RESEARCH ON THE MISUSES OF THE DEFINITE ARTICLE BY CHINESE EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The title of the thesis is informative and economical, and is an important part of academic achievements such as academic papers and dissertations. Title writing has prescriptive requirements and standards in many aspects such as vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric. However, the high frequency and complexity in the usage of English definite article make it often misused in the title writing of bachelor's degree thesis for English majors. Through investigating and analyzing the misuse of the definite article in the titles of bachelor's thesis by English majors over the past five years (2020–2024), this study seeks to categorize and summarize the types of misuse and explore the underlying causes of such errors, thereby providing reference insights for the acquisition of the English definite article.

Keywords: English definite article; second language users; diachronic research.

1. INTRODUCTION

The title of a thesis is both informative and concise, serving as a crucial component of academic works such as research papers and dissertations. The formulation of thesis titles typically adheres to a formal style, with specific requirements and standards in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and rhetoric. However, there is a notable lack of diachronic research focusing on the use of the English definite article in thesis titles. Additionally, the high frequency and complex usage of the English definite article often lead to frequent errors in its application within the titles of bachelor's theses written by English majors. Therefore, this study aims to investigate and analyze the usage patterns of the definite article among Chinese English learners, with the goal of providing insights for future second language teaching and the formulation of thesis titles.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The misuse of the English definite article is a common problem among second language learners. Research on this issue is diverse, mainly focusing on the analysis of misuse types (Zhou Baoguo, 2007; He Zhihong, 2020), the acquisition order of the definite article (Liu & Gleason, 2002), and the analysis of influencing factors (Hawkins et al., 2006; Cai Jinting & Wu Yian, 2006; Zhao Zhe & Zhang Shaojie, 2010; Xu Yuanyuan, 2012; Zhang Lulu, 2014; Chen Yaqiong, 2016; Zhu Xueyuan, 2020; Feng Qi, 2020). However, few scholars have taken thesis titles as the research object to investigate the use of the definite article from a diachronic perspective.

Zhou Baoguo (2007) and Zhu Xueyuan (2020), starting from semantic complexity, conducted a typological analysis of the use of the English definite article and found that the misuse of the definite article is mainly due to the complexity of the target language. This study provides a semantic perspective for understanding the intrinsic mechanism of the misuse of the definite article. Liu and Gleason (2002) categorized the usage of the definite

article and found that learners acquire it in a certain order: situational use precedes structural and discourse use, while cultural use is acquired last. Meanwhile, studies have found that there is no significant correlation between the use of the definite article and English proficiency (Chen Yaqiong, 2016; Wei Li & Dai Weidong, 2010; Zhu Yeqiu, 2003), while Li Mengyi (2018) and Shi Jiangang (2011) found through empirical research that learners at different language levels have different usage patterns of the definite article.

One of the main factors affecting the use of the English definite article by second language learners is the transfer of their first language (Chen Yaqiong, 2016; Zhu Xueyuan, 2020; Feng Qi, 2020; Hawkins et al., 2006). Some scholars have analyzed the root causes of the misuse of the definite article by second language learners from different theoretical perspectives. Zhao Zhe and Zhang Shaojie (2010) and Chen Xin (2011), starting from the relevance theory, pointed out that Chinese students, due to insufficient ostensive stimulus and the lack of relevant information in the cognitive context, often make mistakes such as omission, redundancy, and confusion with the indefinite article when using the English definite article. This reveals the key role of cognitive factors in the misuse of the definite article. Wei Li and Dai Weidong (2010) examined the acquisition of the English definite article by Chinese students from the perspective of the syntax-pragmatics interface and found that advanced-level learners show no significant difference from native speakers in the use of the definite article in most pragmatic contexts. However, they still face difficulties in contexts involving encyclopedic references to plural nouns and anaphoric references to uncountable nouns in broad situational contexts. This indicates that the difficulties in the acquisition of the definite article mainly lie in the syntax-pragmatics interface, where different pragmatic contexts create different learning difficulties. In addition, overgeneralization, fossilization, difficulties in acquiring language rules (Chen Yaqiong, 2016; Xu Tingting, 2011; Zhou Baoguo, 2007), as well as teaching and learning processes (Sun Xin & Wang Yudan, 2022; Zhu Xueyuan, 2020; Feng Qi, 2020; Yang Hongmian & Wang Yan, 2015; Zhang Lulu, 2014) also affect the correct use of the definite article by second language learners.

The use of the English definite article in second language acquisition provides certain references for the reform of definite article teaching. Wakabayashi (1998) revealed the differences in the difficulty of using the definite article in different contexts among Japanese English learners, such as the particular difficulty in specific cultural usage and anaphoric usage for second language learners. Cai Jinting and Wu Yian (2006) found in their study of Chinese college students' use of English articles that the accuracy of article use in writing tasks was higher than that in cloze tests, indicating that task type affects learners' performance in using the English definite article. Wei Li (2007) pointed out through research that in English teaching, functional category teaching should be emphasized, and teaching content should be designed according to the characteristics of the definite article and taught step by step according to its features. At the same time, attention should be paid to the syntax-semantics and syntax-pragmatics interface issues to help learners understand the use of the definite article in different contexts and semantic relationships, improve the quality of input, and promote the effective acquisition of the definite article. These studies provide certain references for the reform of definite article teaching in the field of second language acquisition.

Based on the current situation, this paper will conduct an empirical investigation into the misuse of the definite article in the titles of bachelor's theses in English majors at a university in China over the past five years (2020–2024). It will statistically analyze the types and proportions of errors in the use of the English definite article in thesis titles by

second language learners and explore the causes behind the misuse, thus providing certain references for the acquisition of the English definite article.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN
3.1 Research Questions
This study investigates the misuse of the definite article in the titles of English major bachelor's theses over the past five years (2020–2024) and aims to answer the following two questions:
(1) What types of definite article usage are found in the titles of bachelor's theses by second language learners in English majors?
(2) What are the causes of the misuse of the definite article in the titles of theses by second language learners?

3.2 Research Subjects
The study selects the titles of 994 bachelor's theses from English major graduates at a university from 2020 to 2024 as the research subjects. The choice of English major bachelor's thesis titles as the research subjects is primarily to ensure the validity of the data source (thesis titles are determined after multiple rounds of deliberation by students, supervisors, and others), thereby reducing errors that may arise from the validity of the data source.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis
Data collection for this study spanned five years (2020–2024). The archives of bachelor's theses in English majors at a university were reviewed, and the titles of the theses from each year were compiled and organized. Two native English speakers and one English major teacher were invited to analyze the use of the definite article in the titles. The results from the three reviewers were then compared and discussed to determine the number of definite article misuse errors, as well as the total number and percentage of each type of error.
The data analysis was completed in the following two steps:
(1) Descriptive statistics were conducted on the titles of English major bachelor's theses over the past five years to calculate the number of definite article usages.
(2) Descriptive statistics were performed on the use of the definite article in the thesis titles to calculate the percentage of each type of definite article usage.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
4.1 Use of the Definite Article by Second Language Learners
This study selected the titles of bachelor's theses in English majors over the past five years. Table 1 shows the number of English titles of bachelor's theses and the frequency of the definite article in these titles from 2020 to 2024. As can be seen from Table 1, the average frequency of the definite article in thesis titles over the years is 1.61 occurrences per title, with slight fluctuations each year. This indicates that although thesis titles are a highly condensed form of information expression, there are certain requirements for the use of the definite article in terms of language standardization and accuracy.

Table 1. Data on Bachelor's Theses in English Majors at a University Over the Past Five Years

Year	Number of Thesis Titles	Number of Definite Articles	Frequency of Definite Articles
2020	122	177	1.45
2021	134	211	1.57
2022	270	420	1.55
2023	269	446	1.65
2024	199	347	1.74
Total	994	1601	1.61

Table 2 shows the percentage of correct and incorrect use of the definite article in the titles of bachelor's theses over the past five years. As can be seen from Table 2, the correct usage rate of the definite article in thesis titles is quite high (81.64%), while the error rate is only 18.36%. Looking at the data over the past five years, the error rate of the definite article has been declining (see Figure 1). The above results seem to indicate that Chinese second language learners have acquired the definite article to some extent, but due to the complex and variable usage of the English definite article, there is still room for improvement. Alternatively, as linguistic research deepens, the status of the English definite article in thesis titles is increasingly recognized, hence the declining error rate over the years. See Figure 1 for details.

Table 2. Use of the Definite Article in English Titles of Bachelor's Theses Over the Past Five Years

Year	Number of Definite Articles	Correct Use	Incorrect Use
2020	177	123（69.49%）	54（30.51%）
2021	211	167（79.15%）	44（20.85%）
2022	420	349（83.10%）	71（16.90%）
2023	446	375（84.08%）	71（15.92%）
2024	347	293（84.44%）	54（15.56%）
Total	1601	1307（81.64%）	294（18.36%）
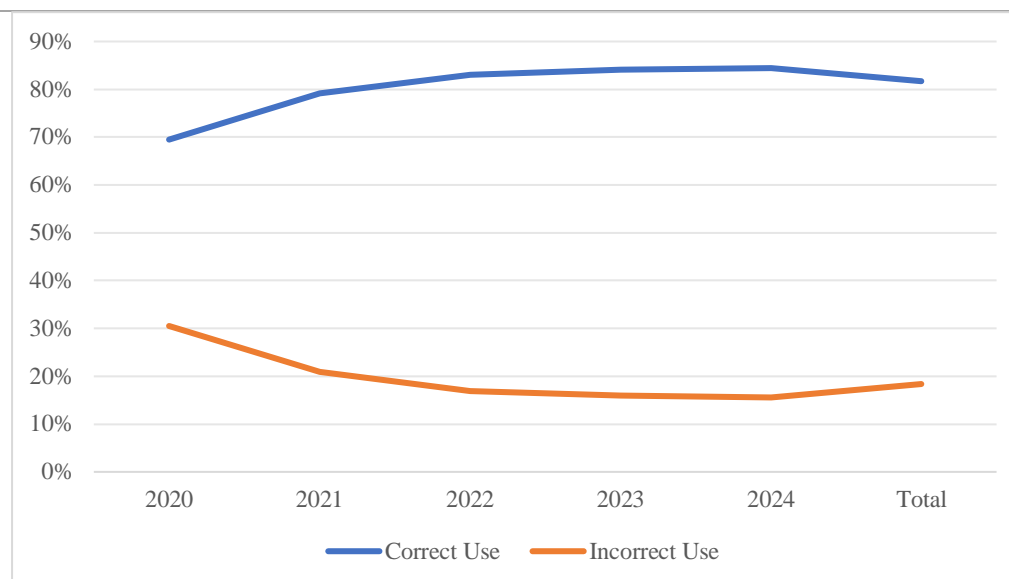
Figure 1. Use of the Definite Article in English Titles of Bachelor's Theses at a University Over the Past Five Years
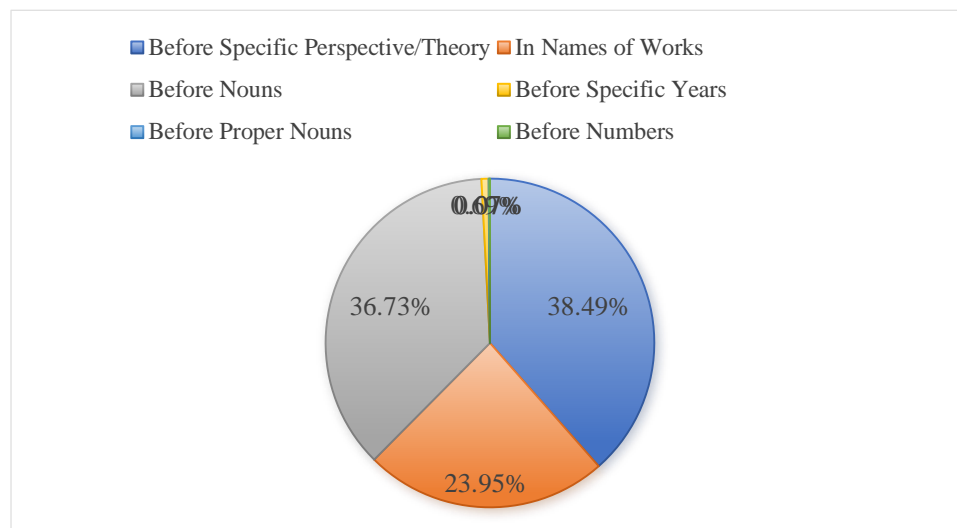
4.2 Correct Use of the Definite Article by Second Language Learners

Through a survey of thesis titles over the past five years, the use of the definite article in English titles was categorized into the following contexts: before a specific perspective or theory (38.49%), in the names of works (23.95%), before nouns (36.73%), before specific years (0.69%), before proper nouns (0.07%), and before numbers (0.07%). Figure 2 shows the correct use of the definite article in thesis titles. As can be seen from Figure 2, the positions where the definite article appears in English thesis titles are relatively fixed, usually before specific perspectives or theories, before proper nouns, or in the names of specific works. The above results are consistent with previous research findings, that is, nominal structures are the most frequently occurring syntactic structures in the titles of academic papers in English (Xu Hongliang & Hong Peipei, 2024). Although there are differences in the syntactic features of English titles across disciplines, languages, and types of publications, the requirements for language in thesis titles may lead to the appearance of nominal structures such as specific years and numbers, where the definite article may be used.

Table 3: Correct Use of the Definite Article in English Titles of Bachelor's Theses Over the Past Five Years

Year	Before Specific Perspective/Theory	In Names of Works	Before Nouns	Before Specific Years	Before Proper Nouns	Before Numbers	Total
2020	72	30	20	0	1	0	123
2021	74	44	47	2	0	0	167
2022	112	89	143	5	0	0	349
2023	138	80	154	2	0	1	375
2024	107	70	116	0	0	0	293

Total	503 （38.49%）	313 （23.95%）	480 （36.73%）	9 （0.69%）	1 （0.07%）	1 （0.07%）	1307

Figure 2. Correct Use of the Definite Article in English Titles of Bachelor's Theses at a University Over the Past Five Years

4.3 Misuse of the Definite Article by Second Language Learners

Based on the classification of definite article misuse by He Zhihong (2020), this study categorized the misuse of the definite article into three types: omission errors, redundant errors, and article confusion. Omission errors mainly refer to the absence of the definite article before specific theories or perspectives, or proper nouns, for example, *An Analysis of Symbolism in Of Mice And Men. In this title, "Symbolism" is specifically referred to within the context of Of Mice And Men, so "the" should be added before it. Redundant errors refer to the unnecessary use of the definite article before the names of works, such as in *An Analysis of the Conversational Implicature in the Downtown Abbey based on the Cooperative Principle. Here, "Downtown Abbey" as a proper noun for a TV series does not require "the" before it. The third type is article confusion, such as in *A Comparative Study of the Evolving Images of Mulan in Chinese and Western Contexts from a Feminist Perspective. In this title, "a" should be replaced with "the" before "Feminist Perspective" to indicate specificity. Figure 3 shows the misuse of the definite article in thesis titles based on the above three types of errors.
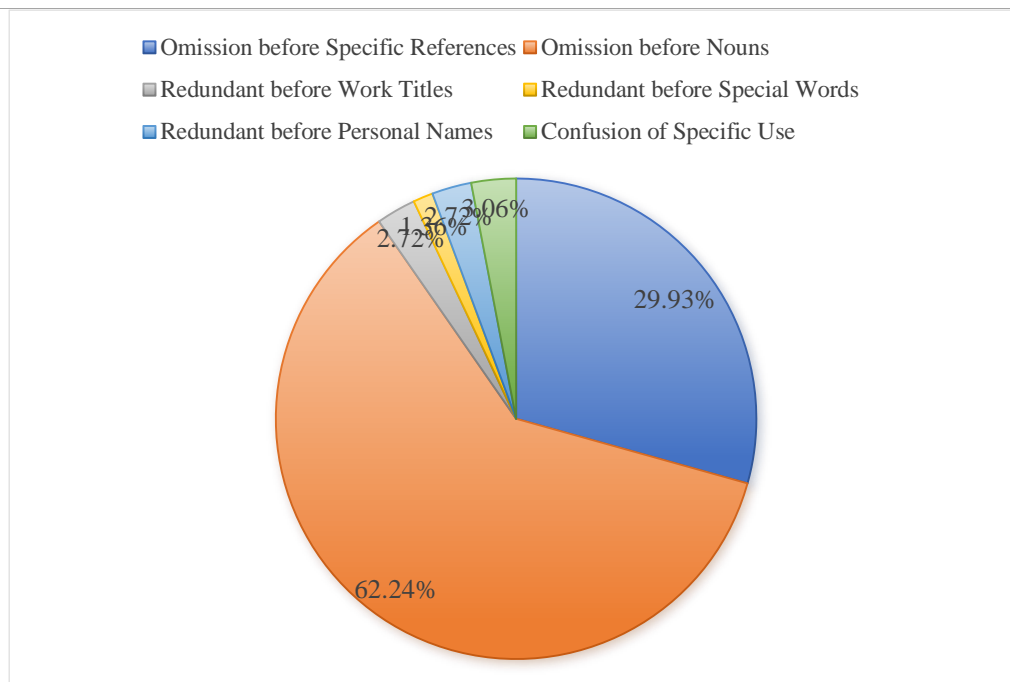
Figure 3. Misuse of the Definite Article in English Titles of Bachelor's Theses at a University Over the Past Five Years

As can be seen from Figure 3, the misuse of the definite article is primarily due to omission errors before specific references (29.93%) and before nouns (62.24%). Redundant errors (4.76%) and article confusion (3.06%) are relatively less common, mainly because nominal structures appear frequently in thesis titles. Table 4 lists the types of definite article misuse in the titles of bachelor's theses in English majors from 2020 to 2024. It can be seen that omission errors are prominent in the titles of English major theses, with many instances where the definite article is omitted where it is required. The reason for this phenomenon may be due to deviations in the judgment of specificity of nominal structures in the first language (Chinese), leading to misuse in the use of the definite article.

Table 4. Types of Definite Article Misuse in English Titles of Bachelor's Theses

| Year | Omission Errors | | Redundant Errors | | | Article Confusion | Total |
	Omission before Specific References	Omission before Nouns	Redundant before Work Titles	Redundant before Special Words	Redundant before Personal Names	Confusion of Specific Use	
2020	13	37	2	1	0	1	54
2021	15	25	2	1	0	1	44
2022	18	49	2	1	0	1	71
2023	30	35	1	1	1	3	71

2024	12	37	1	0	1	3	54
Total	88	183	8	4	2	9	294

5. DISCUSSION

Thesis titles reflect the core of the research. In the process of writing thesis titles, the omission of the definite article in English is a relatively common phenomenon, as it conforms to the principle of linguistic economy (Zhu Yongsheng, 2005), which is manifested in the simplicity of grammatical structures. Such omissions of the definite article are common in everyday communication. However, when writing thesis titles, a formal style is usually required, with specific demands on grammar, vocabulary, and other aspects of language use. Through detailed and in-depth investigation and analysis, this study found that in the titles of bachelor's theses in English majors, the definite article was used in many places where it should not have been, leading to redundancy, while it was omitted where it was necessary. This study analyzes the misuse of the definite article in thesis titles from the perspectives of first language transfer, specificity of nominal structures, and the difficulties in acquiring the use of the definite article.

5.1 First Language Transfer

The presence or absence of an article system in the first language has a significant impact on the acquisition of the English definite article (Lee, 1994; Park, 1996). This study found that the generalized omission of the definite article in the English titles of theses by Chinese second language learners is a common phenomenon. As Master (1997) discovered, the omission of the definite article is a common feature among learners whose first language lacks an article system. However, Thomas (1989) found that the English proficiency of second language learners is not related to the misuse of the definite article, regardless of whether their first language has an article system. This suggests that the overuse of definite article omission is a common feature in the acquisition process of the definite article by second language learners. The cause of this common feature may be due to first language transfer and the principle of communicative economy.

5.2 Specificity of Nominal Structures

Nominal structures in English titles are a concentrated area for the misuse of definite article omissions. This is mainly due to the complex usage of specificity in nominal structures. The findings of this study are consistent with the survey conducted by Cai Jinting and Wu Yian (2006), which shows that the semantic features of nouns significantly affect the use of the definite article by second language learners. Formal English style allows for the omission of the definite article before non-specific uncountable noun phrases. However, learners whose first language lacks a definite article system, especially Chinese learners, often have difficulty correctly judging the countability of nouns, leading to significant misuse of the definite article in thesis titles.

5.3 Difficulties in Acquiring the Use of the Definite Article

The English definite article has a wide range of uses and complex semantic functions. For second language learners, especially Chinese learners whose first language lacks an article system, the acquisition of its use is very challenging. Additionally, the fact that definite articles can be omitted in thesis titles without affecting communicative functions further increases the difficulty for learners in determining whether to use the definite article.

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6. CONCLUSION

This study, through the analysis of specific types of errors in the use of the definite article, has revealed the existing linguistic norm issues in English academic writing among current Chinese English learners. For language teachers and academic writing instructors, the findings of this study can help develop more targeted teaching strategies to assist students in improving their academic writing skills. The analysis of the misuse of the definite article provides theoretical support for language teaching practice. Teachers can offer specialized guidance on the use of the definite article in their teaching, helping students master the rules of article usage and reducing misuse caused by confusion in language structures. Particularly in the teaching of academic paper writing, greater emphasis should be placed on cultivating students' awareness of language conciseness and standardization. Standardized academic writing is an essential foundation for academic communication, and the correct use of the definite article, as an important part of English grammar, is crucial to the linguistic standardization of academic papers. By revealing the non-standard use of the definite article in thesis titles by Chinese English major learners, this study has proposed specific suggestions for improving language teaching and writing guidance, which can contribute to enhancing the linguistic quality and internationalization level of academic papers.

Moreover, this finding helps to deepen the understanding of the impact of the first language on second language learning and provides a perspective for improving second language teaching, especially in terms of cross-linguistic transfer in details such as articles and nominal structures. Overall, this study not only enhances the understanding of linguistic issues in the academic writing of Chinese English learners but also offers new perspectives and theoretical foundations for future research in second language learning, cross-cultural language transfer, and academic writing instruction.

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