

Processing the meaning of English articles by Arab learners

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Abstract

This study investigates the question of whether L2 learners' online knowledge of specificity in English article choice mirrors their offline knowledge. Previous research found Hejazi-Arabic learners of English sensitive to the specificity feature when tested offline. In the current study, 68 Hejazi-Arabic participants and 23 native English speakers took an article elicitation task and a self-paced reading task. The article elicitation task results show learners' overuse of 'the' in the indefinite specific context. The self-paced reading task results show higher reaction times for L2 learners for the *correct* article choice in the indefinite specific context only compared to native speakers. This suggests that Arab learners encounter difficulty due to the form/meaning mismatch of [+specific] feature in this context.

Key words: processing, English articles, definiteness and specificity

Introduction and theoretical background

The general findings in article acquisition research (see for example García Mayo & Hawkins, 2009) is that substitution errors often persist in L2 production even with advanced language learners. Ionin, Ko & Wexler (henceforth IKW) (2004) attribute substitution errors in contexts where there is a mismatch between the definiteness feature and the specificity feature (i.e. [-definite, +specific] & [+definite, -specific]) by learners from languages without articles (-ART) to the specificity feature which led to the formulation of the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH). That is, (-ART) L2 learners assign articles based on specificity rather than definiteness. Later, Ionin, Zubizarreta and Philippov (2009) revised this FH prediction to only include overuse of *the* in the [-definite, +specific] context.

Previous research on Arabic learners of English (e.g. Almahboob, 2009 and Sabir, 2018) found that Arabic learners often overuse 'the' in the indefinite specific context when tested offline despite that Arabic is a (+ART) language. These studies, however, have only investigated Arab learners' offline knowledge of English articles. To the best of our knowledge, Arab learners' online processing of English articles have not been explored yet. In fact, studies that tested L2 learners' online processing of English articles, in general, are very limited. The closest study to our study is a self-paced reading that was conducted by Kim and Lakshmanan (2008) who investigated the ability of

intermediate and advanced Korean L2 learners of English to distinguish English articles based on specificity rather than definiteness. Their results showed that the control group and the advanced L2 learners fluctuate between the definiteness setting and the specificity setting while the intermediate L2 learners initially process articles based on specificity and then definiteness.

The current study

In the current study, we investigate the question of whether Saudi-Hejazi¹ EFL learners' online knowledge of specificity in the English article system mirrors their offline knowledge. 68 intermediate-level Saudi-Hejazi Arabic speaking participants in addition to 23 native English speakers took an article elicitation task (AET/offline/explicit task) and a self-paced reading task (SPR/online/implicit task). The overall prediction for the current study is that if participants show sensitivity to specificity in the target context (the indefinite specific) compared to the other three contexts in terms of fluctuation (monitored by the AET) as well as longer latencies for the mismatch cases in this context (monitored by the SPR), then we can conclude that they have acquired the article system implicitly, but not explicitly. Contrastively, if they show sensitivity only in the AET, but not in the SPR, then the assumption is that the system has not been acquired explicitly nor implicitly.

Results

For the AET, ANOVAs were conducted on the use of *the* vs. *a/an* for EFL learners and for the native control group. The results in table (1) show that native speakers performed as expected with no fluctuation, while definiteness is highly significant in EFL learners' article use. Additionally, specificity has a highly significant effect on learners' use of both *the* and *a/an*. This means that EFL learners are fluctuating between *the* and *a/an*.

For the SPR task, the ANOVA and the post-hoc tests reveal a difference in response times between the match and mismatch conditions for both native and non-native speakers. In general, the mismatch conditions yielded longer reaction times. This holds across all contexts except for the indefinite specific one where the effect is the opposite for non-native speakers, i.e. non-natives speakers took longer in the match condition compared to the mismatch condition. (Figure 1).

Table 1. Results of repeated measures ANOVAs for the natives and non-natives (**p<.001, *p<.01, *p<.05).

Factor	Use of the (natives)	Use of a (natives)	Use of the (non-natives)	Use of a (non-natives)
Definiteness	F (1, 22) = 5808***	F (1, 22) = 3480***	F (1, 407) = 25959***	F (1, 407) = 67353***
Specificity	F (1, 22) = .581	F (1, 22) = .042	F (1,407) = 50.826***	F (1, 407) = 310.136***
Definiteness x specificity	F (1, 22) = 9.85**	F (1, 22) = 2.77	F (1, 407) = 3.985*	F (1, 407) = 219.930***

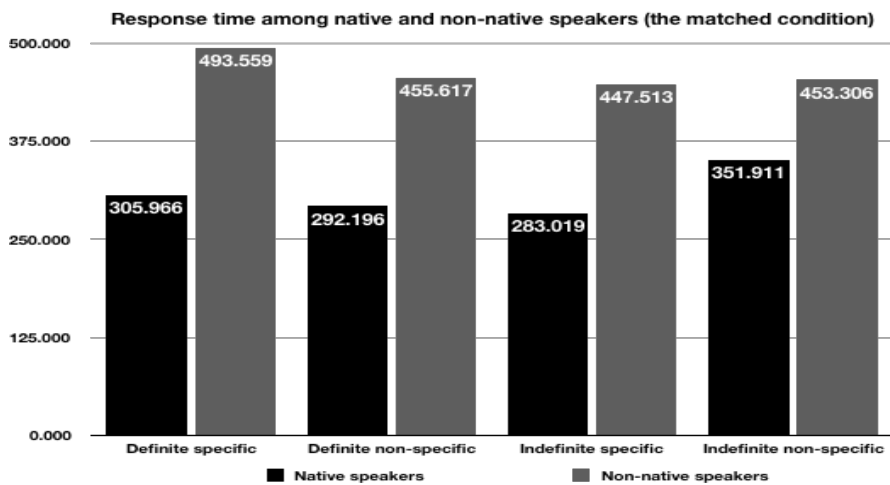


Figure 1. Response time for native and non-native speakers (match condition).

Discussion and conclusion

The AET results show that Saudi Hejazi-Arabic learners of English fluctuate between the specificity and definiteness parameters, a finding that goes against García - Mayo, 2009 (among others) findings for L2 learners with a + ART L1. However, the SPR results show that despite that Arab learners generally take longer in the mismatch condition compared to the natives; we observe a significant switch in the indefinite specific context. The fact that their performance switches in the indefinite specific allows us to notice a specificity-over-definiteness processing preference. In other words, higher reaction times in the match condition of this context might be an instance of confusion where they activate [+specific] reading and expect to see the article “the” but alternatively what they encounter is the article “a” which creates a mismatch

between the activated [+specific] reading and the [-specific] article encountered. This suggests that they process articles, at least initially, based on specificity, which is consistent with Kim & Lakshmanan's (2008) findings for Korean L2 learners whose L1 is a – ART language.

Notes

Hejaz refers to the western region of Saudi Arabia (the western border on the Red Sea).

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