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Errors in the Use of English Articles

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This study aims at providing a comprehensive account of the types of errors produced by Sri Lankan ESL students in their use of English articles. Within the field of second language research (SLR), a large number of studies have focused on error analysis. One of the most difficult challenges faced by second language learners of English is mastering the system of English articles. The simple morphology of English articles is easy to explain but frustratingly difficult for students to master. It has been observed by researchers that English article system which includes the indefinite article a(n) the definite article the zero (or null) article are among the most difficult structural elements for ESL/EFL learners to master although they are the most frequently used structural elements in the English language. The main objective of the study was to identify the types of errors in the use of articles and to identify whether there is a significant impact from the learners first language in committing these errors. Data were collected from randomly written samples of 50 first year undergraduates from the faculty of Arts. Students were given one hour to write on one of five different descriptive topics related to their life and culture. The researcher classified errors according to the Surface Structure Taxonomy of errors (SST), namely, substitution, omission, and addition, recording the frequency of each error type and the percentage of the total. Furthermore, students' errors were classified according to their possible sources into interlingual and intralingual, showing the frequency of errors according to their source. Analysis of errors in students' written samples revealed that while students made a considerable number of errors in their use of articles according to SST, omission and addition of errors were the most frequent, while substitutions were the least frequent.

Key words: definite article, EFL, ESL, indefinite article, interlingual and intralingual