

# English language learning and the use of articles by L1 speakers of Japanese

## Abstract

The present paper aims to describe and analyze the errors in the use of articles by the EFL learners whose first language is Japanese and to find out how these errors are related to L1 transfer. A total number of 99 students from different classes in a national university took part in this study. The students were asked to write a descriptive paragraph about their favorite things. Students' writings were collected, marked, and analyzed using the content analysis technique. For each composition, the numbers of articles which were used correctly and incorrectly were counted. The missing articles were also examined. The overview of errors suggests that missing of an article could be an error arising from an absence of an equivalent article system in Japanese. Some categories of errors also indicate some L1 transfer from Japanese.

## 1. Introduction

Using English articles properly is one of the most problematic things for most second language learners of English. Although articles are among the most frequently used words, even highly proficient learners have trouble using them properly. The proper use of English articles is especially difficult when the learners' native language does not have an article system, like Japanese.

### 1.1 Absence of an article equivalent system in Japanese

As Japanese is a language that does not have articles, most of the Japanese grammar books do not refer to the use of articles. However, in some grammar books, English articles are mentioned to explain some grammatical points of Japanese (Kaiser, Ichikawa, Kobayashi, & Yamamoto, 2001). According to Kaiser et al. (2001), one function of *wa*, a focus particle in Japanese, is to indicate information that is already known or understood. Therefore, as the following example sentence shows, *wa* has an effect similar to the English definite article 'the'.

- (1) 写真撮影は厳しく禁じられた Shasin satsuei **wa** kibisiku kinjirareta  
'The taking of photographs was strictly forbidden.'

Kajikazawa (2006) compares the usage of Japanese particles, *wa* and *ga* using the following two example sentences.

- (2) 私が 大野 です。Watashi **ga** oono desu. 'I'm Oono.' 'I'm the Oono.' (This sentence has a similar meaning to "I'm the person that you know" The following example explains the context when this phrase is used. Ms. Sato knows Mr. Oono only through e-mails and has never met him in person,

and she meets Mr. Oono for the first time face to face. Then, Mr. Oono would say this phrase to Ms. Sato to introduce himself. )

- (3) 私は大野です。Watashi **wa** oono desu.  
'I'm Oono.'

Kajikazawa argues that *wa* has an effect similar to English indefinite articles as the information after *wa* is unknown information. *Ga*, on the other hand, is attached to old or known information, and its function is similar to definite articles. *Wa* and *ga* have multiple functions and their effects are decided based on the context information.

Demonstratives also have similar functions to articles. Iori and Zhang (2007) analyzed the usage of Japanese demonstratives, *kono* (this), and *sono* (its) in various contexts. The authors argued that the effects of *kono* and *sono* are similar to definite articles, but whether they function as definite articles or not depends on the context.

## **1.2 Article errors made by Japanese EFL learners**

There have been several studies investigating article errors made by Japanese EFL learners. Many studies examined what factors make the acquisition of article difficult for learners and how those factors affected their article usage.

Yamasaki (2013) investigates the difficulties that Japanese learners have in using definite articles. To analyze the article usage, she adopts the discourse model. The model consists of three domains: shared knowledge, context of use, and linguistic context. The results show that learners used definite articles correctly when the article usage is decided by only one domain. However, when learners had to rely on two domains in using the articles, more errors were found. The study also suggests that they used the definite article properly when a trigger noun easily evoked a referent.

Takahashi (1997) examines whether Japanese learners' article usage is affected by the presence of a modifier and the knowledge of commonly occurring sequences. The results showed that the learners tended to use a definite article for modified noun phrases. The correct use of definite articles increased when the articles are used with formulaic language.

Komiya (1998) studied whether the type of reference affects learners' article usage. The test results show that learners' familiarity with the definite article differs depending on the type of reference. All the learners used definite articles correctly in the sentences using direct anaphoric reference. In representative and generic use, the correct answer rate was the lowest. The author argued that when the clue of the use is clear, the learners were able to use definite articles correctly.

Butler (2002) focuses on the metalinguistic knowledge that Japanese learners of English employ in selecting English articles and the relationship between the learners' proficiency levels and their use of metalinguistic knowledge. It is revealed that proficient learners used articles more accurately. The learners recognized that detecting the referentiality and countability of noun phrases was challenging for them in using articles.

Some studies have been conducted to examine the effects of instruction on

the acquisition of definite articles. Hinenoya and Loyster (2015), for example, compared two instructional methods of definite articles. One instructional method is the traditional treatment, which emphasizes that the definite article functions to identify the referent. The other method is the mental space treatment, which sees that articles function to signal the accessibility of a discourse referent through mental spaces. The study was conducted to investigate which types of metalinguistic information help learners understand definite article usage. It was found that the mental space treatment group outperformed the traditional treatment.

As described above, the past studies suggest that a number of interwoven factors contribute to the challenges that Japanese EFL learners face in the acquisition of English articles. Rules for the use of articles have been illustrated in a very limited way in grammar books, which makes it difficult for Japanese EFL learners to understand its usage, especially very language specific for English in this case. The present paper aims to describe and analyze the errors in the use of articles by the EFL learners whose first language is Japanese. Just like language of a child is not considered to be a mistake but an effort towards learning to express oneself, the errors in the use of second language need to be taken as an intermediate step towards learning a new language. This step is called Interlanguage (Selinker, 1974). Thus, the research questions (RQ) for the study are as follows.

RQ1. What are the errors in the use of articles in English by Japanese learners of English?

RQ2. How are these errors related to L1-transfer (no explicit use of articles but some other ways of expressing definite or general nouns)?

## 2. Data and method

### 2.1 The participants and setting of the study

This study is benefitted from the authors' English classes taught to the freshmen undergraduate students of the University of Tsukuba, a national university in Japan. To serve the research objective, we used English compositions written for the semester final exam by 99 students from different classes as shown in Table 1. All the participants are L1 speakers of Japanese who had completed at least six years of English study before entering the university which is a minimum requirement of the national education system in Japan (Hu & MacKay, 2012). All of the students took the placement test of English at the beginning of the first semester and were divided into different classes according to their English proficiency level.

**Table 1:** Summary of participants

School	Number of participants
School of Humanities and Culture	35
School of Social and International Studies	32
School of Life and Environmental Sciences	32
Total	99

Among the three compulsory English subjects for the freshmen undergraduate students at the University, the participants are taken only from the English Integrated Skills course. The other two compulsory subjects are English Critical Reading Strategies and English Inter-Cultural Communication, which are not covered by this study.

## 2.2 Data collection and analysis technique

The main data for this study are the errors in the use of articles ('a', 'an' and 'the') in the English compositions written by the participants in the final exam of the fall semester 2014. Students from 3 different classes were asked to write a descriptive paragraph about their favorite food, place, book, movie, or TV show. The students were instructed to use the descriptive adjectives in their writing which were taught three weeks ahead of the test date. However, they were not explicitly instructed about any other particular features of writing. Since this writing task was a part of their final exam, it is assumed that the students tried to do their best in their writing.

Table 2 presents the summary statistics of the compositions. A total of 35 compositions were analyzed from the School of Humanities and Culture, in which an average length of the composition was 100 words, ranging from 35 to 188 words. Similarly, 32 compositions were analyzed from the School of Social and International Studies which had 76 words in average, ranging from 30 to 121. About School of Life & Environmental Sciences, the number of compositions was 32, the average number of words was 107, ranging from 51 to 251.

**Table 2:** Summary statistics of compositions

School	The number of compositions	The number of words			
		<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
School of Humanities & Culture	35	100	32	35	188
School of Social & International Studies	32	76	23	30	121
School of Life & Environmental Sciences	32	107	46	51	251

Notes: *SD*=Standard Deviation, *Min*=Minimum, *Max*=Maximum

The article errors were marked and analyzed using the content analysis technique. Content analysis is a widely used systematic, replicable data reduction technique (Stemler, 2001) that can be used to identify a particular concept (in this case, errors in the use of articles in English writing) within a body of text (in this case, the English composition).

We followed the following process of content analysis. First, the written papers were coded eliminating the names and other personal identification of the participants. Second, the lengths of the composition were identified by word count of each composition. Third, the compositions were read line by line to identify the correct and incorrect usage of both the definite (*the*) and indefinite (*a* and *an*) articles. Finally, the occurrences of correct and incorrect articles were

entered into MS Excel to create a summary of the data for further analysis. In the next section, the results and discussion are presented based on the analysis of errors in article usage to find out the answer to research questions set for this study.

### **3. Result**

#### **3.1 Overview of errors**

The usage of definite and indefinite articles by Japanese learners of English is analyzed by using 99 pieces of students' descriptive writing. Based on the textbook on grammar by Murphy (1999), following basic rules had been used to identify and analyze the correct and incorrect usages of the articles.

##### Indefinite article (a, an)

- I. All singular countable (countable nouns that you can merely count, one car, two cars, three cars) nouns have an article or a determiner (like, any/some, this/that etc.) before them.  
Example: Do you need a book? This book is useful.
- II. For uncountable nouns we have usages like, a carton of milk, a bottle of water, a piece of music.
- III. We can also have plurals with articles in examples like, a pair of scissors.
- IV. All plural nouns do not need a/an article. (Caution: all plural nouns do not end with an -s, some do not change form like fish, sheep or police)
- V. 'An' is used before vowels. But the rule is governed by pronunciation. A semi-vowel like the first sounds in university, year, European do not take "an."

##### Definite article (the)

- VI. It is used when talking about some particular or specific thing.

##### Examples:

- a. Can you repeat *the* question, please? (the question that you asked)
- b. Paris is *the* capital of France. (there is only one capital of France)
- c. Lisa is *the* youngest student in her class. (there is only one youngest student in her class)

- VI. Generally, a second occurrence needs a definite article.

Example: I have a book in my backpack. *The* book is very heavy.

- VIII. It is used with adjectives to refer to a whole group of people.

Examples: *The* French enjoy cheese.

Life can be very hard for *the* poor.

- IX. It is used with the countries that have plural names (like, *the* Philippines, *the* Netherlands), and the countries that include 'republic', 'kingdom' or 'states' in their names (*the* United States, *the* Republic of Ireland).

Source: Murphy (1999)

Taking these rules as reference, all the articles found in students writing were marked in the paper and the summary of the correctness is presented in

Table 3. The first three columns show that the most frequent correctly used article was the definite article *the*, with a total of 212 occurrences whereas the indefinite articles *a* and *an* were used correctly only 87 times and three times, respectively. The next three columns present the incorrect usage of the articles. It shows a total of 56 occurrences of incorrect usages of the indefinite article *a*, whereas, incorrect usages of the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *an* was 39 and three, respectively. Similarly, the final three column show that the indefinite article *a* was missing in 79 places whereas indefinite article *the* and indefinite article *an* were missing in 49 and six places respectively. Please refer to appendices for the details of the articles in each composition.

**Table 3:** Summary of article usages

School	Correct usage			Incorrect usage			Missing		
	a	an	the	a	an	the	a	an	the
School of Humanities & Culture	36	2	98	10	0	11	39	4	24
School of Social & International Studies	19	1	21	21	1	16	16	1	13
School of Life & Environmental Sciences	32	0	93	25	2	12	24	1	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>49</b>

Since the first research objective of this study is to find out the errors in the use of the articles, incorrect usages as well as missing articles are the focus of this study. The following section presents some of the examples of mis(use) of articles in writing. These sample texts are taken from Appendix 1.

#### Indefinite article (a)

- a) #1: In a hot and wet summer day, they find ... big strange machine at their college.
- b) #2: In this movie, monsters work in ... company.  
Mike is ... green monster with short legs and arms.
- c) #20: I think he is ... lonely man and his life is sad.
- d) #28: It's ... very romantic love story.

#### Indefinite article (an)

- a) #4: I was a elementary school student, but I still remember the story clearly (incorrect use of the article)
- b) #33: She never become ... adult. (missing the article)

#### Definite article (the)

- a) #5: Thanks to Sanae, Kaori remembers ... pleasure of playing Kendo.  
(Missing the article)

- b) #13: My grandfather joined ... Nichiro war. (Missing the article)
- c) #28: A beautiful and dreaming woman and the beast which is scary but kind, fall in love. (Incorrect use of the article)

The overview of errors suggests that missing articles could be a general error arising from an absence of an equivalent article system in Japanese. However, there are some more categories of errors that suggest some L1 transfer from Japanese. The next section discusses them in detail.

### 3.2 L1 Transfer

This section describes the errors found in Japanese EFL learners' writing and analyzes a possible mother-tongue interference or an interlanguage stage. Since Japanese does not have an article system in the language there are other semantic universals, like emphasis or specificity in this case, which leads to L1 transfer or an interlanguage stage. Ionin et al (2008) examines the sources of knowledge in the acquisition of articles in English. They have L1 speakers of Russian (that has no articles) and Spanish (that has articles) as their respondents. The authors conclude that L1 transfer, access to semantic universals through Universal Grammar (UG) and input triggers are the three sources relevant for the acquisition articles. The present section focuses on the analysis of some categories found in the data based on native speaker judgment and the notion of L1 transfer.

- Countable/uncountable nouns:

For Japanese learners of English, the concept of countable and uncountable nouns is difficult because it has no grammatical equivalent in Japanese. Kobayashi (2008) analyzes the errors in a Japanese English sub-corpus. The author suggests that when depending on the context the learners need to decide if the noun is countable or uncountable, there is a major tendency of misuse of such nouns. In the current data, we found some errors related to this notion of (un) countable nouns. We found an error in Appendix 2, #29 where *ramen* is used as a count noun.

- (4) My favorite dish is a ramen.

There are two possible reasons for this error. One, ramen is countable in a way. For example, use of *ippai*, *nihai*, *sanbai*...is used to count the number of bowls of ramen.

In Appendix 3, #15, the students misunderstand poem and novel as uncountable nouns in the given sentence.

- (5) He couldn't write poem. So, he wants to write novel like poem.

As both *poem* and *poetry* are translated as 詩 (Shi) in Japanese, the students might have misunderstood poem as an uncountable noun like poetry.

Similarly, eatables have no singular/plural forms and we also had a sentence like

- (6) Apple pie is one of the favorite dish of mine.

- Use of ‘the’ instead of ‘a/an’

In a sentence about a favorite movie, the movie about Rapunzel was described (Appendix 1, #7). A part of the sentences reads

(7) (Rapunzel) lived in the tower since she was a baby.

Even the first occurrence of tower had a definite article. If written in Japanese this sentence would read like,

(8) Akachan no koro kara aru tou ni sundeimasita.

The use of *aru tou ni* implies an element of emphasis when expressed in Japanese. It might read like ‘a certain kind of tower’ when translated in English. But there is a possibility that this element of definiteness is expressed through a definite article ‘the.’ Even though it is not a direct language transfer, it seems like an interlanguage stage. When the learner thinks in Japanese and writes in English, this kind of error would occur. Similarly, in sentence (10), the same movie is explained and at the very beginning ‘the’ is used instead of ‘a.’

(9) It's the Disney movie.

In English, in the first occurrence of such sentence would need an indefinite article but in Japanese there is an element of emphasis of definiteness when we look at the sentence in Japanese in (11) and (12).

(10) Sore **wa** Disney movie. (correct)

(11) Sore **ga** Disney movie. (incorrect)

In this context, the movie is supposedly well-known or its maker is understood before even mentioning it for the first time. The use of *wa* sounds appropriate (or correct) to a Japanese native speaker than the use of *ga*. Kaiser et al (2001) also suggests this difference in the use of *wa* and *ga*. This is another example of an interlanguage stage for a Japanese EFL learner.

## 4. Conclusion

The results of the present study describe article errors found in the writing of Japanese EFL learners. The discussions on the kinds of errors and a further analyses based on L1 transfer suggests that we have a gap in the study of acquisition of English articles by Japanese learners. The idea is that the ESL learners even when their first language (L1) does not have an article system in their language, have some innate knowledge of particularizing or generalizing things. An absence of an equivalent article system in Japanese leads to some involuntary errors by the speakers that give insights into acquisition of article system in English. Further studies, henceforth, on the acquisition of the article system, and the methods of teaching articles would be quite relevant in this area. Moreover, the contrast in the use of specificity or generalization without the use of articles is a very interesting yet less known area in semantic universals.

The major limitation of this study is that its findings may not be generalized to all the Japanese learners of English because the data was collected only from one university and the sample size is not big enough to generalize. However, by finding interesting cases of L1 transfer and interlanguage in the use of English articles, this study has set a solid foundation for a more comprehensive study. Moreover, as it systematically describes the written texts using the content analysis technique, rather small sample size does not affect the result adversely.



Nevertheless, we suggest a comprehensive study with bigger sample size conducted in different universities for more interesting findings.

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**Appendix 1:** Details of articles (Humanities and Culture)

Student ID	Word count	Correct use			Incorrect use			Missing		
		a	an	the	a	an	the	a	an	the
1	81	3		4				1		
2	145	2		1				3		
3	78	1		3					1	1
4	93			5	1					
5	117	1	1	1						1
6	71	2		2				1		
7	89	2		4	2		1	2		
8	63			2						
9	102	3		6				1		
10	78								1	
11	72	2		2			1			
12	127	3		5			1			
13	73			3	1		1			1
14	122	1		4				3		
15	117			4				2		2
16	112			4				3	1	
17	144	2		3				2		2
18	35				1					
19	90			8				3		
20	89	1		1			1	2		1
21	78			2				1		
22	74	5		1						2
23	150			3	3		1	2		1
24	87									
25	81			1	1					
26	68	1		1						
27	127	1		4						
28	138	1		6			1	3		1
29	66						1	1		
30	188	2			1			4		4
31	132			5			2			
32	113	2		3						3
33	84			1			1	1	1	1
34	95			4				4		
35	138	1	1	5						4
Total	3517	36	2	98	10	0	11	39	4	24

**Appendix 2:** Details of articles (Social and International Studies)

Student ID	Word count	Correct use			Incorrect use			Missing		
		a	an	the	a	an	the	a	an	the
1	102	3			3			3		
2	77	1	1	1	2			2		
3	69				1		2	1		2
4	58				3		2	3		
5	85	5		2						
6	100	1					2			2
7	116				2			2		
8	121	4			2	1	1	1		1
9	73			2			2			1
10	33									
11	50	1								
12	93			1			1			
13	78									
14	44				2			1	1	
15	75									
16	75									
17	90									
18	53									1
19	49									1
20	75	2		1						
21	67				1			1		
22	82	2		3						
23	101									
24	61						1			1
25	96			1			2			2
26	97			4						
27	52				2			2		
28	73						2			2
29	68			1	3					
30	30									
31	80			5						
32	105						1			
Total	2428	19	1	21	21	1	16	16	1	13

**Appendix 3:** Details of articles (Life and Environmental Sciences)

Student ID	Word count	Correct use			Incorrect use			Missing		
		a	an	the	a	an	the	a	an	the
1	113	1		3	1		2			3
2	115	3		5	1			1		
3	168			17	3			4		1
4	153			2	2	1	2	2		2
5	51	1		1						
6	62	1		2						
7	164	3		3	2			2		
8	142	4		8						
9	64			1	1			2		
10	76			1				1		
11	69									
12	72			1	1			2		
13	68						1			1
14	160	3		5		1	1			1
15	96			2	3			3		
16	114	1								
17	251	2		7	2		1	1		
18	148			4						
19	198	1		10	1					2
20	72			4						
21	72	1			1					1
22	127			5			2	1		
23	77			1						
24	52	1		1						
25	61	3								
26	74	1								
27	104			1	2			2		
28	102						1			
29	100			7						1
30	90				1		1		1	
31	102				4			3		
32	105									
Total	3422	26	0	91	25	2	11	24	1	12