The Primary Causes of Article Errors Made by Korean Advanced Learners of English

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The major purpose of this study is to explore the primary causes of article errors made by advanced Korean EFL learners. The participants were forty-one college and graduate students. Immediately after completing a fill-in-the-article test, the students participated in an interview where they were asked to state the reasons for their article choice for every item on the test. The qualitative analyses of the interview data revealed that misjudgments of referentiality and noun countability were the two major causes of the students’ incorrect use of articles. The students had trouble understanding the hearer’s knowledge in a given context and judging referentiality especially when references were followed by postmodifiers. The students also had difficulties in judging countability of nouns/noun phrases when they are used in various contexts. Noun countability was found to be a big hurdle L2 advanced learners should jump over to master the English article system. Pedagogically, this study suggests that repeated article exercises involving various and large contexts will help advanced Korean EFL learners to learn how contextual factors determine referentiality and countability of nouns/noun phrases. (178)

I. INTRODUCTION

Articles such as the indefinite article *a(n)* and the definite article *the* are the most frequently used words in English (Liu & Gleason, 2002). However, due to high complexity in their form-function relationship, they have been regarded as one of the most notoriously difficult and challenging structural elements for any learners of English.

The complexity and difficulty of English articles poses a number of challenges not only

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for L2 learners, but also for their English teachers. In a survey conducted by Covitt (1976),
the teaching of English article usage ranked first among difficult tasks for ESL instructors.
Though not impossible to teach, ESL/EFL instructors find it tremendously difficult to
teach English articles because they often do not understand why their students choose to
use articles in the ways they do (Butler, 2002). One teacher in Yamada and Matsuura’s
study (1982, cited in Butler, 2002) stated that his students’ use of articles “bears little or no
resemblance to established English practice; the students seem to use articles almost
randomly” (p. 50). As the teacher in Yamada and Matsuura (1982) speculates, do L2
learners indeed use articles randomly? If not, what interlanguage rules make them choose a
specific article in a specific context? In other words, what are the causes of errors they
make in using articles? In order to teach English articles effectively, we must know the
underlying reasons why L2 learners make incorrect article choices.

Over the years, there have been many studies on article use by Japanese and Korean
learners of English whose first languages have no articles (Butler, 2002; Hak-Yup Kim,
1991; Hwa-yeon Lee, 1996; Liu & Gleason, 2002; Master, 1987; Mizuno, 1985; Murphy,
1997; Tae-Sook Park, 2005; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Yamada & Matsuura, 1982;
Keumsil Kim Yoon, 1993, etc.). These previous studies have dealt with research issues
such as L1 influence on article acquisition, the acquisition process for the English article
system, developmental and difficulty orders of articles, and types and causes of article
errors. Although there have been several studies that investigated major reasons for
making article errors by Japanese and Korean learners of English, there have been no
studies which specifically focused on advanced Korean learners of English.

Master (1997) indicates that “mastery of the article system does not occur until quite
late in the interlanguage, and even advanced speakers continue to have problems” (p. 220).
ESL and EFL teachers often find that quite advanced learners of English often make errors
in article use even though they already acquired most of the article rules listed in English
grammar books. They are sometimes puzzled about the reasons why such advanced
learners frequently make incorrect article choices. Therefore, studies focusing on advanced
learners need to be conducted in order to find out what prevents them from mastering the
English article system. The present study, therefore, aims to explore the primary causes of
article errors made by advanced Korean EFL learners, based on the qualitative analysis of
the data obtained from interviews. The results of the study will help ESL and EFL teachers
to develop effective teaching techniques for improving advanced Korean learners’
accuracy in using articles.
II. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In this section, the classification system of English articles used in this study is presented and previous research relevant to the present study is reviewed.

1. Classification of English Articles

L1 and L2 article acquisition research has focused on identifying contexts for the article use and investigating the learners’ usages of articles in the different NP environments. Huebner’s (1983, 1985) semantic model has been one of the most widely used models for classifying NP environments in English article studies. Adopted from Bickerton’s (1981) semantic wheel, Huebner’s model classifies environments for articles according to two binary features of referentiality, [+/-Specific Referent] and [+/- Hearer Known]. These two aspects of referentiality yield four cross-classified segments of the semantic functions of English articles. These four segments are called semantic types.

Type 1 [-SR, +HK] refers to ‘generics,’ marked with a, the (for singular count nouns), and Ø (plurals and non-count nouns), as in A banana is yellow, in which the reference a banana is not something specific, but is known to the hearer. Type 2 [+SR, +HK] represents referential definites, marked with the. The is used when a given noun or a noun phrase refers to something specific and the reference is known to or identifiable by the hearer from the context, as in Can you pass me the salt, please? In this example, the reference the salt is a specific thing and the hearer can identify what salt the speaker is talking about, that is, the salt on the table. Type 3 [+SR, -HK] refers to referential indefinites, which are marked with a (for singular count nouns) as in Today I bought a car or Ø (plurals and non-count nouns) as in There was wine on sale. They refer to first mention nouns, whose reference is specific to the speaker but not to the hearer, that is, nouns that the speaker introduces into the discourse for the first time. Type 4 [-SR, -HK] represents non-referentials, which are marked in the same way as referential indefinites. The nouns or noun phrases in Type 4 do not have a specific reference nor are they assumed to be known to the hearer, an example of which is I want to buy a house.

The article cloze test used in the present study includes the four semantic types of Huebner’s (1985) English article classification system, along with ‘conventional use’ items.

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1 In the present study, the feature of HK (Hearer Known) means that a reference is not only known to the hearer but can also be identified by the hearer.
2. Literature Review

There have been several studies which investigated the causes of article errors made by Japanese learners of English; however, no studies have been conducted to explore the reasons for article errors made by Korean advanced learners of English.

Keumsil Kim Yoon (1993) examined the problems of article acquisition experienced by Japanese learners of English with focus on the perception of noun countability. She asked Japanese learners of English with mixed proficiency levels and native speakers of English to make intuitive judgments on the countability of 87 nouns extracted from two essays and to insert articles as needed in the same essays where all articles had been removed. She examined the relations between the subjects’ judgment of noun countability and their performance on a cloze test for 24 obligatory indefinite articles. She reported that there seemed to be a correlation between the judgment of countability and the use of a among Japanese students, whereas no apparent correlation was found for native English speakers. Of all the nouns, both groups more successfully judged the count nouns than the non-count nouns. Native speakers had a more flexible notion of noun countability depending on the context, while the Japanese subjects had a fixed notion of countability regardless of the context. Yoon suggested that her Japanese L2 learners might not know “how context is used by native English speakers to determine article use” (p. 284), which may be one of the causes of their incorrect use of indefinite articles.

Butler (1999) is another study which also examined the underlying reasons behind the difficulties in her Japanese EFL learners’ using articles. On the basis of both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data from structured interviews, she proposed a three-stage mental model in order to describe the development of students’ metalinguistic analysis, control in acquiring the English article system, and problems they encounter in each stage. At the first stage, the students tended to depend on local structural cues to determine articles. At the second stage, the students formed various hypotheses or non-generalizable rules regarding article use. In these two stages, they did not clearly understand the notion of hearers’ knowledge or shared knowledge, and they also had a fixed notion of noun countability, as Keumsil Kim Yoon (1993) found. However, a conceptual change occurred between the two stages and the third stage: students were able to understand the notions of hearers’ knowledge, and they began to have a non-static notion of noun countability. This conceptual change made students’ judgments change from focusing on local structural cues to focusing on more global dynamic contexts. However, Butler indicated that this conceptual change was not always immediately reflected in performance. Even at the advanced level, the proper judgment of hearers’ knowledge and noun countability remained problematic.

Since both Japanese and Korean languages have no article system and share some
similar linguistic features, it may be argued that the research findings from the two previous studies on Japanese learners of English can be applied to Korean learners of English. However, the direct application of the results on Japanese learners of English to Korean learners of English may not be valid since the two languages are different in many ways. Moreover, the previous studies on Japanese learners of English did not exclusively focus on advanced learners and their problems in using English articles.

Previous studies on the article use by Korean learners of English have mainly focused on research topics such as L1 influence on article acquisition (Hwa-yeon Lee, 1996), classroom teaching techniques for articles (Hyunsook Kim, 1994; Hae-Sook Park, 2001), article errors (Hak-Yup Kim, 1991), and types of article errors and their difficulty order (Tae-Sook Park, 2005). Hae-Sook Park (2001) investigated the effectiveness of grammar consciousness-raising instruction in acquisition of the English article. She reported that the learners' knowledge of the article concerning shared knowledge and identity was more significantly increased through grammar consciousness-raising activities than the knowledge concerning countability. Hak-Yup Kim (1991) examined problems related to article use through an analysis of article errors. Classifying errors into co-occurrence, word-order, underuse, overuse and substitution errors, he found that article underuse, overuse, and substitution errors were predominant in the interlanguage development process.

Tae-Sook Park's (2005) study is relevant to the present study. Based on the article classification system modified from Huebner (1983, 1985), she examined semantic types or usages of English articles which pose difficulty for her 72 advanced Korean EFL learners. From the quantitative analyses of the data obtained from the fill-in-the-article test, she found that Type 3 (+SR/-HK I bought a house yesterday), Type 4 (-SR/-HK I want to buy a car), and Conventional use (e.g., I went to Kimpo Airport) were most problematic and difficult for the advanced learners, and that the zero article was particularly difficult for the advanced learners.

Although Tae-Sook Park (2005) examined advanced Korean learners' article use, her study focused only on investigating where the problems are, without looking at where the problems come from. In other words, her study did not provide any information about reasons why advanced Korean EFL learners made errors in using specific types of English articles such as Type 3 and Type 4. In order to improve their accurate use of English articles, it is crucial to find out reasons underlying their incorrect use of English articles. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the primary causes of article errors made by advanced Korean EFL learners, based on a detailed qualitative analysis of the data obtained from interviews.
III. METHOD

1. Participants

Forty-one advanced Korean college and graduate students participated in this study. All of the participants had at least one of the following standardized English proficiency test scores: TEPS (Test of English Proficiency at Seoul National University) scores, TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores, or TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) scores. TEPS scores were used as a benchmark; the participants’ TOEFL or TOEIC scores were converted into TEPS scores according to the TEPS-TOEIC-TOEFL score correlation table obtained from Language Education Center at Seoul National University. All the participants achieved scores higher than 750 on the TEPS [237 (PBT: 580) on the TOEFL and 830 on the TOEIC].

Among the 41 participants, 13 participants (32%) had TEPS scores ranging from 902 to 960, 25 participants (61%) received scores ranging from 800 to 893, and only three participants (7%) scored 750, 763, and 770, respectively. The participants’ average TEPS score was 864 (260 on the TOEFL and 920 on the TOEIC).

2. Instrument

A cloze article test was developed to assess the participants’ knowledge on the English article system. The test was designed to include all of the four semantic types (type 1-type 4) of Huebner’s (1985) English article classification system introduced in the research background section of this paper. It also included conventional use of English articles. The test contained 130 items presented in 57 short paragraphs and sentences. Twenty six items were created for each of the four semantic types of articles and ‘Conventional use.’ A majority of passages were chosen from written texts; several passages were selected from spoken texts. In order to obtain the reliability, five native speakers were asked to fill in the blanks of 167 items, from which the 130 items which all five native speakers filled in only one same article were selected for the final cloze test.

3. Procedure

Data were collected through an individual meeting. First, the participants were asked to fill in the blanks in the article test. Immediately after completing the test, they were interviewed by the researcher. There was no time limit for the two tasks, but it took approximately 2 hours for each interview.

The interview task was composed of two parts. Firstly, the students were asked to
provide the reason(s) for their article choices for each of the 130 items. In the cases where they did not have any reasons for their article choice (e.g., guessing or feeling), they were instructed to tell the researcher that this was the case.

Secondly, after providing the reasons for their article choices, the students were asked to answer questions about general rules, strategies, and difficulty regarding their English article use. The major questions were as follows: “What are rules that you know and use about English articles?” “In which cases do you use the definite article, the indefinite article, or ‘no article’?” and “When you are not sure of which article to use, what do you usually do?” These data were used as supplementary data for understanding the students’ use of English articles.

The interview was conducted in the participants’ L1 (Korean). Korean students, even those with advanced levels of English proficiency, may have difficulties in articulating the reason(s) for their article choices in English. Also, they would have some difficulties in answering questions concerning their article use in English. Interviewed in their native language, they were able to provide more sufficient and detailed information regarding their use of English articles. All of the interview data were recorded on audio tapes and transcribed later.

4. Data Analysis

All the participants’ statements about the reasons for their article choice for each of all 130 items were transcribed by the researchers. For the qualitative analysis of the interview data, the researchers first categorized the reasons given by all the participants about their incorrect article choices into several patterns for each item. In order to do that, similar causes were grouped into one category for each test item. Also, the number of the students who mentioned each problem pattern was calculated for each item. Through this process, the reasons provided by many students in comparison with other reasons were considered as major causes for problems in using the accurate article for each specific test item.

Then, the patterns for reasons were examined across all the test items. The patterns were counted in terms of the number of test items and the number of students stating those reasons. In this analysis, some problem patterns were found to be mentioned repeatedly by a number of students in many test items, when compared with other patterns. In other words, frequently occurring problem patterns were found across test items. Such patterns were selected as major problems in the advanced learners’ article use, and were analyzed in detail.
IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data showed that misjudgment of referentiality and misjudgment of noun countability were two major causes for the students’ incorrect article choices across all four types. Misjudgment of referentiality led many students to choose incorrect articles in all of the four semantic types, and misjudgment of noun countability was particularly a serious problem for the incorrect choice of articles in Types 3 and 4.

In addition to the two major reasons, several other reasons, although they were not mentioned by the majority of the participants, were also identified from the data analysis. For example, in generic use of articles (Type 1), many students failed to interpret the generic use of articles as generic and, did not fully understand the generic use of *the* with singular count nouns, as in *The red squirrel is steadily dying out*. The students tended to perceive *a* as a generic article rather than *the*, which can be partly interpreted as the influence of English grammar books. Many English grammar books describe the generic usage of *a* in the list of the rules about *a*, but do not provide sufficient information about the generic use of *the* in the rules about *the*.

As for proper nouns, the students had great difficulty in deciding an accurate article between *the* and ∅, particularly with the use of ∅. The students tended to choose articles based on feeling or even guessing, and some of the students showed a tendency of using *the* unconditionally with all the proper nouns. As for their frequent use of *the* with proper nouns, two students mentioned the influence of English grammar books. In fact, in most grammar books, the uses of ∅ with proper nouns are dealt with as exceptions under the uses of *the* with proper nouns. Thus, this can be one factor of leading the students to use *the* in most cases with proper nouns, especially when they do not know which article to use.

However, as mentioned earlier, among the reasons for the students’ inaccurate article choices, misjudgment of referentiality and misjudgment of noun countability were the most influential factors which caused many problems in article use by advanced Korean learners. Thus, in this section, these two problem patterns are examined in depth and detail along with the test items and students’ comments.

1. Misjudgment of Referentiality

It was found from the interview that most of the students understood the notions of Specific Reference (SR) and Hearer Known (HK). For example, when they explained the reasons for their article choices, many participants mentioned that they use the definite article *the* when a reference is “specific,” “limited,” “concrete,” and “definite.” Moreover, most students knew that the notion of HK is also involved in the use of English articles.
Some students mentioned that the definite article *the* should be used when a reference is specific and the reference is known or identifiable to the hearer/reader from the context where the reference is used. One of the examples given by the students was "I bought a book yesterday, and I like the book very much." The student who gave the example mentioned that the reason why the definite article is used in the word *book* in the second sentence is that it is a specific book and the reader can identify which book the writer is referring to from the given context, that is, the book that the writer bought yesterday. Most of the participants also mentioned that they consider HK when using English articles.

However, the analyses of the data showed that although most participants understood the concepts of SR and HK theoretically and were able to judge the referentiality of a noun or a noun phrase when it is presented in a sentence level, they had difficulty in judging it properly when a reference is presented in a large context, that is, a multi-sentence level.

As for the difficulties in correct judgment of referentiality of a noun or a noun phrase in a large context, two major sub-patterns were found. First, the participants especially had problems in judging whether a reference is identifiable to the hearer or the reader from the context, in other words, whether it is known to the hearer or the reader. Next, the students had much difficulty in judging the referentiality of a noun or a noun phrase when it was followed by postmodifiers such as relative clauses or prepositional phrases. The following sections discuss the two sub-patterns.

1) Misjudgment of the Hearer’s Knowledge

When determining the referentiality of a given noun or a noun phrase, the students first checked if the noun or the noun phrase is a second-mention noun or if there’s any similar word or phrases which are semantically related to it in the preceding text. When they judged that this was the case, they automatically used the type 2 article *the*, because they thought that the reference was already known to the hearer or the reader and could be identifiable by him or her from the given context. The following example illustrates the point:

(1) Doctor Caswell thought it safe to allow Mr. Ellsworth to visit the Metropolitan Museum and other exhibitions. **entirely new world** opened up its mysteries to him. The old man showed a tremendous curiosity in the art galleries and in the painters who exhibited in them.

For the item in bold, nine students chose *the* because they misjudged the hearer’s knowledge. Two students thought that since *entirely new world* is semantically related to *the Metropolitan Museum*, this reference was already mentioned; thus, the reader already
knows what *entirely new world* refers to. Therefore, they chose *the*, type 2 article type, which has [+]SR, +HK] referentiality. Seven students considered the preceding context to be semantically related to *entirely new world*, and thus they thought that this reference was already presupposed in the text, as shown below:

(Quote 1) Here *entirely new world* is another word which represents the events which have been introduced previously such as visiting the Metropolitan Museum and other exhibitions. That's why I believed that the definite article *the* is correct in this blank (Participant 1).

The example below also shows their difficulty in judging the hearer's knowledge:

(2) Greg was one of the best high school basketball players in the country. During the summer between his junior and senior years, he enrolled in an one-week basketball camp where he received expert coaching and played against other comparable high school stars. When he returned to school in the fall, he received a shock. "You can't play basketball this year," said an official of his high school league. "State regulations prohibit ______ players from attending summer sports camps."

Ten students explained that this reference points to the players at Greg's school or the players who participated in the basketball camp. Even two students remarked that the word *players* seems to be second-mentioned since *players* refers to *basketball players* in the first sentence. Such a heavy dependence on the physical existence of the same word in the preceding text is also shown in the following example:

(3) ______ Books! That's what most people imagine when a library is mentioned. People who work in ______ libraries are ______ trained explorers. They know how to search out ______ information that might be located in several different places.

For the test item in bold, six students responded that they chose *the* because the word *library* was in the preceding sentence, although *a library* is singular and *libraries* is plural. For those students, the physical existence of the same word in the preceding text was considered to be a sufficient clue for their using the definite article *the*, regardless of specificity of a given reference. The students thought that *the* should be used because the library is already known to the reader.

Some students depended heavily on whether or not the reference was previously mentioned in the text when they had to select an English article. For them, the physical existence of a given noun in the preceding text served as a convenient symbolic indicator
which signaled that the reference required the use of *the*. Such students tended to look for structural cues or considered only the static local contexts in order to determine articles. In other words, they ignored larger contextual dynamics which affect the use of articles.

2) Influence of postmodifiers

The influence of postmodifiers was another major problem related to the misjudgment of referentiality. When a reference is followed by postmodifiers such as relative clauses or prepositional phrases, many students chose *the* in the items where *a* or *∅* should be used in Type 3 and Type 4. In particular, the students tended to use *the* more frequently when nouns are followed by relative clauses rather than by prepositional phrases.

Seven students especially showed a very strong tendency of perceiving the existence of relative clauses as a trigger of using *the*; the existence of a relative clause for a given reference often resulted in automatic insertion of the definite article *the*. The following example illustrates the problem with relative clauses:

(4) Greg was one of the best high school basketball players in the country. During the summer between his junior and senior years, he enrolled in ____ one-week basketball camp where he received expert coaching and played against other comparable high school stars. When he returned to __ school in the fall, he received __ shock. “You can’t play __ basketball this year,” said an official of his high school league. “State regulations prohibit __ players from attending summer sports camps.”

In this case, nine students chose *the* because of the existence of a relative where-clause. The nine students thought that the following where-clause makes this given reference specific and identifiable for the hearer, as shown below:

(Quote 2) I thought that a where-clause here presented quite specific and concrete information about the one-week basketball camp. That’s why I used *the* (P1).

As mentioned above, further, some students interpreted modifying as a signal of using *the*. However, in this context, the where-clause does not make the reference as a part of the hearer’s knowledge; thus, *the* should not be used.

Such a dependence on postmodifiers was also found in the following example:
(5) Books! That's what most people imagine when a library is mentioned. People who work in libraries are trained explorers. They know how to search out information that might be located in several different places.

The majority of the students chose a definite article the instead of a zero article; as many as 18 students directly or indirectly referred to the existence of a relative that-clause for their reason to choose a definite article.

However, as indicated above, when prepositional phrases are followed, the participants had far less difficulty in judging their referentiality.

(6) The picnic is an enjoyable form of entertainment. Americans are great picnickers, and almost every family has a picnic basket. Summer invitations are often for picnic at a park or in the open countryside. Unless hamburgers or hot dogs are cooked over a fire, picnic food is usually cold—sandwiches, salads, potato chips, pickles.

For the item in bold, five students used the since they thought that a prepositional phrase at a park or in the open countryside renders picnic definite.

(Quote 3) Picnic here is limited to being at a park or in the countryside. So I chose the (P5).

As for the difficulty concerning article uses with postmodifiers, some students mentioned an article rule described in grammar books. They stated that grammar books describe that if nouns are followed by postmodifiers such as relative clauses or prepositional phrases, the is usually used. In fact, Seung-Moon English (1994), one of representative English grammar books in Korea, describes this rule in the explanation of English article usage. This grammar rule may aim to explain the function of identifying postmodification. In addition to identifying postmodification, however, postposed clauses and phrases have a classifying or defining function as shown in the examples above. In fact, postmodifiers appearing in the test items in Type 1, Type 3 and Type 4 are such classifying or defining ones; thus, the should not be used for those items. However, most grammar books do not present such explanation regarding these classifying or defining postmodifiers. Thus, the students who tend to depend heavily on explicit grammar in using English articles may have more difficulty in judging referentiality of nouns phrases when nouns are postmodified.
2. Misjudgement of Noun Countability

Another major problem in English article use by advanced Korean learners was misjudgment of noun countability in Type 1, Type 3, and Type 4. It was found that judging noun countability properly was far more challenging than judging referentiality based on the context. The students had considerable difficulty in distinguishing between countable and uncountable nouns in a given context. Noun countability is not a fixed or static entity. This can be acquired neither by memorizing a list of countable nouns and uncountable nouns nor by consulting with a dictionary. In fact, most English nouns can be used in either countable or uncountable ways depending on the context. Most of the students in this study tried to judge countability depending on the context. In spite of their attempt, the countability judgment required for the proper usage of articles was still found to be very problematic. Some students even tended to depend on their own list of countable and uncountable nouns in mental lexicon without considering the global context.

The students had far more difficulty in judging countability properly in the environments with the zero article. Many students used a incorrectly for nouns/nouns phrases which are uncountable in the context, due to their mis-judgment of countability. In other words, the most important reason for inaccurate article use in the zero article usages was misjudgment of noun countability. The students had greater difficulty in judging countability for abstract nouns than for mass nouns.

When having problems in judging countability, some students tried to think of other similar nouns or expressions that they know. However, such judgment often led them to use articles incorrectly. This is illustrated in the following example:

(7) He was an undersized little man, with a head too big for his body—a sickly little man. His nerves were bad. He had _____ skin trouble. It was agony for him to wear anything next to his skin coarser than Ø silk. And he had Ø delusions of grandeur.

For the item in bold, only 6 out of 41 students used Ø correctly, and most of the students used a incorrectly. Out of 34 students who used a, 26 students were found to do so due to the misjudgment of noun countability. Some of the students used a, based on similar expressions for diseases such as a heart attack and a cold, as shown below:

(Quote 4) A is attached in front of headache in I have a headache. Heart attack is also usually used with a (P31).
(Quote 5) This has the same form as the expression *he got a cold*. That’s why I thought it would be correct to use *a*. This is countable as a kind of disease. When I am not sure of the countability of nouns, I try to draw on other similar examples that I know. Then I apply those examples to the given noun (P32).

However, similar meaning does not assure the same noun countability. As mentioned above, one single noun can be used as countable or uncountable depending on contexts. In fact, in this given context, *skin trouble* does not refer to a specific kind of skin trouble but to skin trouble throughout his body in general: *skin trouble* is uncountable in this context and thus Ø should be used.

The interview data also revealed that L1 transfer has influence on the judgment of noun countability. This was clearly shown in the following example:

(8) You ask me for _____ advice on reading. That’s a very difficult request. You don’t say in your letter whether you want to read fiction, or drama, or essays, or books on travel.

In front of *advice*, most of the students used *a* incorrectly. Out of 34 students who used *a*, 26 students were found to misjudge noun countability of the reference. Some of them were shown to have tried to judge countability of this noun based on its Korean meaning, as seen in the comment below:

(Quote 6) I considered this as “one” advice. We use the expression “one advice” in Korean (P19).

However, *advice* can not be used in a countable way: it is usually used as an uncountable noun. *A piece/word of advice* is used in order to count it. However, many students did not understand the countability of *advice*. In fact, a Korean equivalent of advice *chwungo* can be counted as in *chwungo han mati* ‘one piece of advice’ or *chwungo twu mati* ‘two pieces of advice.’ In Korean, nouns are counted with classifiers such as *mati* in *chwungo han mati*, *mari* in *thokki twu mari* ‘two rabbits,’ and *gurwu* in *namwu sey gurwu* ‘three trees.’ These expressions in a countable way are conceptually possible in the Korean language. When the students had a hard time in judging countability of a noun, they translated it into Korean and determined countability based on Korean concept. This was used as a general strategy for judgment of countability by some students.

It may be the case that language transfer is very influential for some students. In Korean, countability is not marked obligatorily in a syntactic level; Korean has no article system.
Moreover, there are conceptual differences regarding countability between the two languages. As a result, dependence on the Korean language for judgment of countability is likely to lead to the inaccurate article choice because of the conceptual difference for countability between the two languages. This transfer regarding countability was found to be one of the greatest problems for the difficulty in understanding the notion of countability. For accurate article use, the conceptual structure for countability owned by native speakers needs to be acquired. However, this might be very difficult for nonnative speakers, especially those whose native languages do not have an article system.

Another major problem in judging countability was that it was very hard for the students to recognize whether or not a reference can have clearly demarcated boundaries in their conceptions of the abstract or mass entities. Drawing boundaries was more difficult for abstract entities than mass ones. The following example shows difficulty with an abstract entity:

(9) Our village is small and has only one street. Because it is not on a main road, it is quiet and peaceful. The pub is the working man's club. There is _____ talk about the weather and the crops, about what has been happening in the village. The church was built in the fifteenth century. It is the most beautiful building in the village.

Twenty-eight students misjudged countability for the noun *talk* in this context. Thirty-two students incorrectly used *a* for the blank. Among the 32 students who chose *a*, 18 students chose *a* due to misjudgment of countability of the reference. In particular, they had substantial problem in drawing conceptual boundaries for *talk* in this context, as the comments below show:

(Quote 7) I think that *a* can be used in front of *talk* as a simple meeting. (P10).

(Quote 8) I suppose that *a talk* is possible in the same way it is in *summit talks* (P11).

*Talk* can be used in an uncountable or countable way depending on the context. In other words, *talk* can have a boundary as an informal speech, an address, a meeting, or a conference. However, *talk* has no boundary when it means gossip, the subject of gossip, or conversation. In this context, *talk* belongs to the latter; it is used as uncountable, and thus *∅* should be used. This judgment of countability based on the global context was extremely difficult for many students. Particularly, since *talk* is used as countable in many cases, the students had great problems in judging countability for this noun in this context.

Many students directly expressed difficulties regarding noun countability in their article.
use. They stated that they particularly had difficulty in deciding between \( a \) and \( \emptyset \) because they had problems in deciding countability of a given noun or a noun phrase. One student even said that in his case the difficulty in determining countability corresponds to the difficulty in English article use.

(Quote 9) For the items where determining countability was difficult, it was also difficult to choose an accurate article. In other words, the items where it was difficult to choose articles correctly correspond to those where it was difficult to determine countability. Confusion in using articles results from confusion in judging between countable or uncountable nouns. Nouns are countable when they have limitations and boundaries (P2).

As the above quotation illustrates, noun countability poses a great amount of difficulty for advanced Korean EFL learners to accurately use English articles. As Master (1987) indicates, noun countability is considered to cause the most persistent difficulties for nonnative speakers of English in acquiring articles. Noun countability may be the final hurdle which advanced Korean learners of English should jump over in order to master the English article system.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

This study investigated the reasons for the difficulties advanced Korean EFL learners experience in using English articles. The results indicated that misjudgment of referentiality and misjudgment of noun countability are two major reasons for their incorrect use of articles. Though most of the advanced Korean learners distinguished the notion of HK from that of SR and had a notion of noun countability, understanding the concepts of HK and noun countability was not immediately reflected in performance. Most students had a hard time understanding how contextual features determine HK and countability of nouns/noun phrases.

These results are closely in line with Butler's (1999) findings. Although Japanese and Korean are two different languages, the greatest problematic aspects in using English articles were similar between Japanese and Korean learners of English. These results may be attributed to the fact that the two languages have no article system to some extent.

However, this study focused only on advanced learners' article use. Thus, it presented more detailed profile of the problem patterns advanced learners have in using English articles. Regarding misjudgment of referentiality, the students showed two major problem patterns. They had difficulty in judging HK of a reference in a given context, and they
experienced great difficulty in determining articles when references were followed by postmodifiers such as relative clauses and prepositional phrases. In particular, the students had more difficulty in judging referentiality of nouns or noun phrases when they were followed by a relative clause than by a prepositional phrase.

As for noun countability, the students had great difficulties in judging countability when nouns/noun phrases were used in an uncountable way in the context. The students had a very hard time in recognizing whether or not a reference can have clearly demarcated boundaries in their conceptions of the abstract or mass entities. Drawing boundaries was more problematic with abstract entities than mass ones. Thus, judging countability with abstract nouns was the most challenging problem for advanced Korean learners. When they encounter these problems, they used individual strategies for determining countability, which often led them to choose incorrect articles. For example, they tried to judge countability by associating given nouns to other nouns or expressions with similar meaning whose countability they already know. L1 transfer was another factor which caused some students to misjudge countability. From the study, it was found that even advanced learners depend on their L1 when they have problems in determining countability of a reference. Furthermore, one result drawn from a supplementary question strongly illustrates this considerable difficulty in judging noun countability. The students tended to use the when they are not sure which article to use because the (not a or ə) can be used with both countable and uncountable nouns. Thus, the tendency of using the seems to result from the students’ lack of confidence in their judgment of noun countability.

From the study it was revealed that lack of confidence in judging noun countability of a reference was the greatest hurdle for L2 advanced learners on the road toward mastering the English article system. This is consistent with Master’s (1987) claim that countability is the most persistent problem for accurate article use by L2 learners whose L1 does not contain an article system.

The findings of this study suggest several pedagogical implications for teaching English articles to advanced Korean learners. First, intensive practice for helping judge referentiality, particularly HK, should be provided for advanced Korean learners. Such practice should focus on understanding HK and judging referentiality with postmodification, particularly involving relative clauses. In order to help students judge HK properly, the concept of ‘identifiability’ should be taught explicitly using concrete examples. Regarding postmodification, as Master (1990) suggests, advanced L2 learners should be taught to fully understand the distinction between “classifying” or “defining” postmodification and “identifying” postmodification.

Second, instruction on noun countability should be provided to help them improve their English article use. Countability exercises should be developed with a focus on uncountable nouns with zero articles, particularly abstract nouns. Most of all, advanced
Korean learners should be provided with a variety of meaningful exercises which allow them to clearly understand how contextual factors determine the countability and non-countability of a noun. In addition, article exercises should put more emphasis on uncountable nouns, particularly abstract nouns, since the Korean advanced learners had a difficulty in judging both referentiality and countability of such nouns. Through the exercises, they can learn how native speakers change their perception of an entity depending on the context. Based on these pedagogical implications, further studies should develop specific and expanded teaching materials and teaching techniques for helping advanced Korean learners improve their use of English articles.

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