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CHALLENGES TEACHERS OF ENGLISH FACE WHEN TEACHING THE ENGLISH ARTICLE SYSTEM TO LEARNERS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN VIHIGA COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

This paper is a product of a study carried that was out examining the challenges teachers face when teaching the English article system in secondary schools, conducted in Vihiga County, Western Kenya. The need to carry out the study arose from the fact that performance in English as a subject in national examinations has been dismal as reflected in the Vihiga County results. The study was guided by Krashen's learning- acquisition theory. The study adopted a pragmatic paradigm and a case study design. A mixed method approach was employed to allow for the use of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies leading to a better understanding of the article teaching and use phenomenon. The study sample included 6 schools and 24 teachers of English from the schools. A semi- structured in-depth interview was used to generate data. The data was analyzed using content and thematic analysis procedures. The study revealed the challenges teachers face including: complexity of the English article system, learners' L1 influence and scanty English article content coverage in the English language curriculum. Based on the study findings, it was concluded that the pedagogy utilized in the instruction of the English article is flawed, there is minimum content coverage for the English article and that both learners' L1 and L2 negatively influence the acquisition and learning of English article making teaching difficult for teachers. Thus, it is recommended that teachers adopt an eclectic approach in teaching the English article system and that the curriculum developers review the English language syllabus with regard to the article system and accord it the prominence it deserves in terms of content coverage, spread and instructional guidance.

Keywords

English Article, teaching the English article system, teacher challenges, second language learning, English language curriculum



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1.0 Introduction

The value of a well-developed and well learned article system cannot be overemphasized. The English article system is an important aspect of grammar for learners acquiring English as a second or foreign language. Articles are important because they constitute a crucial part of the English system for information referencing and identification which are an important function of language (Celce – Murcia & Larsen – Freeman, 1999). In addition, articles are some of the function words that occur most frequently in English as revealed by corpus data. The article *the*, is ranked as the most frequent word while *a*, is ranked the fifth most frequent word (Sinclair 1991). This means that knowledge, competence and use of the English article system have a significant effect on learners' spoken and written English. It is therefore not surprising that proper use of the articles by learners is a pointer to the learners' increased level of accuracy. On the other hand, inaccurate use of the article system is an indicator that learners have a shaky grasp of language. However, it has been documented that acquisition of the English article system poses problems to learners (Master, 1990; Ekiert, 2004). This has been linked to learners' L1 ((Trenkic, 2007; Crompton, 2011). In cases where the linguistic structures of L1 differ from those of L2 then negative language transfer is experienced or generalization of rules leading to poor learning of grammar structures and consequently its inaccurate use by learners. However apart from learners' L1, there are other factors that contribute to the difficulty in article acquisition. Master (1990) posits that among the factors is the complexity of the article system. He explains that articles serve a variety of functions in the article system and this makes rule application difficult for learners. However, the problems in article misuse may also arise from article pedagogy. Teachers may be experiencing challenges in handling the complex article system Therefore this study sought to determine the challenges teachers of English in SL classes face when teaching the English article system

1.1 The Teaching and Acquisition of Articles in Kenyan Secondary Schools

In Kenya the teaching and learning of English and the purpose of doing so is set out in the English language syllabus approved by the ministry of Education (KIE, 2006). Kenya's syllabus is guided by a theory based on the functional view of language; the view that language is a tool for communication. Thus language teaching in Kenya is guided by the theory of Communicative Language. This view puts emphasis on communicative dimension of language rather than grammatical characteristics of language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In keeping with this theory; Kenya's language syllabus has put in place practices and procedures that English language teachers should follow which involve learners in events that facilitate communication as a strategy to improve their communicative competence. The content of the syllabus is divided into four language skills: speaking and listening, reading and writing skills and then grammar. The content is further divided according to the various levels – forms 1, 2, 3 and 4. The specific components of language to be taught are further divided into topics. At every level the teaching focuses on the four language skills. Grammar is one of the major areas that are also addressed in the teaching of English. According to the syllabus under grammar the following elements must be taught with varying levels of complexity as the learners advance: Parts of speech which include: nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs prepositions and conjunctions. Articles are treated under nouns and only appear as a topic in year two. This raises concern for the present study because although they are a well- known area of challenge for learners of English as a second language, they are obviously not being focused on, in terms of syllabus coverage.

Teaching of grammar in Kenyan secondary schools is done by mainly using the English language text books provided by KICD and private publishers. Both the providers base the text books on English

curriculum for secondary schools. Most of the text books however do not adequately cover the article system.

Teaching methods, strategies and techniques are crucial in any learning situation. This is because the manner in which the content is presented determines learner's reception, retention and application of the content acquired (Moraa, 2012). Therefore, Kenya's syllabus for English has put in place methods of teaching and learning English and activities which are in line with the communicative teaching approach. According to Anusu, Barasa & Omulando (2014, p.84), "the range of activities is extensive but what matters is that they should enable learners to attain the communicative objectives of the curriculum".

Most Kenyan teachers base their teaching of the articles on the pedagogical text books in some cases recommended by Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development. A survey of the current pedagogical grammar books reveals that many of the books do not address the article system at all and where the article system is addressed it is not done adequately. Some of the text books, try to simplify the approach to teaching articles for teachers and learners, for example "The Skills of English for Form 3, (Bukenya, Curtis & Park 1989:177 states "For the first time we mention something whose name is a countable noun, we normally put *a* or *an* in front of it; when we refer to it again we put *the*." According to Berry (1991) this can be misleading. Berry cautions that teachers' efforts to simplify the article system for learners however well-meaning can be problematic and he opines that such a rule offers a straight forward remedy for dealing with both articles but it is quite wrong. In his defends, the teaching of the article system in Kenya is often hurriedly covered under nouns where the learners are told *a* is used before singular nouns that begin with consonants and *an* with singular nouns that begin with vowels; and that *the* is used before both plural and count nouns which have been mentioned earlier in a discourse.

In the literature, there have been numerous studies of learners of English as a second language and the acquisition of articles. The studies have mostly focused on article errors learners make at various levels and in various contexts. It has been documented that second language learners of English have been found to fluctuate in the process of learning articles. They have also tended to omit articles where they are required (Huebner, 2014; Ionin & Wexler, 2004; Atay, 2010; El Wefarlli 2013). While there is agreement that all English L2 language learners have difficulty in using articles mostly in the initial stages, there is no consensus as to what the reasons for these difficulties are. The studies conducted have come up with a variety of causes of article problems during acquisition. (Atay,2010; El Wefarlli 2013; Ionin & Wexler, 2003; Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004; Ekiert 2007; Kambou, 1997). For some of the studies, first language interference has been found to be the key source of problems in the use of articles but for others the problems have been found to originate from the target language itself. Studies on challenges teachers experience in the teaching of the article system have been scanty.

In Kenya studies in second language acquisition have tended to focus on error analysis in general. The article system has not been focused on. In addition, studies on challenges teachers experience in the teaching of the article system have been scanty. There was therefore a gap that needed to be addressed.

Regarding the teaching of article system in Kenya, problems may arise from the fact that English is a second language to Kenyans. For many of students, their first language lacks the article system. Majority of students in Vihiga county of Western Kenya have Luhya language as their first language;

a Bantu language which lacks an article system. According to Trifonovitch, 1981 (as cited in Moraa, 2012), a student is automatically placed at a disadvantage when he/she already has a language of his/her own and he/she is asked to learn another language. Apart from this, second language learners in Vihiga County may also be experiencing problems related to the difficulty of the article system itself. As for teachers they may be experiencing challenges arising from various reasons. These may include learners' first language influence, complexity of the article system itself and the syllabus. Problems with the article system could impact negatively on learners' performance in English in national examinations.

Performance in English in national examinations in Vihiga county has remained below average since 2011 with an average mean score of 5.0 against the country's mean score of 6.0 (MOE Vihiga county analysis of KCSE results 2011 – 2015). Poor mastery of the language means inability to access the benefits accruing from good mastery of the English language. Consequently, the central role of English for its utilitarian value renders it an important subject and cannot be overlooked in the educational field.

Given this scenario, this study sets out to investigate the challenges teachers face in the teaching of the English article system to secondary school learners of Vihiga County whose first language is articleless.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

It is said that the acquisition of the article system is one of the most challenging areas of grammar for second language (L2) learners and is even more challenging for second language learners whose first language lacks articles (ART) than for those whose first language has articles (+ ART) (Master, 1997; Thomas, 1989). The first language of majority of learners in Vihiga, which is Luhya does not have an overt article system. The functions of articles in their first language are realized through demonstrative pronouns, discourse pragmatic contexts and nominal locatives. Therefore, this is likely to present challenges to teachers and learners in the process of teaching and learning English. Articles appear in many areas of discourse practices; and are some of the function words that occur most frequently in English as revealed by corpus data (Larsen- Freeman, 1999) as such they have a significant effect on the effective use of language both written and spoken. According to Master (1997), errors with articles automatically mark a person out as a non-native speaker and call into question the person's general competence in their English. Therefore, misuse of the English article system among learners is a clear indicator of poor mastery of the language the consequence of which may be poor performance in English at school and in national examination.

In this regard, the analysis of KCSE results of Vihiga County in English from 2010 to 2015 reveal a mean score below the country's mean score of 6.0 as follows: 5.365, (2010), 5.2 (2011), 5.5 (2012), 5.484 (2013), 5.95 (2014), 5.495 (2015) (MOE Vihiga county analysis of KCSE results 2010 – 2015). In the perspective of this study, this could partly be attributed to the poor mastery of the English language article system.

English language plays a crucial role as a medium of instruction across curriculum in schools in Kenya and if the learner is handicapped in the language of instruction then learning is affected and if this trend continues then learners will miss out on many opportunities such as joining institutions of higher learning and job opportunities. In addition, there are various engagements in the society which take place through the English medium. But above all when students perform poorly, the society tends to blame their teachers. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the challenges teachers of English face when teaching the English article system in Vihiga County

1.3 Study Objective

Based on the problem stated, the objective of this study was to investigate the challenges teachers of English language face when teaching the English article system among secondary school learners in Vihiga County.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1985), guided the study. According to this hypothesis learners have two independent language systems conscious learning and sub-conscious learning. The best way a language is learned is through natural communication rather than through practicing language skills. This theory was found relevant because of its implication that second language teachers should create ideal situations which allow language to be used in order to fulfil authentic purposes.

2.0 Review of Related Literature

A number of studies have been carried out to find out the impact of implicit and explicit teaching on the development of grammatical structures. Since the article system falls under grammatical structures, a look at some of the studies done on the teaching of grammar can provide an insight into the teaching of the article system which is important in understanding the challenges teachers face in teaching the English article system.

Fujita (2004) carried out a survey on how articles are taught and conceived by teachers in Japan. His aim was to find out the challenges teachers in Japan face in teaching articles. The findings of his study revealed that majority of the teachers did not think it was necessary to focus their lessons on articles and during lessons, focused study on articles tended to be ignored.

Master (1997) conducted a study with the main aim of finding out whether instruction on articles had any impact on article usage. The study revealed that there was general improvement in article usage by the group that was given instruction in articles. In another study Master (1994) carried out a study using a schema covering the linguistic features governing article system. The results of the study revealed that the learners whose lessons were based on this schema used articles more appropriately compared to learners who were taught without the schema.

Borg (1998) carried out a study whose aim was to investigate teachers' perspective on teaching grammar in general. His main concern was with teacher cognition with regard to instructional decisions in grammar teaching and analysis of the teaching of grammar in English L2 classrooms. His findings revealed that: the teacher used errors from learners' work in each lesson to teach grammar, the teacher encouraged learners to use their L1 as a resource to guide them. Lastly, he taught the rules of grammar implicitly. Borg's study contributes to knowledge about strategies that can be employed to teach grammar and articles in particular.

El Wefarlli (2013) conducted a research on the acquisition of the English article system by Libyan learners of English. She investigated the effectiveness of three teaching strategies used to teach articles with the aim of establishing which of the strategies is most effective. They were implicit, explicit and enhanced input strategies. Her findings revealed that the enhanced input teaching strategy was the most effective.

Njoroge and Gathigia (2014) conducted a study on acquisition of the English article system and nouns. The purpose of their study was to investigate the effect of use of songs as a pedagogical tool in

the teaching of articles and nouns. The results revealed that the group who were taught using a song performed better than the control group who were taught using conventional methods.

3.0 Methodology

The study was basically qualitative and the main data generation tool was an in-depth semi-structured interview. A case study design was seen as appropriate to help establish and understand the challenges teachers face when teaching the English article system. Data was collected from secondary school teachers of Vihiga County; Western Kenya. There were 159 secondary schools in Vihiga and 579 teachers of English. Purposive sampling was then used in the selection of schools and teachers who would participate in the study. My purpose of purposive sampling was to get specific teachers from whom I would get the kind of information I wanted. Emphasis was placed on the saturation of the QUAL sample and as such the sample size for this study was small. A sample of 6 schools was purposively selected from the 159 schools. From each school 4 teachers were selected through purposive sampling. This gave the study a sample of 24 teachers. The data was analyzed using content and thematic analysis procedures and presented using descriptive statistics.

4.0 The Findings

The challenges teachers face when teaching the English article system were established through an in-depth interview with teachers of English. Data generated from the interviews was analyzed thematically following the six steps proposed Braun & Clark (2006). The findings are discussed in the following sections.

4.1 The English Language Secondary School Syllabus

Ten (42%) of the respondents made reference to the English language secondary school syllabus as focusing on the communicative competence of the learner. They pointed out that the main objective of this syllabus is to enable learners to communicate competently. The participants raised a number of issues which were sorted out into various sub-themes. Ten (42%) of the participants talked of inadequate coverage of articles in the syllabus. They stated that the secondary school English syllabus focuses on certain grammatical items which do not include articles in their own right. In their opinion this leads to superficial coverage of the article system which could easily lead to poor mastery of articles and results in article errors of all sorts in the students' work. Sixteen (67%) of the respondents stated that the recommended text book they use as a class text is New Integrated English (KIE, 2012). They were quick to point out that the text-book and many others currently in the market do not adequately address articles. A common thread through many of the narratives of the respondents was their constant reference to the many rules that govern the English article use. Twenty (83%) of the respondents stated that the rules governing the article system were many; a burden to the teacher and an obstacle to learning. Lastly 18 (75%) of the respondents stated that a majority of their learners come from the catchment area and are second language learners as such their L1 is an obstacle in the acquisition of articles.

The findings therefore revealed four types of challenges facing English language teachers in their teaching of articles as is captured in table 4.1

Table 4.1 Difficulties Teachers Experience in Teaching the English Article System

Total No. of respondents = 24

Type	Respondents	Percentage
	Frequency	Percentage

The secondary school syllabus does not adequately address the article system	8	42%
The current English secondary school class texts do not cover the article system	8	67%
The rules governing the use of the English Article system, exceptions and contradictions to these rules complicate the learning process and overtax the teacher	20	83%
L1 influence	18	75%

As shown in table 4.1 It can be observed that the rules regarding the use of articles seems to be the biggest problem (83%) followed by learners' LI influence (75%). Other problems include class texts and the secondary school English syllabus.

4.2 Teacher Competence in the English Article System

Teacher competence in the English article system was established via question 3 (b) on the interview schedule which required the respondents to state whether they taught articles or not. 3 (13%) of the participants stated that they do not pay as much attention to articles as they do to other areas of grammar. 2 (8%) only addressed the articles when teaching count and non-count nouns. 17 (77%) of the participants stated that they teach articles but not as a focus of the lesson; they only teach them in their grammar lessons when they are teaching nouns. 1 (4%) of the respondents stated that he teaches articles as grammatical items in their own right. The responses of the teachers are captured in table 4.2

Table 4.2 Responses as to whether the Article system is taught

Total No. of respondents =24

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Taught but not as a focus of the lesson	17	77%
Only addressed when teaching count and non-count nouns	2	8%
Not at all- students learn articles by exposure to language through natural contexts	1	4%
Only taught in lower classes (forms I and II)	3	13%

From table 4.2 it is evident that there is an obvious lack of focused instruction of articles.

4.2.1 Content Delivery

The methods teachers use to teach the article system were established through question 4. The findings revealed that language teachers use a limited number of methods to teach the English article system. The methods that came out from their narratives were captured and sorted out into themes and included the following: 16 (67%) used lecture method however from their narratives, it emerged that the teachers don't adequately cover all aspects of article usage. In 6 (25%) of the narratives it was revealed a few teachers combine two or more methods in teaching the English article system. 2 (8%) stated that they let learners learn articles implicitly

4.3 Learning and Teaching Strategies and Activities

My fourth question on the interview schedule was: What types of learning and teaching activities do you employ to teach the articles? The findings reveal a variety of activities teachers employ to teach the English article system as captured in table 4.3

Table 4.3 Learning and Teaching Activities and Tasks used in Classroom Instruction of Articles

No of respondents total =24

Activity	Respondents	
	Frequency	Percentage
Dialogues and role play	8	33%
Rewrite Exercises	10	42%
Filling - in blanks exercises	20	85%
Group Work	12	50%
Cloze tests	10	42%
Language games, quizzes and flash cards	3	13%

As can be seen from table 4.3, 33% of teachers use dialogues and role play 42% use re-write exercises 85% use filling in blanks exercises, 50% use group work and 42% use cloze tests. This reveals that the activities teachers use are varied but the majority of them (85%) use filling- in the blanks exercises.

4.4 Correction of Article Errors

In response to question 5 on the interview schedule, 14 (58%) respondents stated that they correct article errors but not often only when correcting learners' compositions. Another 10 (42%) respondents stated that they only correct grammatical items they are interested in and rarely pay attention to articles.

4.5 The Most Problematic areas in Article use for Learners from Teachers' Perspective

Having established whether teachers correct article errors the study sought to investigate the kinds of article errors learners make from the teachers' perspective. The views of the participants as to the most problematic areas for learners in article use were established via question (5b) on the interview schedule. The respondents raised a number of difficulty areas for learners which included: fluctuation and overuse (10 respondents) omission of articles (9 respondents) and insertion of articles where they are not required. 3 respondents. The information is displayed in table 4.4

Table 4.4 Ranked Responses as to the most problematic areas in Article Use for Learners

No. of respondents total =24

Type	Respondents	
	Frequency	Percentage
Omissions	10	42%
Overuse	9	38%
Unnecessary Insertion	3	13%

As shown in table 4.4, the findings reveal that from their experience in the classroom, teachers believe the errors learners frequently make are omission errors 45% followed by confusion errors 41%. The least common errors are unnecessary insertion errors 3 (14%).

4.5.1 L1 Interference

Having established the kinds of difficulties experienced by learners in article use, the study sought to find out the causes of the problems. In 10 (42%) of the narratives, participants attributed article difficulties to the learners' L1 and 14 (50%) attributed the difficulties to the complexity of the article system.

4.6 Discussion of Findings

The research set out to establish the challenges teachers face in teaching the English article system to learners in Vihiga County of Western Kenya. Based on the objective of the study the results reveal that teachers endeavor to teach the English article system, but they encounter a number of challenges. First the syllabus which puts emphasis on the communicative aspects of language ignores mastery of rules and does not adequately address the article system which in their opinion is a disadvantage.

Among the challenges raised concerning the teaching of the English article system is the complexity of the article system of the English language. The respondents pointed at the many rules governing article use as an obstacle to the teaching and learning of the articles. This assertion is further supported by the findings of a survey of ESL teachers in the Los Angeles area, where the teaching of articles was reported to be "their number one teaching problem" (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983:171). Master (1990) raises a number of factors that contribute to the difficulty in article acquisition and among the factors is the fact that articles serve a variety of functions which makes rule application difficult.

Seemingly there's an assumption that articles being functional words are not as important as content words and in any case they don't hamper communication. The question is, do the teachers teach articles at all if so how do they approach the teaching of articles? The findings of this study reveal that articles are not taught sufficiently. Over half of the teachers admitted that they teach articles but not as a focus of the lesson meaning articles are taught implicitly since the teaching is based on CLT. If what teachers said about CLT is anything to go by then, the teachers have a challenge in their interpretation of the communicative approach to language teaching. Master (1997) argues:

A communicative approach properly conceived does not involve the rejection of grammar. On the contrary it involves a recognition of its central mediating role in the use and learning of language (P.154).

Their misinterpretation of the communicative approach could be affecting article acquisition as it implies the teachers don't focus on form. Lindstromberg (1986) Berry (1991) and Master (1997) support the idea of formal instruction of articles. According to Master (1970), teaching of articles can have considerable positive effect on the learners' use of language.

From the findings the teachers' competency in teaching the article system is called into question. The findings of this study reveal that most teachers use lecture method in teaching articles. When their narratives are examined, they reveal that these teachers tend to follow Whitman's (1974 p. 253), six "consecutive steps for teaching the English articles based on ease of explanation and frequency of occurrence": However, they do not go all the way .to the sixth step. Most of them only do step1 and 3 meaning the learners are not exhaustively taught all the aspects of the article system. These findings are in congruent with the findings of Fujita's survey (2004) which revealed that the use of articles is not taught particularly effectively in Japanese language classrooms because teachers tend to focus on content and ignore functional words.

From the data it is revealed that over half the teachers use filling in blank activities which according to Berry (1991) translates to lack of variety and over emphasis on some usage types. Berry is critical of fill-in blank exercises and cloze tests. He argues that overuse of gap-filling in exercises designed to practice usage is an indicator of lack of variety in formats and could only reinforce learners' beliefs about the redundancy of articles. The rest of the teachers use activities compatible with communicative approach most of them social interactive activities. This is not sufficient enough to enable learners achieve necessary competencies in a system as complex as the English article system. As regards the most problematic areas for teachers with regard to their learners, the findings reveal that most of the teachers are of the view that omission of articles is the most frequent, followed by confusion errors and lastly, unnecessary insertion of articles. This finding finds support in the findings of Atay 2010; EL Wefarlli 2013;

The fifth challenge encountered by teachers in teaching the articles is learners' L1 influence. Ellis (1994) argues that in SSL situation, the structures of the first language that are different from those of the second language are likely to be an impediment to the learning of the second language resulting in proactive inhibition. However, the findings of Borg (1998) departed from the notion of L1 negative interference. They revealed L1 as a resource to guide learners in explaining grammatical terminologies. This means that teachers should not always view L1 as an impediment to the learning of English L2. They could turn it into a resource and use it to achieve positive results.

Conclusion

Based on the findings the researcher concludes that teachers of English in secondary schools in Vihiga do face challenges in the teaching of the English article system. This study also notes the pedagogy for teaching articles is flawed. The teaching and learning of the English article system has been largely undermined by various factors starting from the inception of the English curriculum to the classroom instruction and to learners' Luhya L1. All these pose challenges for the teachers of English. After analyzing the data generated and drawing conclusions to the study, the researcher made the following recommendations:

There's need for KICD to re-evaluate the syllabus and modify it in the area of the selection of contents to be taught with a view of including the article system as an item of grammar in its own right in order to influence teachers to focus on it just like they do other grammatical items. It will help teachers to devote sufficient time to the area of article use and supply comprehensible input to the learners.

Teachers should use an eclectic strategy and method in teaching articles. This will help them employ both communicative language teaching activities which will be meaning – based and at the same time employ a rule – based approach which will help learners to improve their ability to use articles more accurately.

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