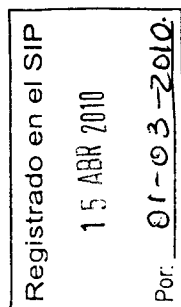


Informe Final de Proyecto de Investigación
9 de marzo de 2010

1. **TITULO DEL PROYECTO:** La adquisición de los artículos de la lengua inglesa por parte de un grupo de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera
2. **CODIGO DEL PROYECTO:** 023-A9-122
3. **VIGENCIA DEL PROYECTO:** del 01 de marzo del 2009 al 01 de marzo del 2010
4. **INVESTIGADORA PARTICIPANTE:** Leyla Hasbún Hasbún, cédula 3-0193-0747, Profesora Catedrática de la Escuela de Lenguas Modernas, con una jornada de 1/8 de tiempo durante el primer ciclo del 2009 y un recargo de 1/8 de tiempo durante el segundo ciclo.



| Objetivo específico | Meta | Logro | Actividad | Limitaciones y Soluciones |
|---|---|-------|--|--|
| Seleccionar la taxonomía más apropiada para clasificar los errores en el uso / omisión de los artículos de la lengua inglesa en una muestra de 159 composiciones. | 1 bibliografía 1 taxonomía de los diferentes usos o reglas de uso de los artículos en inglés. | 100% | Hacer una revisión bibliográfica completa sobre el uso de los artículos en inglés. Escoger un marco teórico que se adapte al estudio. | No encontré ninguna publicación sobre los problemas que enfrentan los hablantes nativos del español al aprender los artículos de la lengua inglesa que se prestara a una comparación directa con los resultados de esta investigación. El más cercano (García Mayo, 2008) se centra únicamente en los usos no-genéricos del artículo <i>the</i> . Hice comparaciones solamente en secciones pertinentes. |
| Determinar cuáles reglas sobre el uso de los artículos son las que los grupos de estudiantes de los diferentes niveles no saben utilizar aún. | Ocho tablas con la clasificación de los errores sobre el uso / omisión de los artículos. Cada una de estas tablas representa un semestre en el plan de estudios. | 100% | Clasificar todos los errores sobre el uso / omisión de los artículos en 159 composiciones escritas por estudiantes de inglés de la ELM utilizando una taxonomía. (Anexo 1) | La mayor dificultad fue determinar con rigurosidad qué errores se debían al manejo incorrecto de los artículos del inglés y cuáles errores fueron provocados por falta de conocimiento en otras áreas de la gramática, por ejemplo, sobre la naturaleza de los sustantivos contables y no contables. |
| Diseminar los resultados de este | 1 artículo | 100% | Escribir un artículo. | El artículo <i>The Use of English Articles by a Group of</i> |

| | | | | |
|----------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| proyecto de investigación. | 1 presentación o taller dirigido a profesores de la ELM y a estudiantes del Posgrado en la Enseñanza del Inglés. | | Preparar y realizar un taller. (Anexo 2) | <i>EFL learners</i> resultante de está investigación será presentado a la consideración de la <i>Revista de Filología y Lingüística de la Universidad de Costa Rica</i> . El taller para profesores y estudiantes de posgrado se realizará el martes 6 de abril de 2010. Estas dos actividades no fueron realizadas antes del 1 de marzo por atraso de la autora debido a razones personales de fuerza mayor. La señora Directora de la ELM fue informada al respecto. |
|----------------------------|--|--|--|--|

Beneficios académicos de la investigación

Creo que el proyecto ha tenido importantes logros académicos

1. En primer lugar, se identificó una debilidad en la producción oral de los estudiantes de los Bachilleratos en Inglés y en la Enseñanza del Inglés que había pasado desapercibida por un número considerable de docentes.
2. Se hacen sugerencias concretas para una futura revisión curricular.
3. Se abren espacios en la Escuela para la discusión de los problemas de aprendizaje que enfrentan los estudiantes.
4. Se contribuye al desarrollo de la investigación en la Escuela de Lenguas Modernas.

Anexo 1

LM-1001

| | | |
|----------|-------------|--|
| Articles | missing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *in dry season 4 *for diet be healthy 9 *three times at week 9 *solution to pollution problem 11 *in dry season 12 *in rainy season 12 *pollution is product of traffic jams 13 *important for all community 13 |
| | unnecessary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *my favorite part are the vacations with a warm weather 6 *the most important activity is the surf 6 *the tourist came 6 *a very good weather 8 *in the nights 8 *a good pictures 8 *a good weather 8 *the people must learn 9 *The UCR 11 *The pollution 11 *The drugs 11 *A young people 13 *The crime 14 *The junk food 16 *You will be on a healthy shape 16 |
| | wrong | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *three times at day 2 *three times at week 2 *Many times on the week 9 *A easy solution 11 *An special place 12 |

LM-1002

| | | |
|----------|-------------|--|
| Articles | missing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *go to university 1 *consider myself as very kind person 4 *invest on Z-cold brand 6 *global market is more competitive 7 *a high degree like master 7 *with good salary 7 *for younger generations 9 *in other hand 11 *youth is changing for money 17 *they have good reputation 18 *they don't have admission test 18 *if you don't have high school degree 21 *two and half years 21 |
| | unnecessary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *has raised a 73% 6 *a 94% 6 |

| | | |
|--|-------|---|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *a game in which the people can 6 *is the money really important? 7 *considered the money important 8 *the technology 8 *the people are less and less thinking 8 *the lack of petroleum made prices 10 *a new problem of the money 10 *I finished the high school 11 *in the society 14 *got together at night to have a dinner 14 *the money 17 *the values 17 *the public universities 19 *in the night 19 *I studied at the UCR *the money 26 *for all the people 26 *the money 26 *the problems start 26 *the money 26 *the money 26 *for all the people 26 (twice) (does not get that people includes everybody) *the money 26 (five times) *the love and health 26 |
| | wrong | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *you have to pass one test (a) 18 *choose an university 19 *choose an university 19 (twice) |

LM-1235

| | | |
|----------|---------|--|
| Articles | missing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *as adult 1 *with big breast and butt 4 *used as decoration 5 *body can be modified 5 *is very antique tradition 6 *one of main objective 7 *it is green wash 7 *population has more control 8 *as social movement 13 *there is difference 13 *with gasoline engine 13 *twenty one century 15 *tattoo is a permanent 17 *in XXI century 18 *the life style of young adult 19 *the life style of young adult 19 (twice) *in XX century 19 |
|----------|---------|--|

| | | |
|--|-------------|--|
| | | *in XXI century 19 |
| | unnecessary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *your thoughts to the people 2 *use the creativity 2 *in the study and work 2 *the curriculum vitae 2 (your) *the physical appearance is 3 *fountain of the youth 6 *the body modification 6 *the body modification 6 (twice) *the society shouts at them 10 *the food waste 12 *the ecological conscience 13 *a part of the society 16 *the plastic surgery 16 *the cancer 17 *the make up 18 *the manhood 18 *women can ... a become rejuvenated 18 *the human beings 18 *the tattoos 21 |
| | wrong | |

LM-1245

| | | |
|----------|-------------|---|
| Articles | missing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Likewise entertainment section 1 *TV guide 1 *entertainment section 1 *for daily routine 2 *Greeks created titans 4 *advertisers' targets 5 *reader's preferences 5 *present strong sexual tendency 6 *has different number of drifts 6 *as conclusion 7 *the rest of pieces of news 18 (the) *in last months (the) 18 *how Nicaraguan people start 18 |
| | unnecessary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *those that critic the society 3 *the stereotypes found in the society 3 *taken by the society 3 *The National Geographic Magazine 4 *the National Geographic Magazine 4 *The National Geographic Magazine 4 (thrice) *the human ancestors 4 *talks about the CAFTA 7 *The Franklin's reflections 7 *with the CAFTA 7 *the soccer news 10 |

| | | |
|--|-------|--|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *the Cosmopolitan Magazine 11 *a mirror of the society 17 *the comic strips can be divided 17 *celebrated the Independence Day 18 |
| | wrong | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *produce the sense of (a) 1 *one characteristic of (a) 7 *a sort explanation (sort of an explanation) 17 |

LM-1353

| | | |
|----------|-------------|--|
| Articles | missing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *due to the encouragement of independent learning process 4 *UK government 5 *according to teacher's performance 5 *qualities such as caring nature 7 *the importance of teacher's role in 9 *creates rich learning environment 12 *by increasing salary 12 |
| | unnecessary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *In the Paul Bress' article, 3 *call the teachers 3 *the Computer Assisted Language Learning 3 *changes in the education 5 *since the teachers are not considered 6 *the teachers are important 6 *to make a difference in the classroom education 6 *they also considered that the enthusiasm and humor are relevant 7 *the author concluded the educators still have a crucial impact 10 *the teachers will be motivated 13 |
| | wrong | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *the openly manner to develop a class (an) 4 *an special teacher 6 (a) |

LM-1362

| | | |
|----------|-------------|---|
| Articles | missing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *will never fulfill such wish 11 *not undergoing surgery or organ transplant 11 *nowadays human race live 11 *reducing mortality rate 12 *Mortality rate in Costa Rica would be 12 *through health system 13 *In some cases medication is covered 13 *other ways to get an organ: black market 13 *Poor donate but they cannot receive. 13 *Organ transplant is not a debatable option 15 *9% of money from payments 16 *Costa Rican government should exploit 18 *have access to social security system 20 *at the end, parents' decision can make 20 |
| | unnecessary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *the coverage of the fifty percent of the surgeries 2 *people die daily because of the lack of money to pay for 2 *for the organ transplant operations 2 |

| | | |
|--|-------|--|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *because of the lack of money 3 *Where is the justice? 6 *If the health systems do not start working to try to 6 *The lack of money is the main point 8 *an integral health care 9 *since the most of the immigrant population 10 *a night out in the town (?) 11 *such as an organ transplants 15 *A each person has different needs. 17 *The newspapers, the radio, television 17 *governmental institutions have to be the responsible for getting 18 *suffers a heart failure 20 *suffer a heart failure 20 (twice) *take the control over any situation 21 |
| | wrong | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *an specific moment 1 *needed a organ transplant 14 *considering la Caja a important ... institution 16 *consider money the priority (a, the number one) 16 |

LM-1472

| | | |
|----------|-------------|--|
| Articles | missing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Images on poem (in the) 2 *Such as land, plants, animals (the) 3 *aware of such impact they have (the) 3 *Points to ^ beauty and greatness of nature (the) 9 *They must be ^ subject of respect (the) 10 *In ^ first stanza (the) 13 *In ^ first stanza (the) 13 *have limited not only wind's freedom 15 *What ^ ancient Greeks saw in 16 *A savior of ^ world 19 *Written ^ long time ago 20 *At ^certain extent (a) 21 *Materialism, ^ complete loss of (a) 22 |
| | unnecessary | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *The industrialized countries 2 *The nature's response 5 *An consume without 5 *Destroy the nature 5 *Waste the natural resources 6 *Threatens the life 8 *A forgotten nature 11 *Respecting the nature 13 *Demonstrate the negative and selfish human actions 15 *How the materialism has permeated 16 *Before the indifference 16 *And the materialism make people 17 *The nature response 22 *The natural resources 22 *About the nature condition 22 |

| | | |
|--|-------|---|
| | | *Raise a permanent awareness 22 *for the XXI century society 23 |
| | wrong | *A flower on the mountain (a) 13 *The concern about the destroying of nature has been expressed (a) 20 *The religious motif is used (a, first mention) 20 |

LM-1482

| | | |
|----------|-------------|--|
| Articles | missing | *Costa Rican country has always 4 *all time 7 *signing of free trade agreement 11 *they have voice to express 15 *as part of logical evolution 15 *in religious or any other major group 16 *articles like this help reader to be 17 |
| | unnecessary | *The debate about the CAFTA 1 *The time is up 5 *Some people ... use the strength 6 *over the reason 6 *do not have a direct access to 8 *regarding the CFTA 12 *the CAFTA has to be approved 16 |
| | wrong | *an useful new trick 11 |

THE USE OF ENGLISH ARTICLES BY A GROUP OF EFL LEARNERS

Leyla Hasbún Hasbún

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza la producción escrita de un grupo de estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera con el fin de determinar los errores en que incurren en lo que respecta al uso de los artículos de la lengua inglesa. Los resultados muestran que el tipo más común de error en todos los niveles tiende a ser el sobreuso de los artículos. Esto sucedió en seis de los ocho grupos estudiados. Este tipo representa entre el 40.0 y el 58.82% de los errores. Se postula que al menos en parte esto se debe a interferencia de la lengua materna. Hay evidencia de que este sobreuso tiende a disminuir a medida que los estudiantes mejoran su competencia lingüística.

Palabras claves: artículos, adquisición, errores, interferencia, inglés como lengua extranjera

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the written production of a group of English-as-a-foreign-language students in order to determine the errors concerning the use of articles that students make. Results show that the most common type of mistake in all levels tends to be the overuse of articles. This happened in six out of eight groups. This type of mistake represents from 40 to 58.82% of the article errors. The article claims that this is partly due to first language interference. There is also evidence that indicates that overuse tends to decrease but not in a significant way.

Key words: articles, acquisition, errors, interference, English as a foreign language

The English article system is an elusive aspect of English grammar. It includes the indefinite article *a* (*n*), the definite article *the*, and the zero or null article, e.i., instances in which a noun requires no article. Undoubtedly, the article system is especially difficult for those learners whose native language does not have articles, as is the case in many languages of the world such as Russian, Polish or Chinese. However, research has shown that the acquisition of articles is challenging even for those learners whose L1s, like Spanish, employ them.

Master (1990: 461) asserts that dealing with the article system is demanding for learners of English, because, first of all, articles are frequently unstressed or "invisible" (zero or null article), and therefore, they are not salient in the input. In addition, the misuse of articles rarely causes confusion in oral communication; consequently, learners are not required to become fully aware of their appropriate use because they can manage without them. These two

characteristics delay acquisition. In a more recent article, Master (2002: 332) expands his account of article difficulty. First of all, he reiterates that articles are usually unstressed and sometimes invisible, and consequently, they are very difficult to discriminate in spoken discourse.¹ He adds that they are among the most frequently used function words in English, which makes the constant, conscious application of rules in extended discourse intricate. Finally, Master explains that, in the article system, a single morpheme serves many functions, e.g., definiteness, countability and number. This is a very complex situation since the natural human tendency is to expect a one-form-one function correspondence.

Since the article system is indisputably difficult, teachers often wonder how to best guide their learners through the intricacies of the acquisition process. They consider multiple options to make acquisition less painful. What is more, they sometimes question the effectiveness of pedagogic intervention, that is, whether instruction really makes a difference. For example, in a discussion of the teaching implications derived from the research findings available at the time, Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982: 267) recommend devoting some time to formal grammar lessons for adults but advise teachers to "focus on low-level, easy rules, not complex ones, e.g. the *it's* / *its* distinction is a low-level rule. On the other hand, the definite / indefinite *a* / *the* distinction seems to resist explicit instruction. The rules governing the use of *a* and *the* are so complex, they are not adequately stated in many grammar books. This distinction will be acquired subconsciously, if it is acquired at all." Doughty and Williams (1998: 201) concur. They claim that "there are some forms, such as the English article system that seem strangely impermeable to instruction and so, for that reason alone, perhaps should not take up valuable class time." Other researchers and teachers, however, have a more optimistic view. Master (1994: 248) concludes that "language instruction is beneficial if that instruction is based on a systematic presentation of the material, that is, when the material is presented in a hierarchy of manageable segments with continuous building on what has been taught before."

For the teaching of the articles, Master (1990) offers a straightforward binary distinction between classification (a/an or θ) and identification (the), which collapses other features used in formal linguistics. Classification² includes the features [- definite] [- specific] and

identification³ comprises [+ definite] [+ specific]. Frodesen & Eyring (2003: 78) follow Master and explain that “an indefinite article (*a/an* or Θ) classifies a noun and shows that it represents or reflects a type, group, or a class distinct from some other type, group or class,” while the definite article *the* can “identify a noun and show that it has been singled out in some way.” Table 1 summarizes these concepts in the way that modern ESL/EFL textbooks present them.

Table 1: Pedagogical Tools for the Teaching of Articles

| Pedagogical Tools for the Teaching of Articles | |
|--|--|
| Adapted from Frodesen, J. & Eyring, J. (2003) <i>Grammar dimensions 4a</i> , p.78. | |
| Classification [- definite] [-specific] | Identification [+definite] [+specific] |
| Shows a kind, type, class or group | Shows a specific feature, aspect, characteristic |
| A → singular noun I need a raincoat. | The → singular noun → plural noun → non-count noun The raincoat on the sofa is Mary's. |
| An → singular noun Ann needs an umbrella. | The umbrella I bought is green. |
| Θ → non-count noun We need Θ clothes. | The clothes she is wearing are expensive. |
| Answers the question “What?” What do you need? A raincoat. | Answers the question “Which?” Which raincoat? The raincoat on the sofa. |

Master believes that pedagogical tools such as the one above allow for a one form / one function correspondence for the articles *a* and *the*, i.e., “a straightforward rule of thumb that accounts for article usage in the greatest number of cases” (465). He explains that the major limitation of this categorization is that proper nouns and idiomatic expressions need to be covered separately (466). However, a significant advantage is that the terms *identified* and *classified* are far more inclusive than *definiteness*, and although they reduce descriptive

adequacy, they effectively explain the article system for educational and psychological purposes.

The definite article has generic, used for a class of entities rather than a specific member of a class, and non-generic uses, the latter being wider and more frequent. Hawkins' (1978) developed his *location theory*, which provides a helpful interpretation of the nongeneric meaning of the definite article in English. He asserts that all instances of nongeneric *the* can be grouped into eight general categories. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999: 279) summarize Hawkins' theory as follows: "When a speaker / writer uses *the*, he instructs the hearer / reader to locate the referent in the same shared mental set of objects." Table 1 recapitulates Hawkins' ideas as elucidated by Liu and Gleason (2002: 6) and García Mayo (2008: 552) who conducted studies on the acquisition of nongeneric *the*.

Table 2: Hawkins' (1978) Location Theory: Uses of nongeneric *the*

| Type of Use | Use of <i>the</i> | Example |
|---|--|--|
| 1. Anaphoric | When something is mentioned a second time and subsequently | Bill was working at a lathe the other day. All of a sudden <u>the</u> machines stopped running. |
| 2. Visible situation | With a noun mentioned the first time to refer to something that both the speaker and the listener can see. | Pas me <u>the</u> bucket. |
| 3. Immediate situation | Similar to type 2, except that the thing referred to may not be visible | Don't go in there, chum. <u>The</u> dog will bite you. |
| 4. Larger situation relying on specific knowledge | With a first-mention noun because it is known in the community | People from the same village talking about <i>the</i> church, <i>the</i> pub, etc. |
| 5. Larger situation relying on general knowledge | With something that one can assume people from a country or around the world should know | <u>The</u> White House, <u>the</u> moon |
| 6. Associative anaphoric | The same as type 1, except that the first-mention <i>the</i> is used with a noun that is related to a previously mentioned noun, rather than being the same noun | We went to a wedding. <u>The</u> bride was very tall. |
| 7. Unfamiliar use in NPs with explanatory modifiers | With a first-mention noun that has an explanatory or identifying modifier in the form of a clause, prepositional phrase or noun. | <u>The</u> movies that are shown here now are all rated R. There was a funny story on <u>the</u> front page of the Guardian this morning. I hate <u>the</u> name Algernon. |
| 8. Unfamiliar use in NPs with | Similar to type 7, except that the modifier does not provide | My wife and I share <u>the</u> same secrets, where the modifier |

| | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|---|
| non-explanatory modifiers | explanatory information | <i>same</i> does not identify the secrets. Here <i>same</i> is used as a unique adjective that always requires <i>the</i> . |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|---|

Liu and Gleason (2002) utilized Hawkins' (1978) Location Theory as a point of departure to classify the nongeneric uses of the article *the*. Instead of using the eight original categories proposed by Hawkins, the authors collapsed them to four major uses: cultural, situation, structural and textual. In order to find out whether these uses present different levels of difficulty, they designed an instrument that consisted of 91 sentences containing deleted obligatory uses of the article *the* as well as distracters that required zero articles, that is, instances in which a noun requires no article. The participants, who were ESL college learners and who were mostly East Asian, were asked to read the sentences and insert *the* wherever necessary. The authors concluded that the four nongeneric uses pose different levels of difficulty, which suggests that the acquisition of the different uses follows a natural order. These ESL learners seemed to have acquired situation use first, cultural use last, and structural and textual uses in between. Secondly, the supplience of *the* in obligatory contexts for all the uses improved significantly with proficiency level whereas the overuse of *the* showed an initial worsening followed by an improvement as the students' proficiency level increased. The first pedagogical implication proposed by Liu and Gleason (2002) is that classroom teaching practice and instructional materials should reflect this natural order of acquisition. The authors suggest beginning with the situation use of *the*, where the teacher can easily apply the principle of here-and-now, and postponing the cultural uses and treating them as frozen lexical items following the Lexical Approach. (For a detailed explanation of this approach, see Nattinger and DeCarrico, 1992 and Schmitt, 2000). Secondly, Liu and Gleason believe that, in order to make instruction effective, different sensory channels should be employed. For instance, the teaching of the situation use should include kinesthetic, auditory, tactile and visual learning. With structural and textual use, more cognitive learning may be needed since these two uses involve the ability to analyze structural and textual information. The cultural use requires cognitive learning and a great deal of memorization because such use entails the application of many rules

which are often very complex. Finally, since students naturally go from underuse to overuse and finally to appropriate use, teachers need to be patient and give learners time to be ready for the acquisition of the article system.

García Mayo (2008) replicated the study by Liu and Gleason (2002). In order to overcome one of the limitations acknowledged by the authors, namely, that the majority of their learners spoke Chinese, Korean and Japanese, East Asian languages that have no articles, García Mayo selected EFL learners who were native speakers of Spanish, a language that "has definite articles with a similar semantic / pragmatic context of use to that of English for the four uses of the nongeneric definite article" (555). In addition, she used a different proficiency measure. The difficulty hierarchy proposed by Liu and Gleason for ESL was validated for EFL students, whose native language has articles. García Mayo also concluded that the participants' overuse of *the* decreased significantly as their English proficiency improved for all the groups and that all instances of definite article overuse found were due to transfer from Spanish. This finding is not in line with the results obtained by Liu and Gleason. As to pedagogical implications, García Mayo agrees with Liu and Gleason in that it is a good idea to teach the easiest uses first, but she argues that teachers should provide plenty of practice on the two most difficult categories in the hierarchy. Furthermore, the author recommends providing metalinguistic feedback and using form-focused tasks.⁴ These two activities, which promote learner awareness of target grammar forms, are recognized in the literature as helpful for input processing (see for example Pica, 2007); nevertheless, Fotos and Hinkel (2007: 131-32) assert that "meaningful input alone, even enhanced input, does not promote the development of target-like L2 accuracy. Both grammar instruction and opportunities for output are now seen as additional requirements."

The current study

The School of Modern Languages where the study was conducted has been going through a process of accreditation for the past few years. This process of self-examination has identified a paucity of research on the specific language difficulties that the students need to overcome. In an attempt to at least partially solve this problem, the

author has conducted a series of studies whose main goal has been to determine the actual shortcomings in the learners' written production as well as to identify teachers' and students' beliefs concerning problematic language areas. In the first study (Hasbún, 2007), the author concluded that, although the frequency of certain grammar errors increases and decreases unpredictably across levels, errors pertaining to subject omission, subject verb agreement and negative forms tend to be more common in beginners. In addition, the three most frequent types of grammar errors learners across levels made were related to the incorrect use of articles, prepositions and verb forms. In the second study (Hasbún, in press) results indicated that teachers underestimate the frequency of certain grammar errors. For example, half of the teachers failed to identify articles as being one of the most common categories of errors. In addition, the study revealed that first-year students believe that learning grammar implies memorizing patterns, second-year learners feel that memorization does not guarantee accurate use of a rule, and advanced learners seem more concerned about the acquisition of vocabulary than grammar. Finally, beginners lack metalinguistic awareness to describe language difficulties; most learners were vague when describing language problems.

The focus of the current study is the analysis of the misuse of articles, one of the most pervasive types of mistakes. The longitudinal approach allowed the author to address the following research questions:

1. What are the most common types of article errors at different levels of language proficiency?
2. How frequent are they?
3. Is there evidence of significant decrease in the percentage of any of the types of errors as the students advance in the program?

Methodology

Participants

The present study was conducted at the University of Costa Rica, a large public university. The participants were 159 undergraduates in the BA in English or the BA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language programs. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22. In this cross-sectional study, eight sections were randomly selected. Each of the groups represented one of the eight semesters in the two BA programs offered by the university. First-semester students were assumed to be beginners while eighth-semester students were considered to be advanced. At the time of data collection, the students were half way into the semester.

The Data

The present study is the third in a series about the frequency of language errors. The data used in the study consisted of eight groups of compositions written by the participants as regular part of their schoolwork. Some of these examples of academic writing were produced in class while others were assignments completed at home. To keep the data confidential, the students were identified by a number. Compositions were considered to be very fitting for this type of analysis because they provide ample context to determine appropriate use and to establish intended meaning.

Analysis of the Data

The 159 compositions were carefully reread, and all errors concerning the article system were recorded. All other errors, grammatical or of any other type, were disregarded. For each group, a list of errors was compiled, indicating the subject's assigned number.

The classification of errors is not always straightforward. Quite often a researcher is uncertain about whether a given error is an article problem or rather lack of proficiency in another grammar area. Therefore, since the focus of this study was the article system in English, a new analysis of the data was conducted to make certain that all errors that involved the misuse of an article were included. Sentence [a] is an example of an error that was not considered an article problem in the original analysis. It is important to point out that all the examples used in the present study are verbatim. Article problems are presented in italics to highlight the type of inaccuracy.

- a. LM-1245 (subject 3): In the first group are comics that critic the careless interest that the society shows to important problems, such as *pollution water's problem*, and the ozone layer problem.

A better rendition of the italicized portion of the sentence above is “the water pollution problem.” In the sentence written by the learner an article is missing. However, what seems to be the main difficulty is the learner’s inability to use a noun as a modifier of another noun (water pollution). Instead, the learner incorrectly uses a possessive structure which could very well be the result of interference from the native language (la contaminación del agua). Nevertheless, in the present study, this inaccuracy was classified as an article error since one was missing.

Another type of problem arises when dealing with the difference between count and non-count nouns as in the following example:

- b. LM-1002 (subject 26): *The* money doesn’t buy the most important things *the* love and *the* health.

It has been argued that noun countability is an important component in determining the appropriate choice of articles, as are referent specificity and hearer’s knowledge (Goto Butler, 2002: 455-56). If an L2 learner is unable to determine whether a noun is countable or not in a given context, he or she is likely to make mistakes in article choice. However, in this study errors like the one in *b* above were considered article problems.

The second step was to classify the article errors into three groups: unnecessary articles (overuse), missing articles (underuse), and wrong articles, that is, the inappropriate choice of an article or the use of a different word class. This analysis was done by individual and by group. Finally, a master list was compiled to include all the population.

Findings

Table 3 supplies a general overview of the errors concerning the use of the article system. The first column provides the group, the second column gives the ranking of article errors among all grammar errors made by that particular group as discussed in Hasbún, 2007, the third column is the actual number of article errors made by the group in the new analysis

(raw score), and the last one is the percentage that article errors represent in the total number of grammar errors made by the students in each group. This last column is vital to the understanding of the problem because, in the present study, raw scores are not comparable since there are different numbers of students in each group, and the participants wrote essays of different lengths.

Table 3: Errors Concerning the Use of Articles

| Group | Rank Among All Errors | Raw Scores | Percentage of Total Number of Errors |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|---|
| LM-1001 n=18 | Second | 28 | 13.64% |
| LM-1002 n=26 | Second | 42 | 15.71% |
| LM-1235 n=22 | Second | 37 | 15.28% |
| LM-1245 n=18 | Second | 33 | 13.39% |
| LM-1352 n=13 | Second | 19 | 12.01% |
| LM-1362 n=22 | Third | 35 | 10.93% |
| LM-1472 n=23 | First | 33 | 13.82% |
| LM-1482 n=17 | Second | 15 | 16.65% |

Table 3 shows that article errors are among the three most frequent types of grammar errors for all the groups. They represent from 12.01% to 16.65% of the total number of errors. The percentage seems to be quite stable. In fact, there is no evidence of significant decrease in the percentage of errors as a result of instruction since the most advanced group has the highest percentage (16.65%). This highlights the fact that, while other types of grammar errors tend to subside as learners advance, article misuse tends to persist regardless of formal training. This

finding lends support to Dulay, Burt and Krashen's (1982) claim that since the rules governing the use articles are so complicated, they are seldom successfully acquired. These authors add that in the rare cases in which they are, the process is subconscious. This latter statement is probably not shared by most linguists and teachers now. In fact, they would most likely concur with the idea that serious efforts need to be made to find more useful ways to help learners acquire the article system in English. Fotos and Hinkel (2007: 131) argue that "most current pedagogy now includes both meaning-focused instruction and FFI, the first referring to purely communicative activities, and the second to activities promoting learner awareness of target grammar forms in input and production of the forms in output." Quite possibly, this is what the population needs in order to make significant progress.

Table 4 classifies article errors into three types of contexts: where an unnecessary article is supplied, where a required article is missing, and where a wrong article or another word such as a preposition is used instead of the correct article. The following are examples of the first type:

- c. LM-1001 (subject 6): The most important activity is *the* surf.
- d. LM-1245 (subject 17): It almost can be seen as a mirror of *the* society because of the topics they write about.
- e. LM-1362 (subject 15): The government has to pay for expensive surgeries such as *an* organ transplants because health is a universal right.

Examples of the second category are

- f. LM-1362 (subject 16): This action is done on behalf of the government and CCSS by taken nine percent (9%) of θ money for payments to health insurance.
- g. LM-1472 (subject 9): The use of figurative language in this poem points to θ beauty and greatness of nature.
- h. LM-1001 (subject 9): For θ diet be healthy you have to eat fruits and vegetables too.

Examples of the third category are

- i. LM-1362 (subject 1): It can be easier to pay a monthly rate for a public medical insurance that to pay a big bill in for any private or public health help in *an* specific moment.
- j. LM-1352 (subject 6): The results of this experiment show the special qualities that you expect of *an* special teacher.
- k. LM-1002 (subject 19): When you are going to choose *an* university you have to get information about the options do you have.
- l. LM-1472 (subject 20): On the other hand, *the* religious motif is utilized to reinforce the persona's point of view against the passivity of humankind towards nature.
- m. LM-1001 (subject 2): Minimum you need to have three times *at* day for eats and eat little portions of each thing.
- n. LM-1002 (subject 18): You have to pass *one* test in order to study a career, and most people do not pass it.

Examples [i], [j] and [k] are grammar errors probably triggered by phonological inaccuracy.

Consonant clusters in syllable-initial position present a challenge for Spanish speakers since Spanish allows only limited clustering to occur. In fact, in Spanish /s/ is never followed by another consonant at the beginning of a word. Example [l] is a mistake because the definite article is used in a situation where the indefinite article is required since the noun *motif* was mentioned for the first time. In [m] the preposition *at* is used instead of the indefinite article in an idiomatic expression. Finally, in [n] a cardinal number is used. This mistake was most likely prompted by the fact that, in Spanish, there is no distinction between the indefinite article and the number *one*.

Table 4: Summary of Article Errors by Type

| Course | Total Number of Article Errors | Type of Article Errors | Number of Errors per Type | Percentage of Errors per Type |
|---------|--------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| LM-1001 | 39 | unnecessary article | 20 | 51.28% |
| | | missing article | 12 | 30.76% |
| | | wrong article / word | 7 | 17.94% |

| | | | | |
|---------|----|----------------------|----|--------|
| LM-1002 | 54 | unnecessary article | 30 | 55.55% |
| | | missing article | 19 | 35.18% |
| | | wrong article / word | 5 | 9.25% |
| LM-1235 | 46 | unnecessary article | 19 | 41.30% |
| | | missing article | 25 | 54.34% |
| | | wrong article / word | 2 | 4.34% |
| LM-1245 | 54 | unnecessary article | 30 | 55.55% |
| | | missing article | 19 | 35.18% |
| | | wrong article / word | 5 | 9.25% |
| LM-1352 | 34 | unnecessary article | 20 | 58.82% |
| | | missing article | 11 | 32.35% |
| | | wrong article / word | 3 | 8.82% |
| LM-1362 | 59 | unnecessary article | 29 | 49.15% |
| | | missing article | 21 | 35.59% |
| | | wrong article / word | 9 | 15.25% |
| LM-1472 | 58 | unnecessary article | 24 | 41.37% |
| | | missing article | 23 | 39.65% |
| | | wrong article / word | 11 | 18.96% |
| LM-1482 | 25 | unnecessary article | 10 | 40.00% |
| | | missing article | 13 | 52.00% |
| | | wrong article / word | 2 | 8.00% |

Table 4 highlights the fact that, for these learners, the most common problem tends to be the use of an article where one is not required. Overuse was also found by García Mayo (2008) whose learners were native Spanish speakers like the ones in the present study. However, results are not comparable since she exclusively focused on the acquisition of non-generic uses of the article *the*. In her study, the overuse of *the* decreased significantly as the learners' English proficiency improved. In the present study, there is no clear evidence of such behavior because overuse of articles persists even at the more advanced stages of acquisition. In addition, García Mayo (2008:550) argues that "the overuse of *the* is strongly influenced by [the learners'] L1." This is an interesting claim that deserves attention.

In English, the Zero article (\emptyset) typically occurs with plural nouns, noncountable nouns or proper nouns although there are other situations in which this happens, especially in fixed phrases. In contrast, in Spanish, "the definite article goes with mass nouns and plural count nouns that are used with a general meaning" causing interference (Swan and Smith, p. 104). Therefore, at least some of the students' overuse of the definite article might be attributed to the influence of Spanish, the learners' native language.

In a study conducted by Master (1994: 232), he found that θ with plural count nouns attained higher accuracy levels than θ with non-count nouns.

The following are examples of mistakes concerning the overuse of the definite article with mass nouns:

- o. LM-1362 (subject 6): Honest and hard working people die just because they are not rich to pay for the care that they need, so where is **the** justice? (por lo tanto, ¿dónde está la justicia?)
- p. LM-1472 (subject 13): Instead of respecting **the** nature, we are destroying the forest. (En vez de respetar la naturaleza, estamos destruyendo el bosque.)

In examples [q] and [r], plural count nouns which are used with a general meaning are preceded by the definite article as the rule applies in Spanish.

- q. LM-1352 (subject 13): The more importance people give to the characteristics of exemplary teachers, the more likely is that **the** teachers will be motivated to sharpen their own dexterities." (Entre más importancia le de la gente a las características de los maestros ejemplares, más probable será que **los** maestros se vean motivados a desarrollar sus propias destrezas.)
- r. LM-1472 (subject 2): Air pollution, water contamination, nuclear waste etc. are worries for **the** industrialized countries. (La contaminación del aire, la contaminación del agua, los desechos nucleares son preocupaciones para **los** países industrializados)

Conclusions and Teaching Implications

Results from this kind of study can suggest focal points for instruction and address the errors that are most common to the target population. They also focus more specifically on subgroups within the error types. Article errors occur frequently enough in these learners' written production to be worthy of classroom attention and to justify further research in this area.

With respect to the first two research questions, it can be concluded that the most common type of article errors at different levels of language proficiency tends to be the overuse of articles. That was true for six out of the eight groups. It can be argued that this is due, at least in part, to native language interference. As to the third question, there is some evidence of

decrease in the overuse articles as the students advance in the program, but it does not seem to be very significant. For the most part, for the first six groups, overuse of articles accounts for roughly 50% of the errors while in the last two the percentage is closer to 40%.

It is safe to conclude that, by the end of the BA, there is no complete acquisition of the article system. An obvious answer to this problem is the recycling of this topic along the program. An examination of the syllabi of the first introductory language courses, LM-1001 and LM-1002, as well as the four required grammar courses in the BA programs at the School of Modern Languages reveals that recycling is not systematic. Articles are introduced in LM-1001. However, the textbook includes only the rule referred to as "first mention, subsequent mention." There are a couple of exercises in this textbook, but the supplementary material does not include any additional practice. It is important to point out that this particular rule is not especially difficult because the same applies in the students' native language. The following semester, in LM-1002, there is no formal teaching of articles.

In LM-1234, the first grammar course that the students take during their sophomore year, articles are dealt with in detail. The textbook used *Basic English syntax* (Flores, Alfaro and Flores, 2002: 27-40) includes a chapter devoted to determiners which discusses the main rules that govern the use of the article system in English and provides twelve exercises for practice. The following semester, in LM-1244, there is no formal teaching of articles. In LM-1353, *Morphosyntax I*, the learners study a chapter called "The structure class," which includes a five-page section on determiners in general. However, this section has only one exercise whose goal is the identification of determiners in six sentences. The next semester, in LM-1363, *Morphosyntax II*, articles are not addressed. Finally, during the senior year, there are no grammar courses. In conclusion, students practice and are evaluated on the use of articles in only one course. Perhaps more work is necessary.

Although articles are difficult to teach and to acquire because there are many factors that intervene in their use and there are many high-frequency fixed phrases that need to be memorized as individual items, efforts need to be made to tackle the problem. Teachers need to raise awareness of the general rules that apply and encourage learners to pay attention to special

situations on their own. Grammatical awareness enhances comprehension because it provides information that is helpful for making sense of input. It helps learners notice the gaps in their output and draws attention to their problem areas.

¹ In this respect, Yule (1998: 25) argues that since in speech the difference between unstressed a (n) and θ is hardly noticeable and that for L1 and L2 learners the indefinite article is probably not heard in the beginning stages of acquisition, the indefinite article is acquired later than the definite article.

² Classifying is a process by which we name a thing (or things) as belonging to a class of objects. We talk about the thing as a member of a category. Yule (1998: 33)

³ Identifying is a process by which we refer to a thing (or things) as distinct from other members of the same category or class of objects. It has a distinguishing effect. Yule (1998: 33)

⁴ Long, 1991 (as cited in Doughty and Williams, 1998:4-5) explains focus on form as what a teacher does when he or she "draws students' attention to linguistic elements as they arise incidentally in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning or communication." Focus on form can also be planned rather than incidental when triggered by an analysis of the learners' needs, that is, when a language feature has been identified as problematic.

Leyla Hasbún Hasbún
Doctora en Lingüística Aplicada
Programa de Posgrado en la Enseñanza del Inglés
Escuela de Lenguas Modernas

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