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The problem of learning French among students in the English-speaking subsystem of Form II, Form V, and Upper Sixth form at Mendong Bilingual High School

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Abstract : This study deals with the problem of learning French as a second language for students in the English-speaking part of Mendong Bilingual High School (Form II, Form V, and Upper Sixth). The main objective of the work is to explore the difficulties these English-speaking learners have when they write in French, especially focusing on common grammar points like determiners and articles. Following Corder's error analysis theory (1974), the method involved studying the French usage errors found in written work from secondary school students (Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced levels) at the Lycée Bilingue de Mendong. The results show that the grammar mistakes these students make in French writing are directly related to linguistic interference from English and the use of translanguaging strategies.

Keyword: Learner, determiner, linguistic interference, error, translanguaging.

La problématique de l'apprentissage du français en milieu anglophone : cas des classes de Form II, Form V et Upper Sixth du Lycée Bilingue de Mendong

Résumé : Cette étude porte sur le problème de l'apprentissage du français langue seconde chez les élèves de la section anglophone du Lycée Bilingue de Mendong

(classes de Seconde, Première, et Terminale). L'objectif principal de ce travail est d'explorer les difficultés que rencontrent ces apprenants anglophones lorsqu'ils écrivent en français, en se concentrant particulièrement sur des points de grammaire communs tels que les déterminants et les articles. En s'appuyant sur la théorie de l'analyse des erreurs de Corder (1974), la méthode a consisté à étudier les erreurs d'usage du français trouvées dans des travaux écrits d'élèves du secondaire (niveaux Débutant, Intermédiaire et Avancé) au Lycée Bilingue de Mendong. Les résultats montrent que les erreurs grammaticales commises par ces élèves dans leurs écrits en français sont directement liées à l'interférence linguistique de l'anglais et à l'utilisation de stratégies de translanguaging.

Mots clés : Apprenant, déterminant, interférence linguistique, erreur, Translanguaging.

INTRODUCTION

Learning French as a foreign language (FLE) in English-speaking environments poses problems that largely stem from the multilingual context of learners. The key to acquiring a second language (L2) is mastering linguistic knowledge (declarative knowledge) and language skills. Prior evidence shows that a significant number of students have been taught using traditional methods, followed by learning based on new approaches (communicative approach and skills-based approach), but they still have difficulty mastering FLE in terms of grammar and language. In other words, students memorize grammar rules but are still unable to put these rules into practice because they do not know how to translate knowledge into skills (procedural knowledge).

Linguistic interference causes confusion for most students given the linguistic similarities and differences between the first and foreign languages they learn. These interferences are increasingly becoming a significant source of errors in French as a foreign language classes. Errors can occur in both spoken and written

language. This is particularly noticeable in the use of articles in French. Observations indicate that French articles cause a lot of problems and confusion in both oral and written French for the English-speaking students who were the subject of this study. However, this should not be surprising, given that English is a language in which the article system is more or less simplified.

In grammar teaching, an article is defined as a word that introduces a noun and allows that noun to play a role in the sentence. Articles are pivotal words in speech; they allow nouns to be actualized and situated in space and time. In dictionary entries, for example, nouns are not actualized in speech; they are given a simple definition with minimal information about their lexical category, such as wine, masculine noun, liquid produced by the fermentation of grapes, a fresh grape juice. Actualizing the same term in speech might give this result: They drank an excellent wine yesterday or They drank wine/excellent wines.

The overall context of this study is the current socio-cultural and academic landscape of Cameroon, which places a crucial emphasis on the role of both French and English as official languages. This dual linguistic environment, especially in bilingual education settings, necessitates focused research targeting the specific challenges faced by a key audience: English-speaking students in the Francophone subsystem.

Given this background, and based on the frequent errors observed in students' use of articles, this study aims to explore and categorize the errors in article usage among English-speaking learners of French at Mendong Bilingual High School.

1. ERROR ANALYSIS THEORIES

The current socio-cultural and academic landscape, particularly the crucial role of French and English in Cameroon's official languages across all educational levels, necessitates focused

research targeting a specific audience. This context provides the backdrop for investigating linguistic challenges.

In this light, Error Analysis (EA) provides a valuable theoretical framework. It was initially established by linguists aligned with the cognitive approach who recognized that the knowledge learners have of a target language is inherently different from the way they use that knowledge (S. Selinker, 1972, cited in Corder, 1973). This perspective posits that the mistakes made by learners are not random deviations, but rather evidence of an internal linguistic system (interlanguage) in development, as learners actively work to acquire the correct structures of the target language.

Unlike contrastive analysis, EA compares the learner's first language to their developing interlanguage, and then compares this interlanguage to the target language. The function of EA in second language learning has become crucial for assessing learners' progress and performance (J. Richards & G. Schmitt, 2000). While EA offers comprehensive explanations for teachers—especially when addressing errors made by adult learners (S. Gass & S. Selinker, 2008)—it has faced criticism over the years. The primary critique is that too much emphasis is placed on learner errors, leading to a recommendation to balance the use of contrastive analysis and error analysis

The theory of translanguaging

In contemporary second and foreign language education, there has been a significant shift away from conventional methodologies that treat the learner's first language (L1) and the target language as separate and distinct linguistic systems. Researchers and educators are increasingly favoring approaches

that acknowledge the importance of collaboration and the coexistence of multiple languages within the learning process.

In this context, García (2009) proposed the theory of Translanguaging. This theory champions the idea that bilingual or multilingual learners should be encouraged to simultaneously draw upon and utilize all the languages within their full linguistic repertoire when working to acquire a new language. This framework fundamentally rejects the traditional, restrictive view that languages are isolated systems and must therefore be taught in strict separation to avoid interference.

2. ANALYSIS OF ARTICLES USAGE AMONG ENGLISH-SPEAKING LEARNERS

Frequency of Error Distribution

Manual processing of the corpus through systematic reading of the essays allowed us to calculate the frequency distribution of different types of errors. Overall, 404 (four hundred and four) errors concerning article usage were identified.

Regarding the A-level (beginner) essays, we obtained 180 errors; however, of the 45 essays available, three (3) contained no article errors, representing 6.7% of the students. From this data, we can conclude that the average number of errors observed per essay was 4.3.

Intermediate level B students made a total of 144 errors. However, out of 35 papers, seven (7) were error-free, representing 20%. This allowed us to calculate an error rate of 5.14 errors per paper.

Advanced level C students made a total of 80 errors. We also observed that out of 20 papers, nine (9) were error-free, representing 45%. The error rate was therefore 7.27 per paper.

Overall, we observed a significant increase in the mastery of article usage across levels.

- Number of errors according to article type

The errors are classified into 5 categories according to article type (LE, UN, DU, Ø, AU) based on the correct answer. For example, if the student wrote "une fille" when they should have written "la fille," we classified this error in the definite article category (LE). The data collected shows that, in all the essays, the use of the indefinite article (30.6%) and the definite article (27.5%) is responsible for the majority of errors. Next come the partitive article (21.0%), the zero article (17.4%), and then problems with article contraction (3.0%).

For A-level French students, the use of the indefinite article (38.6%) clearly poses the most problems, unlike B- and C-level students who experience more difficulty with the definite article (28.0% of errors).

However, it is worth noting that the number of errors involving the zero article is very low in both groups (14.3% and 19.6%), and that errors with the partitive article and the zero article appear to be significantly more frequent among B-level learners than among A-level learners. This latter finding is interesting because it may, for example, be due to the fact that the partitive article is normally taught from the beginning of French studies, and thus more advanced students (level C) have had more time to assimilate the rules.

3. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

To conduct this analysis, the same order as in the quantitative section will be followed; that is, errors will first be described according to error category and then according to article type. The errors will therefore be studied from different perspectives. While this will inevitably lead to some repetition and overlap, it

also demonstrates the variety and complexity of the French article system."

- **Absence of a necessary element**

In the category of absence of a necessary element, more than fifteen different types of errors were found. Furthermore, the errors are distributed quite evenly. Thus, it is difficult to identify one or two clear cases that most often result in errors of omitting an article. If the errors in groups A, B, and C are considered as a whole, learners have an almost equal tendency (approximately 10% to 45% of cases) to omit a necessary article in constructions..

Let's look at some examples of these errors:

- **Absence of article in genitive constructions:**

He had a serious accident with his brother's friend's motorcycle... (Form II)

I don't like the noise of cars... (Form V)

My mother had sent me on a way to crush the peanuts of... (Upper Sixth)

In the first example, the friend in question is clearly defined. Therefore, we should say the friend's motorcycle... As for the second sentence of the same example, we are talking about cars in general, so the person doesn't like the noise of all cars.

It follows: I don't like the noise of cars = cars. In the third sentence, the peanut in question is clearly defined since it refers to something specific.

- **Absence of an article in partitive constructions:**

- I found myself on a bed and a nurse gave me water... Form II [de l']

- After the police conducted the investigations, they said the driver had been drinking alcohol before driving. Form V [de l']
- I came home from school that day. My mother was crying because they said my uncle had died in the village, and she had no money to travel... Upper Sixth [de l']

These examples show two similar errors concerning the use of the partitive article. Learners wrote only d' before the mass words water, money, and alcohol instead of the full partitive article de.

- Absence of article before the subject:

- My friend's birthday...FORM II [le]
- Woman and her child were injured...FORM V [la]
- Accident is something that happens... UPPER SIXTH [l']

In these examples, learners omitted the article before the subject's day, woman, and accident. However, choosing between the definite and indefinite article can cause another problem, so it is necessary to write the day, the woman, and the accident.

- Addition of a faulty element

- I had received a lot of money for my birthday... [d'] UPPER SIXTH
- They had drunk too much alcohol before the accident... [d'] FORM V
- When the woman stood up, she and her baby had blood all over their bodies... [d'] FORM II

The analysis reveals that errors concerning expressions of quantity represent 20-25% of the errors in incorrectly adding an element in the corpus, but one might have thought that learners in groups A and B would make these types of errors primarily. However, the number of these errors is the same in group C as well, even though

the rule of omitting the article after expressions of quantity was taught from the beginning of their studies, and the learners certainly heard this rule several times during their French studies.

Furthermore, it can be observed that Group B more often unnecessarily added an article after the verb "to be" than Group C, which, conversely, made more errors with articles after prepositions than Group B:

a. My neighbor, who was my best friend, is the foreigner...
in the Upper Sixth.

b. She will now live in Port Hartcourt... [at Ø].

In example a), there is no reason to use the definite article before the word "foreigner," which has an adjectival value, as in: He is handsome, he is a teacher, he is a foreigner. (for example, b), it is interesting. First, articles are normally used after prepositions in French; nevertheless, the article is omitted in several cases after certain prepositions, for example, on foot, without money, with confidence, by chance, etc.

4. DESCRIPTION OF ERRORS ACCORDING TO ARTICLE

TYPE The descriptive analysis of the errors observed is organized by article type. The discussion will first focus on errors concerning the definite article, followed by an examination of errors involving the indefinite and partitive articles. Finally, an overview of errors related to the zero article will be presented. Due to space constraints, not all errors can be presented; therefore, the following examples have been selected based on their frequency, persistence, and general interest in the corpus.

- Definite Article

As shown in Table 6 in the preceding subheading, the second largest number of article errors (44.3%) in the corpus concerns

the use of the definite article. The use of definite forms causes errors, especially for Groups A, B, and C. It is interesting to note that the distribution of the different categories of these errors is almost identical in all three groups (A, B, and C). That is to say, in all three groups, most of the errors with the definite article concern the subject of the sentence. Next come the problems in genitive constructions, and, thirdly, those in verbal expressions. Finally, a few cases of definite article use that resulted in only rare errors were also observed.:

Tithe Subject

When looking at mistakes in using the definite article before the subject of a sentence, two main types of errors show up in the essays: students either completely skip the article needed before the subject, or they use the indefinite article instead of the definite one.

Examples of Omission Errors (Definite Article Missing):

If people hadn't shaken him after his fall. (Upper Sixth) [The definite article Les is needed: Si les gens...]

Children shouldn't play on the road. (Form II) [The definite article Les is needed: Les enfants...]

In one class, some students take drugs when there are no teachers. (Form V) [The definite article La is needed: Dans ma classe, la plupart des élèves...]

The Genitive

Genitive phrases—which are sentence structures showing possession, like Noun 1 + de + le + Noun 2—seem to cause a lot of difficulty for English speakers.

The general rule is that the French genitive is built with the preposition *de* and the definite article *le*. This pattern is often seen in the examples, but it is important to remember that this is not always the case. For example, the genitive structure in Finnish is not always the same as in English, and sometimes the article is used before Noun 2 in English, and sometimes it is not. The correct use of the article depends on what the writer wants to say, but there are also certain fixed expressions.

VERBAL EXPRESSIONS

Some verbs and set expressions in French must have the definite article. Usually, there are no special rules for these, so learners simply have to memorize them. Even though the number of these four errors is not very high in the essays, their frequent appearance shows they are difficult for English-speaking students.

Examples of Verbal Expression Errors:

My parents had planned to celebrate my birthday... (Form II) [Fête d'anniversaire requires the article *l'*: célébrer l'anniversaire]

Mistakes with verbs like to study, to love, and to hate, which require the definite article in French, show two kinds of errors: students either skip the article (a. and b.) or use the partitive/indefinite article (c.).

a) Everyone must study French... (Form V) [The article *le* is needed: étudier le français]

b) I like Great Britain... (Form II) [The article *la* is needed: J'aime la Grande-Bretagne]

c) I hate gossip that people spread about me... [The article *les* is needed: Je déteste les ragots]

These examples are likely due to the influence of English, which often does not use an article in these constructions (e.g., "I like British," "Everybody must learn French"). Therefore, it is important for French teachers in Cameroon to teach that the partitive article is not automatically used in French just because the concept exists in English.

Indefinite Article

Mistakes involving the indefinite article are the most common in the essays, making up 30% of all errors.

Most errors with the indefinite article are about two things: either choosing the wrong article (definite instead of indefinite) or skipping the article. These mistakes appear often when students write object complements, use negation, attributes, and particularly in the adjective + plural noun structures.

Adjective + Plural Noun

Errors happen frequently when using the indefinite article before a plural noun that has an adjective in front of it. The general rule is that the article is skipped, and the indefinite article *des* changes to *de*.

This rule is mainly used in formal written French. This is why sentences like *~il a des graves ennuis~* are considered incorrect in written work, even though the form *des* might be heard in spoken French.

- Partitive article

Errors related to the forms and use of the partitive article are an area where English-speaking students often make mistakes. In our corpus, partitive errors account for 21% of the errors identified, and they are particularly numerous among students in group B (38% of all errors), but we find the same types of errors in the papers of group C as well. This is interesting because Berling U. (2003: 98) also notes that errors involving the partitive article occur mainly at lower levels and decrease at higher levels. According to our study, errors relating to the partitive are less common among students in group A, but the difference between the three groups A, B, and C is not that great. Thus, we can see that, for some reason, errors relating to the partitive seem to be more persistent among English-speaking learners. Furthermore, Casile H-M's (2009) observations in his study on English-speaking learners' knowledge of the elements *du, de la, des, and de* only reinforce our own. With regard to our corpus, we have noticed that various quantitative constructions clearly cause the highest number of errors (50%-60%) in all three groups, but even memorizing the correct form of the partitive article seems to be difficult for some English speakers.

➤ **The partitive article itself**

First, we will address errors concerning the use of the partitive article itself, i.e., the forms *du, de la, de l',* and even *des* in certain cases. It should be noted that the use of these forms seems to cause many more errors among learners in group B than those in group A. The following examples show that students do indeed have a poor command of the various forms of the partitive article:

- There are too many directors who want to have the money... [de l']
- I drink alcohol maybe four times a year... [de l']

Our materials show that in most cases, English-speaking learners tend to use the definite article instead of the correct form of the

partitive article. In addition, we find a few cases where students did not use any article, as shown in the following examples:

Error of Omission (Missing Partitive):

1. I eat fufu.~~ (Correct French form: Je mange la boule.)
2. He has patience.~~ (Correct French form: Il a de la patience.)

Error of Substitution (Using Definite instead of Partitive):

3. I drink the water (Correct French form: Je bois de l'eau.)
4. She wants the money (Correct French form: Elle veut de l'argent)

Perhaps students remember that *de* is part of the partitive article but forget the rest. We also believe that the fact that English does not have a partitive article corresponding to the French partitive article has a major influence on these errors. It is likely that learners have not yet assimilated the rules for using the partitive article, and it seems to us that this process takes a long time.

With regard to the use of the partitive, these errors are most common among Finnish students, even in group A, which in fact made more of these errors (33 errors out of 56 = 59%) than group B (55 errors out of 110 = 50%).. At the beginning of their studies, these types of errors are more or less “normal” and often more general, but no more acceptable, while more advanced French learners, i.e., those in Form 5, should already be familiar with these rules. Apparently, this is not always the case.

- **Zero article**

The use of the zero article, i.e., the phenomenon of not using an article before a noun, seems to cause slightly fewer errors for

English-speaking learners of French than other articles, but there are differences between the groups. In fact, , students in group A make more errors with the zero article (19.6%) than students in groups B and C (14.3%). This is an interesting observation, firstly because the zero article is used a lot in English,;and secondly because we have just seen at the beginning of this chapter that English-speaking learners tend to omit necessary articles when speaking French.

➤ **Compound words**

In general, prepositions are used to form compound words in French. The construction N1 + de + N2 is probably the most common way to translate English compound nouns.English-speaking learners of French tend to add the definite article in this construction, even though the zero article is often an indication of compound words. Other articles are also possible, but their use depends on the meaning of the expression, and each case must be carefully analyzed. The zero article gives the general meaning to the expression and indicates the characteristic, the type of noun (une carte de Ø visite = type of card) (Callamand M., 1989: 17).

➤ **Attribute**

When it comes to problems with the use of the zero article in attributive constructions, learners have made fairly typical, even classic mistakes that violate the rule of be + Ø + noun indicating a profession. Normally, no article is used in these constructions, but English-speaking learners often add one, resulting in incorrect forms such as:

- a. Her sister [...] she is a director. [Ø] FORM V
- b. She is a curator, and you? [Ø] FORM II

These sentences answer the question what is X's profession? In this case, the zero article must be used, which has a value similar to an adjective.

Example: I am a teacher/

I am happy

➤ **Prepositions**

The zero article is also used after several prepositions, either for semantic reasons or because of the survival of old constructions. We could analyze these cases at length, but we will explain the problem through some examples found in the corpus:

Example:

a- Life would be less fun without parties. [without Ø]

b - The newspaper had not mentioned the damage or the people involved in the accident. It had been left without attention.

Examples a- and b- are quite common in our corpus. Students often tend to use the definite or indefinite article

after the preposition *sans*, even though it is most often followed by the zero article.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the difficulties English-speaking learners at Mendong Bilingual High School encounter with the French article system, analyzing a corpus of 40 errors across 100 student essays. The findings confirmed that the students possess a relatively poor knowledge of French articles, evidenced by widespread problems encompassing definite, indefinite, partitive, and zero articles. The data analysis revealed three common error types: the omission of necessary articles, the addition of unnecessary articles, and the incorrect choice between different article types. While linguistic interference from English (L1) was identified as the dominant source of these difficulties, the study also underscored the significance of intra-lingual errors,

suggesting that incomplete learning and faulty generalization of French rules contribute significantly to the overall error rate, alongside factors like ignorance and carelessness. Ultimately, this research confirms the French article system as a major pedagogical hurdle and contributes to Applied Linguistics by providing specific insights into the L1/L2 contrast, suggesting a need for more explicit and targeted instruction, particularly concerning subtle rules of agreement like the use of *de* before adjectives preceding plural nouns.

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