

L1 transfer, definiteness and specificity of determiners in L2 English

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Abstract

This study investigates L1 transfer from Cypriot Greek (CG), definiteness and specificity of determiners in L2 English. 100 CG undergraduate students (ages 17-23) participated in the study. The linguistic (socio-economic) background questionnaires were used. Their written corpus (100 essays) was analysed in terms of determiner production. They were also offered an elicitation task based on Ionin et al. (2003, 2004), which was focused on elicitation of definite determiner *the* in [+def; +spec] and [+def; -spec] environments and indefinite determiner *a* in [-def; +spec] and [-def; -spec] environments. The results of the study showed that the most problematic condition for CG students was [-def; +spec] with target indefinite determiner as they fluctuated in their written production between target and non-target settings.

Key words: determiners, definiteness, specificity, L1 transfer

Introduction

It was found that L2 English acquisition of articles is a very difficult process (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1987; Parrish, 1987; Robertson, 2000; Leung, 2001; Ionin et al., 2008). L2 learners make omission or substitution errors (Larsen-Freeman, 1975; Thomas, 1989; Parodi et al., 1997; Hawkins et al., 2006). L2 learners either have access to Universal Grammar (UG), directly or via their L1, which is in line with the domain-specific view of L2 acquisition, or they use general learning mechanisms such as statistical learning, which is in line with the domain-general view (Ionin et al., 2008).

Definite articles are presuppositional expressions, while indefinite articles are quantificational expressions, as for the latter there is no prior presupposition or mentioning (Heim, 1991). In English, definite article *the* presupposes that the referent has been established by prior knowledge or discourse and this knowledge is shared by both a listener and a speaker (Ionin, 2003, 2006). Learning of articles involves form-meaning mapping. Definiteness is one of the cross-linguistic semantic universals, the other is specificity. L2 learners have access to both universals and they fluctuate between them. Ionin et al. (2003, 2004, 2008) observed that L2 learners of English have more accurate performance on [+def; +spec] and [-def; -spec], when there is agreement

between definiteness and specificity, than on [+def; -spec] and [-def; +spec], when the two universals are in conflict. English articles encode definiteness rather than specificity, therefore L2 English input provides target-like definiteness patterns and L2 learners with a higher level of proficiency might be more successful than those with a lower one.

L1 Cypriot Greek (CG) has articles, which means that L2 learners of English with CG background would either transfer semantics of Greek article into English or fluctuate between definiteness and specificity semantic universals provided by UG (Ionin et al., 2003, 2004, 2008).

The aim of this study is to examine L2 acquisition of English definiteness and specificity of determiners, whether L1 transfer overrides fluctuation or fluctuation overrides L1 transfer and whether amount and quality of L2 input, level of proficiency and age affect L2 learners' production with respect to definite and indefinite articles.

Study

100 CG undergraduate students (ages 17-23, L2 proficiency: beginners, intermediate and advanced) participated in the study. The linguistic (socio-economic) background questionnaires were used. Their written corpus (100 essays) was analysed in terms of determiner production. They were also offered an elicitation task based on Ionin et al. (2003, 2004), which was focused on elicitation of definite determiner *the* in [+def; +spec] and [+def; -spec] environments and indefinite determiner *a* in [-def; +spec] and [-def; -spec] environments. The participants were offered to choose from three options each time (*the*, *a* or \emptyset), there were 10 items for each condition. The task also investigated whether L2 learners of English transfer from L1 and they were asked to choose the appropriate variant (*the*, *a* or \emptyset) in such semantic and syntactic environments, where CG and English differ in terms of article use (Holton et al., 2004; Buschfeld, 2013). There were also distractor items focused on the use of various tenses.

Results and discussion

The results of the study showed that the most problematic condition for CG students was [-def; +spec] with target indefinite determiner as they fluctuated in their written production between target (42.55%) and non-target (57.45%) settings. They mainly substituted indefinite article *a* by *the* (52.12%) or used null determiner (5.31%). As far as other conditions concerned, for [+def; +spec] condition they had 76.38% target *the* and 23.62% non-target (12.55% indefinite article or 11.07% omission); for [+def; -spec] condition they used target *the* (73.40%) and 26.60% non-target (20.21% indefinite article and 6.39%

omission); and for [-def; -spec] condition they had target *a* (78.29%) and 21.71% non-target (12.34% definite article and 9.37% null article), see Table 1.

Table 1. Definite vs. indefinite article production in four environments.

Environment	target <i>the</i>	non-target	non-target <i>a</i>	non-target \emptyset
[+def; +spec]	76.38%	23.62%	12.55%	11.07%
[+def; -spec]	73.40%	26.60%	20.21%	6.39%
Environment	target <i>a</i>	non-target	non-target <i>the</i>	non-target \emptyset
[-def; +spec]	42.55%	57.45%	52.12%	5.31%
[-def; -spec]	78.29%	21.71%	12.34%	9.37%

According to *one-way ANOVA*, age seems to be an important factor for the production of target *the* determiner in [+def; +spec] environment/condition: *Sig 2-tailed .005*. Age of onset to L2 English seems to be important for the target production of definite determiner *the* in [+def; -spec] condition *Sig 2-tailed .047*.

According to *paired samples t-test*, there is a statistical significance between the target production of indefinite determiner *a* in [-def; +spec] and [-def; -spec] conditions: $t(99)=11.861$, $p=.000$; between the target production of definite determiner *the* in [+def; +spec] condition and target production of indefinite article *a* in [-def; +spec] condition: $t(99)=8.702$, $p=.000$; between target production of definite article *the* in [+def; -spec] condition and target production of indefinite article *a* in [-def; +spec] condition: $t(99)=6.290$, $p=.000$.

It was found that L2 learners of English transfer from L1 CG, but the rate of transfer is low: they used definite determiners with *proper names* and *places* (24.69%), before *time expressions* (17.66%), with nouns that are additionally modified by *a demonstrative* and *possessive* (12.77%), quantifiers *all* and the *whole* (36.18%), with *most of* (54.47%). They tend to omit indefinite articles in predicate DPs after verbs *to be* and *to become* (21.28%), with expression *like* (21.71%), in direct object position with the verb *have* (32.77%), see Table 2.

According to *one-way ANOVA*, age is an important factor for the omission of articles in time expressions due to L1 transfer: *Sig 2-tailed .005*. The results of the study showed that fluctuation overrides L1 only for [-def; +spec] condition, when two semantic universals, definiteness and specificity are not in agreement. This finding is in line with Ionin et al. (2008) and Trenkic (2000) as L2 learner had an overall better performance in the use of definite than indefinite articles. Age is a statistically important factor for definite/indefinite article acquisition in L2 English, but not the level of proficiency, quantity and quality of input.

CG participants transfer from L1 and might not pay attention to discourse-based triggers in L2 English.

Table 2. L1 transfer from CG.

target \emptyset	non-target	non-target \emptyset	non-target <i>the</i>	non-target <i>a</i>
with proper names/place names				
75.31%	24.69%	12.12%	7.68%	4.89%
preceding time destination, hours, weekdays, months, years and before seasons				
82.34%	17.66%		10.63%	7.03%
with nouns which are additionally modified by a <i>demonstrative</i> and <i>possessive</i>				
87.23%	12.77%		4.89%	7.88%
with nouns that are additionally modified by the quantifiers <i>all</i> and <i>whole</i>				
63.82%	36.18%		21.70%	14.48%
in predicate DPs after the verbs <i>to be</i> and <i>to become</i> , predicate structures, simple DPs				
78.72%	21.28%	16.18%	5.10%	
with <i>like</i>				
78.29%	21.71%	15.33%	6.38%	
with most of				
45.53%	54.47%		49.36%	5.11%
in direct object position with the verb <i>have</i>				
67.23%	32.77%	30.63%	2.14%	

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