SPECIFICITY AND GENERALITY IN ENGLISH ARTICLE USE: EVIDENCE FROM PAKISTANI ESL LEARNERS' WRITING

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1. Abstract

This paper analyzes the errors that Pakistani students make in using English articles using the Error Analysis Model of Corder (1967). Though the learners in Pakistan have been exposed to the English language over the years in the academic setting, there is still a significant challenge in the usage of articles, and this has mainly been attributed to the fact that no such system exists in Urdu and the other regional languages of Pakistan. The research uses mixed method research design and finds and categorises the errors in terms of omissions, unneeded insertions, substitutions, and misuse of the zero article based in the essays written by 60 intermediate and undergraduate students. It has been revealed that omission errors are the most frequent, and nearly two-thirds of all article-related errors fall into omission, substitution, and insertion errors. Qualitative analysis also demonstrates that these errors are instigated by both interlingual and intralingual influences, while quantitative techniques are used in the measurement of the frequency of every type of error. The research identifies semantic distinctions, i.e., definiteness and specificity in the use of the article. Pedagogical implication implies that contextualised teaching of grammar must be taught, the learner must be exposed to as much authentic text as possible, and that special teaching and learning interventions should be given to the learner with emphasis on the kind of common errors. The findings of the research contribute to the research in the area of applied linguistics since they offer empirical findings in a South Asian multilingual setting and point out the persistence of issues with article acquisition in the second language.

Keywords: *article misuse, Pakistani learners, Error Analysis, English grammar, interlanguage, second language acquisition, definiteness, applied linguistics*

2. Introduction

The proper usage of articles in English has always been an issue for learners who acquire English as a Second or foreign language, whose mother tongue lacks an article system (Abbas et al., 2025). The application of articles in the text is one of the primary reasons for acquiring competence in academic writing in a country where the English language is used as the official language and as the medium of instruction in various educational institutions (Khan et al., 2023). Although Pakistani learners have been exposed to English in different forms over the years, the systematic and recurrent errors in the application of a, an, the, and the zero article are common among them; therefore, this leads to the loss of clarity, coherence, and accuracy of their writing from a grammatical perspective (Nazeer, Azam, Syed, & Noorani, 2022). Errors in article use are not only important, but also consistent and fossilized (Amin, Arshad & Mustafa, 2025).

This problem rests on the significant structural disparities between the English and Pakistani regional languages, particularly Urdu, since the language does not have a direct counterpart to the English system of articles (Abbas et al., 2025). Consequently, the learners tend to struggle with the conceptualisation of definiteness, specificity, and genericity (the semantic concepts that are represented by articles in English but are not reflected by morphemes in Urdu). It is this attribute of the linguistic gap that causes the repeated misspeakings and exclusions in the written production of the learner. Past studies have acknowledged the fact that such an issue exists, but very few have conducted relatively specific and systematised error studies of writing articles misused by Pakistani learners in English writing according to contemporary analysis models (Aqeel, Rubbani, & Hamid, 2022).

The current investigation will be capable of identifying, grouping, and describing the nature of the article errors by the Pakistani learners within the theoretical context of the Error Analysis (EA). In particular, the research takes into account the level and the nature of misuse that includes omission, the unnecessary insertion, and the substitution of articles. By covering these dimensions, the study tries to build challenges of learners, interlingual and intra-lingual influences, and discover the implications for the language pedagogy and the curriculum development.

The significance of the research is that it could prove handy in influencing the teaching of practice, specifically, the teaching of academic writing, grammar, and proficiency of the English language in Pakistan. The opportunity to detect the tendencies of misuse of language articles frequently may assist teachers in planning certain interventions and creating educational material that will meet the specific needs of some learners. Additionally, the empirical evidence presented in the research work will also contribute to the literature of applied linguistics, giving empirical evidence acquired on the Pakistani learner corpus that will also support the cross-linguistic research on learning articles and their abuse.

2.1 Background of the Study

The English article system is another practice that is generally challenging for every second/foreign language learners of English, particularly those speakers whose language does not morphologically realise the articles. In Pakistan, where English (as a foreign language) is significant in education, government, and business communication through written language, grammatical correctness is a significant component of quality written language (Nazim, Iftikhar, & Madad, 2024). Although Pakistani learners can be exposed to the English language at an early age in school, they habitually make errors in using the right forms of articles (a, an, the, and the zero article), and they usually commit grammatical errors in any form of written academic writing. These chronic challenges are added due to the complexity of the usage of articles, i.e., the necessity to comprehend definiteness, specificity, and general reference.

2.2 Problem Statement

Many studies demonstrate that one of the most common and frequent grammatical mistakes of writing in the English language among Pakistani students is the misuse of articles (Ahmad, Shahid, & Farhat, 2023; Aqeel, Rubbani, & Hamid, 2022). Most of the regional languages used in Pakistan, such as Urdu, lack such a system of articles, and consequently, learners will revert to some L1-based structural level to form English noun phrases. Such language ignorance usually results in an article omission, excess, or inappropriate replacement in a written text. Despite the fact that the overall grammatical mistakes in Pakistan are observed among the learners in the previous studies, however, restricted and targeted studies with reference to the misuse of the articles from the

perspective of EA are nonexistent. There is no concentrated empirical study, and that translates into knowing neither the nature of these errors nor how frequently and where they occur.

2.3 Research Objectives

1. To identify and classify the types of article errors produced by Pakistani learners.
2. To determine the frequency of each category of error using an error analysis framework.
3. To explore the underlying sources of article misuse, considering both interlingual and intralingual factors.

2.4 Research Questions

1. What types of article errors are most frequently produced by Pakistani learners in English writing?
2. What is the frequency of each category of error using an error analysis framework?
3. What are the possible linguistic and cognitive sources of these article errors?

2.5 Significance of the Study

The implications of the outcome of this study on applied linguistics, the teaching of the English language, and curriculum development in Pakistan are numerous. An improved understanding of the misuse of the articles can guide the language teachers to design certain instructional processes that address the weaknesses of the learners. Moreover, the ability to identify the patterns of errors will also be helpful in the development of more effective teaching resources, grammar studies, and tests. On a theoretical level, the study is valuable to the growing body of research in this area about the acquisition of articles and L2 error analysis since it will offer empirical data on the matter in a Pakistani setting. This not only contributes to the knowledge of how interlanguage develops, but it is also an indication of the influence that linguistic typology can impose on second language learning.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Articles in English Grammar

The English article system consists of the definite article "the" and the indefinite article "a and an", and the zero article, playing various semantic and syntactic roles. Articles work towards this end of defining specificity, generic reference, and countability (Abbas et al., 2025). The definite article characterizes common knowledge or particular reference, and the indefinite article a/an can mostly mark new nonspecific or generic nouns. The obscuration of these semantic differences renders the acquisition and correct utilisation of the articles in English particularly challenging to the students whose native languages are not morphologically encoded to represent these differences. Use of articles is particularly among the hardest categories of grammar that researchers have reported that ESL/EFL students have been struggling to master learning (Ahmad, Shahid, & Farhat, 2023).

3.2 Acquisition of English Articles Among ESL/EFL Learners

The acquisition of the articles has been researched extensively in relation to the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Investigations reveal that semantic categories like specificity and definiteness are applied by learners in learning articles, but in most languages, these categories are not, but are conceptual in nature (Zia et al., 2025). The absence of articles in the L1 of the learners may lead to some problems in the importation process of the English articles to the semantic notions, which are not present in the L1. Studies also indicate that students can employ the so-called fluctuation hypotheses; they switch between definiteness-based and specificity-based usage of articles until higher competence is achieved (Noor et al., 2025). As well, developmental

mistakes and over-generalizing, which do not fully acquire semantic differentiation, contribute to further difficulties, especially in the written production, where it is supposed to be controlled.

3.3 Pakistani Learners' English Writing: Key Features

Studies on English writing among Pakistani students imply a lot of grammatical errors, including the wrong use of tenses and prepositions and, in particular, articles (Baig et al., n.d.; Fatima & Ajmal, 2025). The national language of Pakistan, Urdu, has a pastoral determiners and demonstratives system but does not have a distinct system of articles, which causes a negative transfer when learners attempt to internalise the guidelines of the articles in English (Ghyas & Sakhawat, 2024). Other regional languages that do not have a morphological article, such as Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashto, also cause interlingual borrowing. Research has revealed that the Pakistani learners tend to leave out the articles in situations that would involve them using the definite article or overuse it in situations where none of the articles is suitable (Nazim, Iftikhar, & Madad, 2024). Such findings, however, do not preclude the absence of detailed and systematic error analysis that pays attention to particular patterns of misuse of the articles, in particular, in the academic writing area in the literature.

3.4 Error Analysis (Theoretical Framework)

Corder (1967) was the pioneer of the error identifying/error classifying/error interpreting method of Error Analysis (EA). There are a number of stages involved in EA, like error description, data collection, error identification, error explanation, and error evaluation (Ellis, 1994). The framework is particularly relevant to applied linguistics as it pays attention to the production of words or phrases by the learners and assists in revealing the developmental processes of language acquisition. There is an interlingual error (induced by transferring L1) and an intralingual error (induced by overgeneralizing, simplifying, or incorrectly applying the target language rules). It is an appropriate framework to interpret the misuse of the articles of the Pakistani learners, which is why its analytical power enables the researchers to track the patterns of the language and determine the potential source of difficulty.

3.5 Empirical Studies on Article Misuse

The judgment of article misuse in learners is universal, which is mentioned in earlier empirical studies carried out in various ESL/EFL settings. It has been discovered that the mistakes that are committed when using the articles are in common patterns, including the omission of the definite article or the replacement of the indefinite articles (Naz et al., 2025). The studies conducted in the South Asian region also exhibit this kind of pattern, as the students tend to overlook some of the articles that are obligatory to be positioned in front of the nouns and apply the articles that are superfluous (Nazir, Kayani, & Yasin, 2023). Similar results are appropriate in Pakistani-oriented research, which, however, is not as numerous: incorrect use of a/an tiny article (repeatedly omitted and confused with a/an tiny article), misuse of the zero article (Halima et al., 2021). Most of these research works, however, confine themselves to a rather general coverage of grammar errors, as opposed to the misuse of the article. It remains a question requiring an attentive and systematic research on the context of EA that separates the errors of the article and provides comprehensive patterns of frequency and explanation.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The research design adopted in this study was a mixed-method research design that rested on the principles of Error Analysis (Corder, 1967). Its primary aim was to discover, categorise as well

and determine the kind of mistakes in the implementation of articles in English writing among the Pakistani learners. Quantitative techniques were used in the measurement of the frequency of every type of error, and the qualitative analysis is a presentation of the interpretation of the nature and origin of such errors. The combination offered a chance to have a holistic view of the challenges that the learners went through, and this is in line with the suggestions of Ellis (1994) on the importance of integrating the numerical and descriptive solutions in the study of the second language.

4.2 Participants

The sample was comprised of 60 Pakistani learners, studying in the public sector institutions and taking intermediate and undergraduate courses. They were aged between 17-22 years and were all schooled in English as a mandatory subject for at least ten years. The participants were chosen by employing a purposive sampling method in order to ensure that the sample appeared like normal Pakistani learners who had exposure to English in an academic environment. None of the participants claimed that he or she were a native speaker or had extensive time in an English-speaking setting. Data collection was to occur by seeking ethical consent.

4.3 Data Collection

The data was collected based on written essays prepared during the normal classroom activities. They were requested to compose a 300-350-word essay on good topics known by the participant, like good topics related to education, technology, social issues, etc. The reason why the genre has been adopted is that academic essays provide learners a chance to demonstrate free usage of selected grammatical structures, such as using articles. Approaches to collection to a total of 60 essays were collected within about 18000 Thinks of words written by the learners. All of the scripts were coded and anonymized to achieve confidentiality.

4.4 Analytical Framework

Identification of errors was done using the five steps of Error Analysis, which entailed collection of errors, identification and classification of errors, explanation and evaluation of errors as suggested by Corder (1967) and further elaborated by Ellis (1994). To begin with, the cases where there was an incorrect usage of the article were underlined and extracted. The errors were further divided into four broad categories, namely: (a) omission, (b) unnecessary insertion, (c) the replacement of one article by another, and (d) abuse of the zero article. Manual calculations were performed on the frequencies, and a second coder was used to verify the frequencies to ensure consistency in coding. The analysis scheme is depicted below.

Table 1. Error Coding Scheme for Article Misuse

Error Category	Description	Example
Omission	Article required but not used	*He went to __ university.*
Unnecessary insertion	Article used where none is needed	*She likes the honesty.*
Substitution	An incorrect article was used in place of the correct one	*He bought the car yesterday* (when referring to a non-specific car)
Zero article misuse	Incorrect use of the zero article	*She visited Lahore in summer → in the summer*

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The identity of the participants was anonymised, and both the students and instructors gave their consent. These data were utilised solely for academic research (in line with institutional ethical policy).

5. Analysis

5.1 Frequency of Article Errors

With the corpus of 18,000 words being analysed in learners, a total of 543 errors related to the articles were found. The most widespread error was the missing of an article, and this constituted nearly half of all the errors. Substitution and irrelevant insertion were common, whereas zero-article was also common but a noteworthy rarely.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Article Error Types

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Omission	257	47.3%
Substitution	142	26.1%
Unnecessary insertion	101	18.6%
Zero-article misuse	43	7.9%
Total	**543**	**100%**

These findings are in line with existing literature that offers English as a second language, and the errors of omission are the dominant forms of errors (Murtaza et al., 2025).
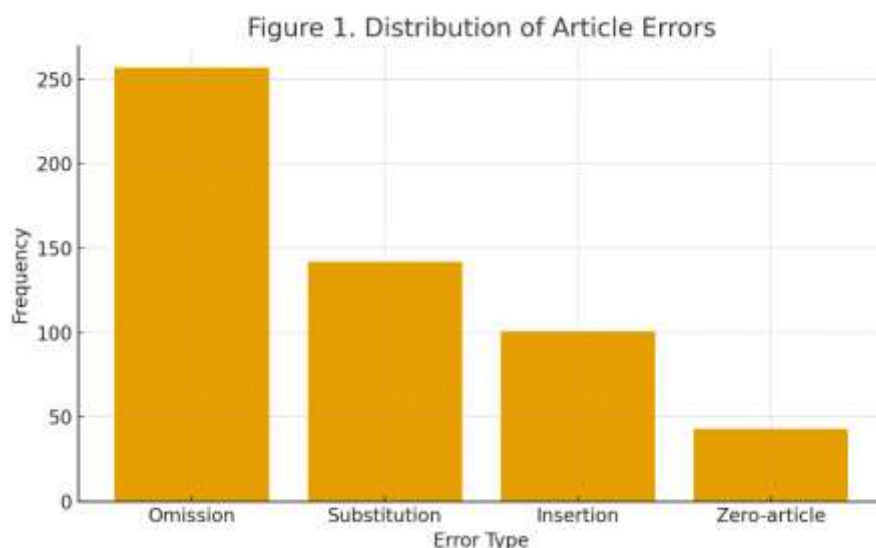

Figure 1. Distribution of Article Errors

5.2 Types of Misuse Identified

Omission Errors

The omission errors usually happened in a scenario where the definite article "the" was obliged, either preceding unique nouns (e.g., sun, government, teacher when stated), or superlatives. In fact, learners also did not use a/an before singular count nouns, e.g., yard sold. "He bought a book yesterday". These patterns suggest that the unique issues of definiteness were not fully addressed, which is a common issue for L2 learners (Sarwar & Ahmed, 2024).

Substitution Errors

The mistakes that were more frequently made were substitution errors, which involved "the" was used in non-specific contexts, and a/an was used with definite nouns. Students could write about students in general, given that they would write that students should study hard. This indicates issues of learners in differentiating between generic and specific reference.

Unnecessary Insertion

The learners tend to place the preceding abstract nouns/ general ideas, which include education, honesty, or pollution, before rather than after the verb. This appears to reflect overgeneralizing the rule where one thinks that "the" is precedes nouns of generally known phenomena.

Zero-Article Misuse

Among the mistakes connected with the articles, the zero article was observed when specifying the time, season, or the names of institutions or organisations. As an example, learners wrote in, and "not the summer" or "go to the school", but go to school. These findings are in agreement with studies that find it difficult to learn idiomatic zero-article structures (Aqeel, Rubbani, & Hamid, 2022).

Table 3. Sample Learner Sentences Illustrating Article Misuse

Error Type	Learner Sentence	Correct Form
Omission	*He went to __ market.*	*He went to the market.*
Substitution	*She bought the pen yesterday.*	*She bought a pen yesterday.*
Insertion	*Honesty is important.*	*Honesty is important.*
Zero-article misuse	*He is in __ jail.*	*He is in jail.*

5.3 Patterns Across Learner Groups

Comparison of intermediate and undergraduate learners revealed that the issues with the use of articles were equal in both groups, although the total amount of errors was low in undergraduate learners. The difference indicates that increased exposure to English and higher academic competence can be a factor in the increased accuracy of the articles. Nevertheless, the patterns of errors were similar in both groups, which implies that not only proficiency level but also other underlying cross-linguistic and developmental reasons are the cause of the problems.
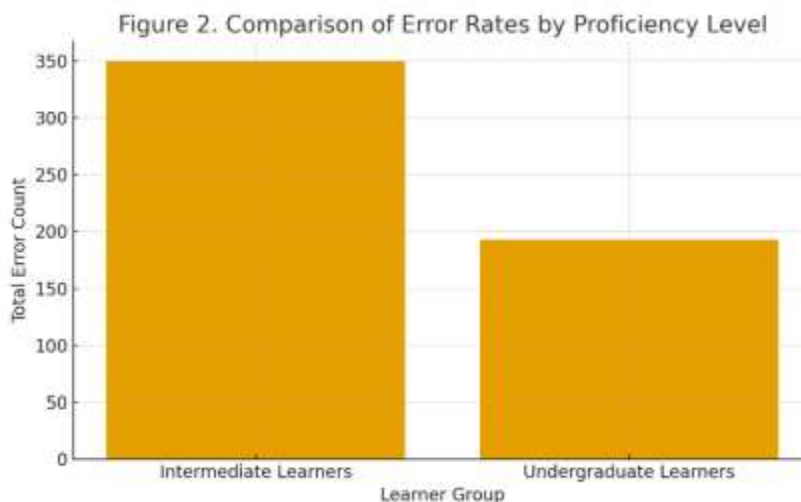

Figure 2. Comparison of Error Rates by Proficiency Level

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation of Findings

The findings, derived from the study, made it sit right in the view that the misuse of articles is a sequence and systematic process in the English textualization of the Pakistani learners that correlates with the past research that was previously documented in a similar setting within ESL/EFL (Khan, Babar, & Farooq, 2023). The fact that the number of omission errors is numerically the largest indicates that the contexts where the obligatory use of the articles is mandatory are the most challenging to the learners. No wonder Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, and other Pakistani languages do not contain a morphological article it resulting in poor exposure of the marking of definiteness (grammatically) by the learners. A high percentage among the learners did not apply the definite article before the nouns referring to unique entities or generally identifiable contexts, i.e., learners have not completely absorbed the principles of semantic rules of definiteness, which is a validation of the Hypothesis of Fluctuation proposed by Ullah, Ullah, & Ahmad, (2025).

The errors of substitution and redundant insertions also increase the age of the intricacy of rubbing together the article use with slight semantic differences like specificity and generic reference. Indicatively, the inclinations of "the" in place of "a/an" are evidence that the learners have the tendency to simplify the rule that "the" is applies to familiar or high saliency nouns. On the same note, the introduction of the pre-abstract nouns such as education, honesty, and pollution that are not called upon suggests that the learners find it hard in learning how to make the distinction between an abstract/ generic reference and the specific reference. These tendencies give an implication that perhaps learners are prematurely practising pedagogy-based rules without engaging in the understanding of further semantic meaning.
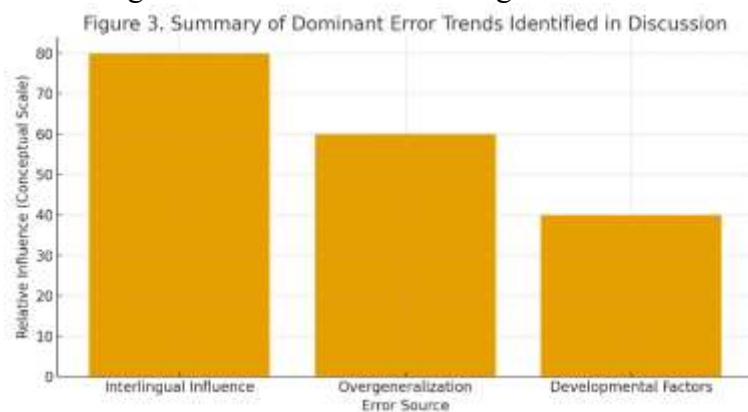

Figure 3. Summary of Dominant Error Trends Identified in Discussion

6.2 Sources of Errors

Interlingual Influence

It appears that there is no such power that can influence the misuse of articles as strongly as interlingual transfer among the Urdu and other local languages. Since the languages are not morphologically coded to define, the propensity of the learners to carry over L1 patterns to writing in English. This is one of the causes of such high rates of omission errors and the lack of consistency in marking definiteness. The role of L1 has been widely researched as a significant predictor of misuse, with the articles written by the majority of L1-speaking writers (Zia et al.,

2025), and according to the findings of this case, the same pattern is also followed in this study by the Pakistani counterparts.

Intralingual Factors

The errors in the usage of the article are also caused by intralingual errors, such as overgeneralization and partial application of rules to a large extent. Students tended to use the pre-nominal position of the abstract nouns and nouns that are not countable, and demonstrated confusion about the definite or important conceptual value. Also, a wrong application of the zero article in the forms of institutionalised fixed (e.g., go to school, in gaol) denotes insufficient knowledge about the idiomatic structure of English that, however, is not so straightforward in grammar. These trends are in line with the way Ellis (1994) has approached intralingual errors, whereby learners engage actively in the learning process in which they make assumptions.

Instructional and Curriculum-Related Influences

The findings further show that there is a possibility of instructional practices inciting article errors. Teaching of English grammar in Pakistan is mostly focused on rule-based teaching as opposed to meaning-based learning (Khan, 2022). Students are able to memorise regulations, such as using "the" before important nouns or omitting articles before plural nouns, and, thereby, end up using these rules incorrectly. Little classroom attention to real writing activities can also reduce the opportunities of the learners to apply the rules of the articles in the communicative organisation.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

The research investigated the English writing of Pakistani students with respect to the article misuse on the premise of the Error Analysis model, which shows omission, substitution, non-essential addition, and zero-article abuse are constant issues. The most common error was omission errors that indicate the L1 transfer of Urdu and other regional languages that do not have morphological articles. Substitution and insertion errors captured the challenges the learners had in differentiating between definiteness and specificity and generic reference, as well as zero-article errors were indicative of challenges in dealing with idiomatic structures in English. Such findings are aligned with previous studies regarding SLA and verify that the use of articles is among the most challenging parts of the English grammar for language learners in non-English languages.

7.2 Recommendations for Pedagogy

The implication of pedagogic recommendations suggests more focus on teaching grammar in context, contrastive linguistic awareness, and exposure to authentic English input. The corpus-based educational approach to teaching, the presence of writing tasks, and the active focus on semantic contrast could be helpful in helping the learners to overcome the common challenges. The most frequent types of mistakes, errors of omission in particular, should be discussed by teachers with a focus on making specific exercises in terms of definiteness and specificity.

7.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Further research can be based on the comparison of the misuse of articles in different areas of education, spoken and written production, and the elements of the new forms of teaching intervention. Longitudinal research can enable a clearer understanding of how the usage of the articles is gained by the learners. Moreover, a greater sample of learners and inter-institutional sampling can also contribute to the further optimization of the patterns of errors in the Pakistani situation.

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