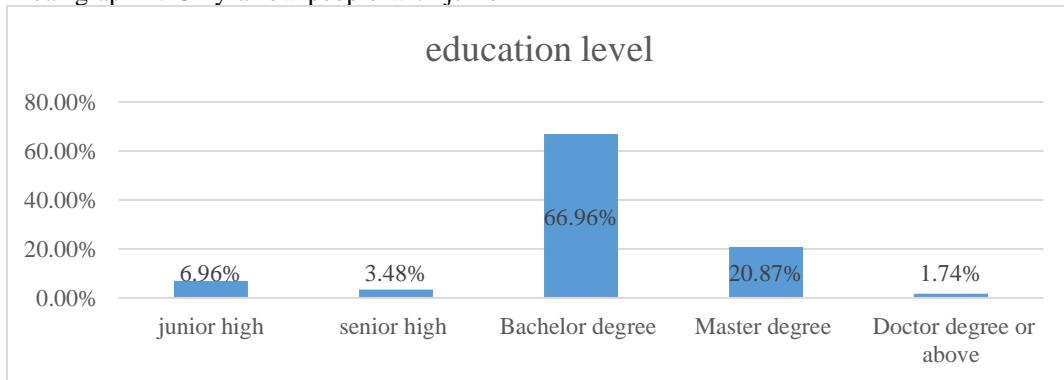


Figure 2 Education Level

There are 5 questions aiming to test participants mastery of the omission of definite article and the average point is 2.908 while that of confusion between definite article and indefinite article and overuse of definite article is 3.126 and 3.146, as detailed in Figure 3. According to Figure 3, it is clear that participants have the best proficiency in judging errors of overuse than confusion and omission.

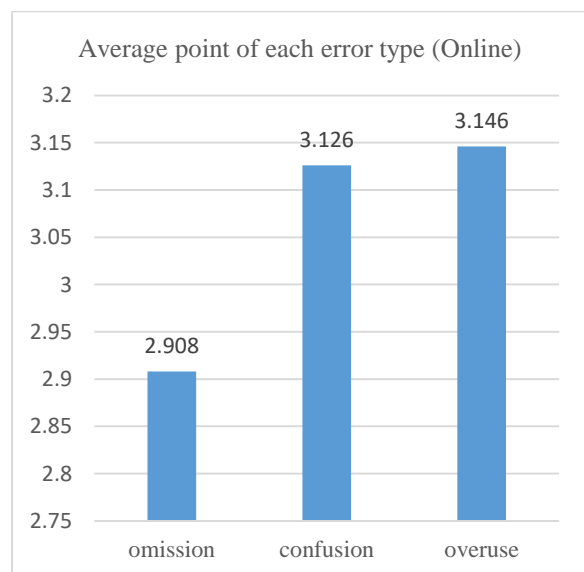


Figure 3 Average Point of Each Error Type(Online)

The average point of questions with difference influence factors are presented in the bar graph below. According to Figure 4, participants were most influenced by semantic features while least likely to be influenced by number.

Participants got the lowest point (2.58) of question 25 “Young Shakespeare never imagined that he could become a famous writer”. “Shakespeare” is a proper noun and when it appears alone, no definite article should be added. When the “young” appears before “Shakespeare” as a modifier, however, “the” should be added.

It’s worth mentioning that the highest point (3.55) also appears in the question (Question 9) relevant to modifier (Question 9: “The most native Americans are working today, that’s 1969, then ever before in history”). “Most” here is neither in superlative form nor an adjective. Instead, it’s an adverb. Most of our participants to some extent disagreed with this test sentence, which means they can distinguish modifiers of different parts of speech and have a relatively better mastery about when to add definite article before “most”.

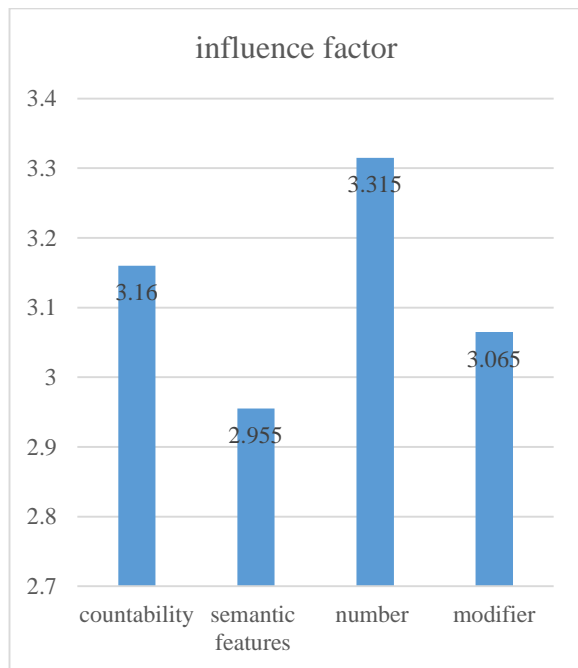


Figure 4 Influence Factor (Online)

**5.2 Offline Results:**

There are a total of 30 participants in the offline test, including 12 girls and 18 boys. The participants were senior high school students at a key middle school in Nanchang, Jiangxi province, China. They have studied English for an average of eight years and have a higher English proficiency than their peers. The offline questionnaire is the same as the online one (5 questions for omission, 5 for confusion, 5 for overuse).

As shown in Figure 5, 5 questions aim to test participants’ mastery of the omission of definite article

and the average point is 3.07 (to two decimal places). Then the average point on the five questions about the confusion of the definite article is 3.29. Finally, 5 questions about the overuse of the definite article is 3.18. As can be seen from the graph, the frequency of the omission of definite article is the highest for these participants for senior one.

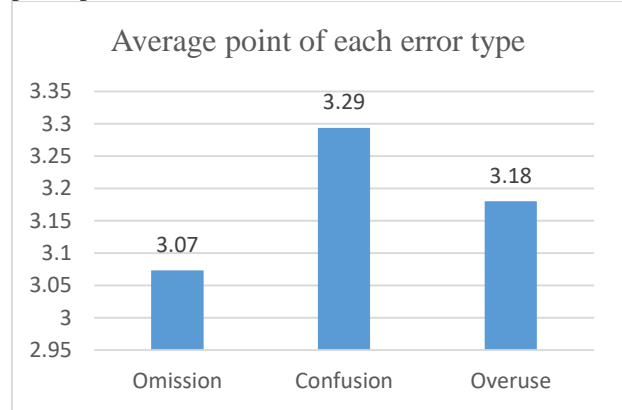


Figure 5 Average Point of Each Error Type(Offline)

In the offline questionnaire, the influence of different factors on the misuse of definite articles is shown in Figure 6. We find that scores for each question are about the same, but modifiers have a relatively greater effect on the use of the definite article.

Same as the online questionnaire, the lowest score is Question 25, whose influence factor is modifier. Moreover, there is another question in the offline questionnaire that is almost lower than the Question 25, and that is Question 11 “I bent over and examined the device. The thick layer of dust had settled on it.”. The influence in this problem is the countability. “Layer” is a quantifier here and should be preceded by an indefinite article rather than a definite article. Although they did not do badly with the countability, they did not do particularly well with the use of definite articles before the quantifiers.

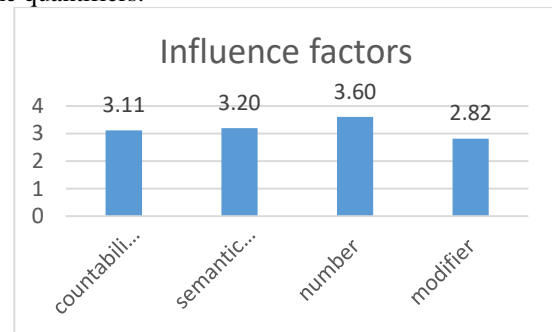


Figure 6 Influence Factor (Offline)

**5.3 Comparing online and offline results:**

An interesting result can be found by comparing the results of the offline and online experiments. Most of the participants in the online test were people with bachelor degree, while the offline participants were senior high school students. But for each kind of the questions, the

average high school student scored higher than the average online participant.

The high school students were also slightly less affected by each cause of error than the online participants. In addition to the factor of countability, the other three influencing factors have less impact on the offline participants than on the online participants.

So we can find that the high school participants have a better acquisition of definite article in a certain context than the participants with bachelor's degree.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 Interpretation :**

Our research questions are:

- (1) Which definite article mistakes are Chinese students more likely to make?
- (2) Which influencing factor is more likely to disturb students and make them use the definite article incorrectly?
- (3) In the English teaching of basic education, which part of the practice can teachers strengthen to reduce the use of definite article mistakes?

With regard to the incorrect types of definite article, we confirmed our previous conjecture through investigation. There are three types of definite article errors, the confusion, omission and overuse of the definite article. By comparing the results of online and offline questionnaires, we found that the most frequent error type is the omission of the definite article. Moreover, in the online questionnaire, the overuse of the definite article is the less frequent error, while in the offline questionnaire, the confusion of the definite article is the less frequent error. This validates the "complete migration, complete accessibility hypothesis" of Zdorenko & Paradis [9]. In the initial state of second language acquisition, the functional categories and their eigenvalues of the first language will be transferred to the second language. There is no definite article in Chinese. Therefore, Chinese English learners will miss a lot of definite articles at the beginning, and then with the progress of target language acquisition, they will miss less and less definite articles until they are fully acquired.

As for the factors that influence the use of definite articles, we found that the two most influential factors are semantic features and modifiers. It is reasonable to speculate that this may have something to do with the way Chinese students learn grammar. Because Chinese grammar teaching is in inductive, instead of in deductive way. Teachers always teach the grammar rules first, and then strengthen the grammar by doing exercises. As a result, students lack of understanding of the usage of the definite article in the context, and thus make more errors under the influence of semantic features.

### **6.2 Further investigation:**

According to our research, it seems that universal grammar still affects second language acquisition. The acquisition of the core grammatical points, such as articles, still has a great influence on the whole second language acquisition. At the same time, our study also found that the current grammar education model in China may not be sufficient for second language learners to master the use of the definite article. Therefore, future research can try to study the influence of grammar education mode on students' article acquisition. At the same time, further studies can also consider more social factors that influence the use of articles, such as socioeconomic level, gender or extracurricular classes. Language acquisition is a dynamic and complex nonlinear process, so that we should consider as much as possible the factors that affect second language acquisition. Moreover, an interesting result was found in our study that the acquisition of definite articles was not directly proportional to age. It means that the acquisition of definite articles does not improve with age. This complex relationship may require a longer, larger sample of research. Finally, our study focused more on reception than production, so future research could try to find the differences and connections between the reception and production of article acquisition.

### **6.3 Limitation :**

Since we randomly selected 15 test questions from COCA, we failed to ensure that the quantity of questions influenced by each factor were equal. What we did was to analyzed influence factors based on sentences from COCA rather than creating contexts by ourselves. For example, in 8 out of 15 test questions, the usage of "the" are relevant to semantic features while only 3 questions were about countability and 2 questions about number or modifier. Hence, the inspection force of each influence factor was different and data from questions with larger quantity was more reliable and accurate.

Besides, due to the inadequacy of test questions and participants, it's hard to demonstrate convincingly which factor exerts more influence on participants' decision. Some improvements can be made by analyzing data from corpus such as TECCL(Ten-thousand English Composition of Chinese Learner) or by enriching test questions and enlarging our sample size.

Thirdly, the diversity of our participants was very limited. They were all Chinese speakers and took English as their second language, which made us fail to compare the proficiency of acquiring definite article between different language speakers such as Chinese native speaker or Korean native speaker. Moreover, it was hard to make judgements on an EFL learner's proficiency by simply collecting his or her education level. If using an official English test such as IELTS as a yardstick, we can divide our participants into groups with different English

proficiency according to their IELTS scores and then make comparison between groups to see whether the acquisition of definite article is in proportion to overall English proficiency.

#### **6.4 Pedagogical Implication:**

Despite the limitations listed above, this research offers some insight into the possible difficulties that ESL learners can face and has important consequences for the teaching of English language texts. These consequences apply to teaching approaches, goals, and practises for Chinese ESL learners as well as other native language learners.

In terms of teaching emphasis, since learners may not be aware of the use of English articles, it is suggested that teaching should focus not only on the training of form and meaning, but also on the training of the use of definite articles, especially the training of grammatical function, collocation, and constraints on use, since it can be conducive to the improvement of learners' productive knowledge [18]. Similarly, cognitive learning style, to some extent, it should also be applied to the teaching of the definite article [19]. For advanced learners (undergraduate and postgraduate), mastery of the English article system includes not only knowledge of technical terms and conditions relating to noun countability and/or word pronunciations, but also knowledge of theories and generalisations relating to the semantics and functions of English articles, as well as the ability to recognise the intended referentiality of a noun phrase in a specific context. For intermediate learners (high school students), it is necessary to strengthen the learning of omitting the definite article in the misuse of articles. In addition, it is also necessary for teachers to bring students into the practice of context and semantic features. Teaching practitioners must also diagnose their students' metalinguistic understanding in order to identify information gaps. The problem identified in this study may also be confronted by learners such as the potential confusion between the specificity and the definiteness, a lack of awareness of the significance of reference interpretations and the generic application of even a/an and the, as well as problems in distinguishing differences in the countability of a target word in the target word and its equivalent in the native language. These and other possible variations in learners' understanding should be addressed in English article instruction.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

In this article, we have reported on the results of a questionnaire survey which investigated errors and causes in the use of definite articles by advanced Chinese intermediate and advanced English learners.

Although many advanced language learners pass the English test to enter higher institutions, they lack the metalinguistic awareness of the definite article and are

less likely than intermediate English learners to judge the wrong use of the definite article. For all learners, omission and confusion are difficult parts. It is recommended that formal and standardised instruction of English articles be carried out in order to remove their ignorance of the use and structure of English articles and enhance their comprehension of the English article system. Awareness enhancement facilitates learners' acquisition of English articles when their selection of relevant articles in each context is driven by their linguistic knowledge rather than their baseless instincts.

## **REFERENCES**

- [1]. Thomas, M., 1989. The acquisition of English articles by first-and second-language learners. *Applied psycholinguistics*, 10(3), pp.335-355.
- [2]. Wakabayashi, S., 1997. *The acquisition of functional categories by learners of English* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge).
- [3]. Robertson, D., 2000. Variability in the use of the English article system by Chinese learners of English. *Second language research*, 16(2), pp.135-172.
- [4]. Snape, N., Leung, Y.K.I. and Ting, H.C., 2006. Comparing Chinese, Japanese and Spanish speakers in L2 English article acquisition: Evidence against the fluctuation hypothesis?. In *8th Generative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Conference (GASLA 2006)* (pp. 132-139). Cascadilla Proceedings Project.
- [5]. Zdorenko, T. and Paradis, J., 2007. The role of the first language in child second language acquisition of articles. In *Proceedings of the 2nd Conference on Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America (GALANA)* (pp. 483-490).
- [6]. Master, P.A., 1987. *A cross-linguistic interlanguage analysis of the acquisition of the English article system* (Doctoral dissertation, UCLA).
- [7]. Murphy, S.L., 1997. *Knowledge and production of English articles by advanced second language learners*. The University of Texas at Austin.
- [8]. Ionin, T., Zubizarreta, M.L. and Maldonado, S.B., 2008. Sources of linguistic knowledge in the second language acquisition of English articles. *Lingua*, 118(4), pp.554-576.
- [9]. Zdorenko, T. and Paradis, J., 2008. The acquisition of articles in child second language English: fluctuation, transfer or both?. *Second language research*, 24(2), pp.227-250.
- [10]. Young, R., 1996. Form-function relations in articles in English interlanguage. *Second language acquisition and linguistic variation*, 135, p.175.
- [11]. Butler, Y.G., 2002. SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS'THEORIES ON THE USE OF

- ENGLISH ARTICLES: An Analysis of the Metalinguistic Knowledge Used by Japanese Students in Acquiring the English Article System. *Studies in second language acquisition*, pp.451-480.
- [12]. Ionin, T., 2003. *Article semantics in second language acquisition* (Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology).
- [13]. Ionin, T., Ko, H. and Wexler, K., 2004. Article semantics in L2 acquisition: The role of specificity. *Language acquisition*, 12(1), pp.3-69.
- [14]. Yoon, K.K., 1993. Challenging prototype descriptions: Perception of noun countability and indefinite vs. zero article use. *IRAL: International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 31(4), p.269.
- [15]. Corver, N. and Zwarts, J., 2006. Prepositional numerals. *Lingua*, 116(6), pp.811-835.
- [16]. Guo hongjie and Zhou Qinqin, 2012. A study on the variation of indefinite article acquisition in Chinese English learners. *Journal of PLA Foreign Language Institute*, (1), pp.54-58.
- [17]. Mede, E. and Gürel, A., 2010. Acquisition of English articles in early bilingualism. *EUROSLA Yearbook*, 10(1), pp.193-219.
- [18]. Nation, I.S., 2013. *Learning vocabulary in another language Google eBook*. Cambridge University Press.
- [19]. LA, N., 2020. Exploring the effect of matching cognitive learning style with focused written corrective feedback on English definite/indefinite article system learning.