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## Effect of Semantic Notions in Second Language Acquisition of the English Article System

Herath HMNAK

Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education

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### ABSTRACT

*This Study investigates the second language acquisition of the English article system by Sinhalese learners in order to find out the role of certain semantic universals of the Universal Grammar during the acquisition process. The English article system presents many problems for non-native speakers of English, particularly when they do not have an equivalent structure in their first language. In the pedagogical literature teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) report that articles are often their number one difficulty. ESL teachers find it difficult to understand how or why their students choose to use the articles in the way they do. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to see whether or not L1 Sinhalese learners of English fluctuate between two semantic notions namely; specificity and definiteness, and the effect of this fluctuation on acquisition.*

*120 students from three groups of learners at different proficiency levels (40 elementary, 40 intermediate and 40 upper –intermediate students) were tested. Data collection instrument, a forced-choice elicitation task is used. The task consists of 40 short and contextualized dialogues belonging to four different contexts; i.e. definite/specific, definite/non-specific, indefinite/specific and indefinite/non-specific. Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 17 packet program (descriptive analysis and one-way ANOVA (analysis of variance).*

*The results showed that intermediate level learners exhibited fluctuation between definiteness and specificity to a great extent in (+definite/-specific) and (-definite/+specific) contexts. Elementary level learners were more accurate in these contexts exhibiting article omission errors in definite contexts. Overall, despite certain unexpected results, upper intermediate level students were quite successful in article assignment in defined contexts. This revealed that there is a positive correlation between article system acquisition and proficiency.*

**KEYWORDS:** *english as a second language (esl), english articles, semantic notions*

## 1. Introduction

Acquiring a second language is a mystic process. As well as its mystery, it is also a long, difficult, and painful period. Acquisition of the English article system is one of the biggest challenges in this process, especially for the learners whose native language has no article system. Article choice in English is highly complicated, context-specific and beyond simple rules.

Articles are unstressed function words, hence perceptually non-salient and semantically light-weight (Lu and Fen, 2001: 44). However, 'a' and 'the' constitute two of the ten most frequently used words in the English language and it is hard to find a spoken or written sentence that does not contain at least one of the three articles. Despite the fact that articles are the most commonly used words in English, their usage is in fact surprisingly complex. Many ESL/EFL practitioners, especially writing teachers realize that the article system is a very difficult aspect of English syntax to learn and acquire. (Master, 1987: 9). Further, ESL teachers find it difficult to understand how or why their students choose to use the articles in the way they do.

That complexity in article acquisition is partly due to the fact that the Second language learners, mostly seek one-to-one form-meaning relationship while acquiring the language, so the concepts and the rules become easier to understand and internalize. However, the article system does not have one-to-one form-meaning connection in discourse because it is context dependent and too complex to be identified via simple and one way form-meaning association. Articles in English express highly abstract notions that are extremely hard to infer, implicitly or explicitly, from the input (DeKeyser, 2005: 5). All these reasons make the article system acquisition a nightmare for L2 learners of English. In the pedagogical literature, ESL teachers report that articles are often their number one difficulty. (Covitt 1976, cited in Celce-Murcia and Larsen- Freeman 1983). Yet, the misuse of the article system can lead to a negative disposition on the part of the listener or reader and this is naturally of concern to non-native speakers of English, especially students in their tertiary level, who are frequently required to express themselves in the written mode. Indeed, it is in the written mode that the article errors are most glaring.

Article usage presents numerous difficulties for Sri Lankan writers too, even for those with a relatively high level of proficiency in English. Many examples of the inaccurate use of English is scattered throughout the media, as well as academic and scientific writing of a large number of Sri Lankans.

Since 'a' and 'the' are two of the most frequently used English words, the inability to master its accurate use becomes the most obvious and confidence-shattering difficulty. As academics or scientists progress in their knowledge of other fields, the recurrent communicative problem over this small but frequently used word is, as in the learning of any language, a cause of inconvenience or embarrassment to themselves as well as their peers and superiors. Therefore, it is worth examining the article errors among students and the reasons for them.

DeKeyser (2005: 5) states that "where the semantic system of the L1 is different from that of the L2, as it is often the case, or where equivalent notions do not get expressed overtly in L1, except through discourse patterns [as in the case of Japanese, Chinese or Korean] the learning problem is serious and persistent" (DeKeyser, 2005: 5).

Then what are these semantic notions which are so distinctive across languages? Specificity and definiteness are semantic universals of the UG and represented in some form or another in all languages. In some languages, these universals are expressed through word-order, case markers or discourse patterns. Some languages have lexical denotations to assign those universals and articles are one way of achieving this. Ionin (2003) asserts that "languages use articles to encode either specificity or definiteness" (85). For the languages which have an overt morphology to encode UG governed semantic universals, there are two settings for the representation of articles. It means UG assign two settings on which articles are based, the specificity setting or the definiteness setting.

Germanic languages such as German and English instantiate the definiteness setting. In Samoan, articles are distinguished on the basis of specificity (Kim and Lakshmanan, 2009: 91). Fernando.S. (2008) states that main source of errors among Sri Lankan students is the use of 'the' and it is worth examining the difference between English and the Sri Lankan languages in expressing concepts like definiteness.

## 2. Statement of the Problem

When the relevant literature is taken into consideration, it is evident that the article acquisition of the English Language by Second Language learners is an issue worth examining. Although it is well known that many second language (L2) learners have trouble using articles “properly,” the primary causes of their difficulties remain unclear. This research addresses this problem by examining the effect of semantic universals, namely definiteness and specificity in acquisition of the English Article System by L1 Sinhalese Learners. By doing this, the present study attempts to better understand the process of “making sense” of the English article system by learners who are at different stages in their interlanguage development.

As mentioned above, the aim of this study is to investigate the effects of semantic universals in the acquisition English article system by L1 Sinhalese learners.

Depending on the purposes, the research questions of this study are;

- 1) What are the systematic errors of L1 Sinhalese learners on the course of English article system acquisition?
- 2) What are the reasons of these systematic errors observed in L1 Sinhalese learners' data?
- 3) What are the developmental features of Sinhalese learners' acquisition of English articles? Does proficiency have an effect in the correct use of articles?

## 3. Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the second language acquisition of the English article system by Sinhalese learners in order to search for the role of certain semantic universals of UG during the acquisition process. More specifically, it examines the role that definiteness and specificity play in the acquisition of English articles by L1 Sinhalese learners.

The data will also be analyzed to find out the role of proficiency level on the course of article system acquisition.

## 4. Review of Literature

English article system has quite simple forms for articles; “a(n)” for the indefinite expression and “the” for the definite expression. Despite this simplicity, mastering the system is quite challenging for L2 learners; especially for the ones whose L1 is a –ARTICLE language. Many studies have been devoted to Article system acquisition. Many early studies have been carried out in order to examine the article use of L2 learners, see their accuracy rates and find out the acquisition order of articles. Some of the studies focus on the acquisition order and accuracy of the articles but additionally they come up with pedagogical implications for language teachers.

Recently, researches have started to examine the process within a generative perspective. Various studies have been carried out with learners from various L1s and the results have been discussed from UG, L1 transfer and L2 input points of view. This study also focuses on examining the role of semantic notions on the acquisition of English articles.

Huebner's (1983) classification (which itself was based on Bickerton, 1981) has been one of the most widely used models for the analysis of English noun phrase (NP) environments. A slightly modified version of Huebner's model is used in this study since previous research relies on his methodology. In Huebner's model the use of English articles is determined by the semantic function of the NP in discourse. According to the model, English NPs are classified by two discourse features of referentiality—namely, whether a noun is a specific referent [+/-SR], and whether it is assumed as known to the hearer [+/-HK]. These two aspects of referentiality thus give rise to four basic NP contexts that determine article use. The contexts are definite-specific, indefinite-specific, definite-nonspecific and indefinite-nonspecific

Various studies (Kubota 1994, Fen and Lu 2001, Butler 2002, Ekiert 2004, 2007, Bergeron Matoba 2007) have all pointed out the fact that definiteness and specificity is used interchangeably by the students; especially by the intermediate level students. As a result, "the" is overused. This is supported by the research done by S.F. Maharoo (2014) taking a sample of Sri Lankan students following their degree programmes in Eastern University. According to her the greatest fraction of error in article usage has occurred due to overuse and overgeneralization, especially in the definite article 'the' in the formation of nominal phrases in generic reference and definiteness. The presence of an approximating counterpart of the indefinite article in both Tamil and Sinhala does not make the indefinite article usage that problematic as the definite article. As it is there is misuse of the appropriate article in the appropriate position especially in the use of definite article 'the'. Sometimes they seem to compare the sentence with that of their first language, trying to do a literal translation in order to get an L1 equivalent. However articles do not have a one to one correspondence between the L1 & L2 of the learners. So they have used inappropriate rules governing the article usage in English.

Siromi Fernando, who also has examined the use of the definite article 'the' in academic essays by Sri Lankan undergraduates at the Department of English, University of Colombo states that Sri Lankan students make more errors in the category of Cataphoric reference, totalling about 38 %. Further she argues that the ignorance of rules pertaining to the use of 'the' and lack of correction of written work, or correction without explanation of reasons for errors contributed to problems regarding the use of 'the'. She highlights the need for examination of the difference between English and the Sri Lankan languages in expressing concepts like definiteness. It was also suggested that the difficulties in the use of 'the' can be effectively dealt with through discussion and systematic teaching of the rules. In addition, the categories that led to a large numbers of errors in the use of 'the', like cataphoric reference, should be emphasized in teaching.

It is obvious that language acquisition is a long process. During this process, alternation and development are inevitable. In literature few studies focus on developmental process of article system acquisition of second language learners. Serving for this purpose, Kim and Lakshmanan (2009) have recently carried a research to investigate the developmental process of learners' article acquisition. According to them, in the on-line task both advance and intermediate level learners associated definite article with specificity and they fluctuated between definiteness and specificity. However, advance learners do not exhibit fluctuation between the semantic universals of UG; they show native like performance. So far many studies have been examined and some common results have been obtained. The results drawn from the studies are listed below; L2 learners of English tend to overuse the in specific/indefinite contexts, L2 learners of English tend to associate the definite article with specificity which causes fluctuation between two settings; definiteness and specificity while trying to set the correct parameter for the article choice. This fluctuation lasts until the input triggers which are so subtle, ambiguous and context-dependent so difficult to realize eventually lead the L2 learners to choose the right setting for the article choice.

In certain studies, L1 overrides fluctuation; whereas some other researches argue that UG is the dominant force in ACP setting, no matter what the L1 is. This result provides further and much stronger support for UG accessibility. This research is expected to support these common results and stand as a further contribution for the field.

## 5. Methodology

This study examined the effect of semantic notions in the second language acquisition of the English articles. The 120 participants for this study were all students of Advanced Technological Institute, Kandy who were expecting to follow different Higher National Diplomas in English medium. They were all in ESL (English as a Second Language) context.

When a new batch is taken, they were given a proficiency test and according to the results of the test their proficiency levels were determined. For the study, learners from three different levels were tested; 40 elementary students, 40 intermediate level students and 40 upper-intermediate level students. Their ages ranged from 20-27.

Participants were all tested in the classroom by the researcher herself. They were given half an hour to

complete a forced-choice elicitation task, which is composed of 40 contextualized mini-dialogues. The contexts are definite-specific, indefinite-specific, definite-nonspecific and indefinite-nonspecific as the research focused especially on how far the semantic notions, namely specificity and definiteness, affect article acquisition. Each context has mini dialogues and in total there were 40 conversations. The order of the items in the task was truly random. In the task, in each dialogue, the target sentence was missing an article.

The learners were asked to choose among the articles given ( a / an /the / Ø ) basing their responses on the proceeding context. All the task items were contextualized because it is known that the interpretation of nouns or NPs (hence the required article) may change depending on the contexts. Some slots might have been filled in with more than one article. In order to avoid such ambiguity, dialogues were contextualized so that the participants could understand the situations clearly.

Before the task was distributed, the participants were informed that the purpose is not to test their accuracy but their intuitions about the article choice. So they were asked to choose the article which first comes to their mind and not to change their answers. Most of the students finished the questionnaire earlier.

For this research two different analysis techniques have been performed. The first one is the descriptive analysis of the SPSS 17.0 packet program. This analysis shows us at what percentages learners assign the target article and make errors. The second technique is one way ANOVA. This technique is applied in order to compare the means of participants from different levels and to see how significant the participants' mean scores are in four different contexts with respect to their proficiency levels.

## 6. Results and Discussion

This study yielded quite important findings related to the acquisition of English Article System by Sinhalese learners. The results find considerable support from literature and this strengthens my study.

First of all, in this study article choices of learners from three different proficiency levels were examined and effects of definiteness and specificity to their article choice were investigated. Research hypotheses were proven by the results. My main hypothesis was that Sinhalese learners will associate the definite article with specificity, so they will fluctuate.

As a result of this fluctuation, they will overuse definite article in –definite/+specific contexts and indefinite article in +definite/-specific context. It was also assumed that fluctuation frequency will differ according to the proficiency level and a negative correlation will be observed. These hypotheses and research questions found their supportslargely from the results.

First research question was about the systematic errors of Sinhalese learners on the course of English article system acquisition. As an answer for this question the most important finding in the study is that L1 Sinhalese learners overused certain articles in certain contexts.

In +definite/-specific and –definite/+specific contexts especially intermediate level learnersoverused the indefinite article *a* and definite article *the* respectively. Overuses were observed in many studies in literature as well (Butler, 2002; Ekiert, 2004, 2007; Kubota, 1994; Lu and Fen, 2001; Kaku, 2006; Kim and Lakshmanan, 2009; Ionin et al, 2008; Ionin and Wexler, 2003; Ionin et al, 2003, 2004; Snape, 2005a, 2005b; Zdorenko and Paradis, 2007a, 2007b among many others).

All these studies support the results of this study. As well as the results itself, the reason is crucial. The reasons of the observed overuses are the answer of the second research question. Taking related literature and theoretical knowledge as the background it was argued that like other L2 learners of English from article-less languages, L1 Sinhalese learners of English associate the definite article with specificity instead of definiteness. The reason of this association is that specificity distinctions are more basic than definiteness distinctions in the sentence. Moreover, according to Kim and Lakshmanan (2009), the selection of specificity setting for the definite article may also be triggered by the input. It means that definiteness is less transparent in the input; it is hard to infer the meaning of definiteness and definites are more frequently specific in the input.

As a result of the frequency bias in the input, L2 learners of English associate the definite article with specificity. When the context is specific, they perceive it as definite. This misinterpretation causes overuses in the contexts where definiteness and specificity have contrastive values (when one of them is (+) the other is (-)). In +definite/-specific contexts learners tend to use the indefinite article because the specificity feature has (-) value and in –definite/+specific contexts they use the definite article as the context has (+) specific value. Ionin (2003) formalized these overuses.

According to this parameter and the hypothesis on the way of language acquisition, L2 learners of English have full access to UG. UG provides learners with both of the settings of the ACP. However, L2 learners do not know which setting is the correct one for the target language so they show optional adherence to both settings of UG; definiteness and specificity. It means they fluctuate between these

two values. Some of the time they assign articles on the basis of specificity but some of the time definiteness is the setting for the article choice. This fluctuation lasts until the input leads them to set the right parameter for the article choice in the target language. However, setting the right parameter takes time because input triggers are discourse based and discourse and pragmatics are acquired quite late and through experience. This factor makes the article system acquisition process quite challenging for learners. However, once the learners have control over the discourse and reach the input triggers, they start to master the article system.

The third research question was about the developmental features of the English article system acquisition process of Sinhalese learners and it was examined whether the proficiency have an effect on the process or not. Obtained results clearly answered these questions. According to the results, the highest fluctuation is observed in -definite/+specific contexts and the highest fluctuation percentage belongs to the intermediate group. This finding is contrary to the research hypothesis that elementary level learners would be more confused in these contexts with contrasting values and be less accurate in assigning the target article. This unexpected result finds support from literature (Butler, 2002; Ekiert, 2004; Lu and Fen, 2001). The possible reason of this unexpected accuracy might be that at this stage of acquisition learners start to become aware of the syntactic properties of definiteness and indefiniteness in English, so they are confused and fluctuate between definiteness and specificity. Butler (2002) explains the reason of this inconsistency with her hypotheses. She argues that article choice of lower proficiency level learners is influenced by the rules taught by their teachers and written in their text books. These rules are stored and used without clear understanding of definiteness or specificity. As there is rules and formulas in their minds, there is no confusion, or let's say no fluctuation. When they become intermediate, they recognize their errors. This effect of recognition leads learners to confusion in their article choice. They start to assign articles with their newly acquired awareness and it brings learners to adopt a number of temporary, ad hoc hypotheses for choosing articles (Butler, 2002:467). As they improve in terms of their language proficiency reliance on rule-based hypotheses decrease and learners realize that they should also consider speaker-hearer knowledge and the context in which the given article is used. It means that in time they set the parameter for the article choice appropriately. The results of this study largely support this assertion because upper-intermediate level learners' fluctuation rates are quite minor both in -definite/+specific and +definite/-specific contexts. However, they still do not show native-like performance in these contexts. This finding takes us to the fact that the acquisition of the article system in English is a difficult process which requires quite a long time. It takes time because in order to choose the correct article, learners should evaluate the discourse and find out the input triggers which will lead them to the correct choice. However, input triggers are discourse based and discourse and pragmatics are acquired quite late and through experience. So eliciting cues from the input to choose the right setting is not possible due to the current level of L2 learners. As learners have not fully acquired or mastered the acquisition of discourse and pragmatics yet, they manifest fluctuation.

## **7. Conclusion and Recommendations**

In the overall sense the aim of my study is to contribute to the literature of English Article System acquisition by Sinhalese learners and widen the spectrum of the researches.

At a specific level the purpose is to examine the effect of semantic notions in second language acquisition of the English article system by Sinhalese learners and investigate the role of definiteness and specificity during the acquisition process. It is also aimed to find out the role of the proficiency level on the course of article system acquisition. The data for the thesis was collected from the students of Advanced Technological Institute, Kandy. Students from 3 different proficiency levels were tested. As the data collection instrument, a forced choice elicitation task was prepared. This task consisted of 40 short dialogues which depended on four different contexts; +definite/+specific, +definite/-specific, -definite/+specific, -definite/-specific. Collected data was analyzed by means of SPSS 17 package program using the descriptive analysis and ANOVA techniques. The results of the study were mostly in line with the hypotheses.

It was expected that especially elementary and intermediate level learners would fluctuate between definiteness and specificity in +definite/-specific, -definite/+specific contexts because they would associate the definite article with specificity instead of definiteness. This fluctuation would last until they became proficient enough and input led them to assign the right article. As expected, intermediate level learners fluctuated between definiteness and specificity and overused "a" and "the" in [+definite/-specific], [-definite/+specific] contexts. However, contrary to my predictions, elementary level learners performed better than intermediate counterparts. From upper-intermediates' side the results were quite satisfactory; they did well nearly in all contexts. It proved that proficiency level helps article system acquisition and learners can perform better in time on the course of English Article

System acquisition.

As well as fluctuation, omission errors were also observed. Especially elementary level learners tended to omit articles in [+definite/+specific] context. Articles omission rates mostly observed in definite contexts. In general all learners were better in [-definite/-specific] context and worse in [+definite/-specific] and [+definite/+specific] contexts.

The present study yielded important results related to the acquisition of English articles by Sinhalese learners and in the light of these results it is possible to come up with certain implications to help teachers.

In order to achieve efficient teaching of articles, firstly, learners should be aware of the underlying reasons of their article choices. It means that they should know according to what they are expected to assign articles in that target language. In that sense, learners should be informed about semantic universals of UG; specificity and definiteness. The logic behind their article choice should be explained to them. Fluctuation and specificity should be taken seriously because it may cause fossilization.

In the data it was found out that Sinhalese learners of English showed sensitivity to local contextual clues. They directly assigned the definite article for items which has a relative clause structure. Relative clause structure leads learners to a confusion because they had been taught that before the relative clause structure definite article must be used. As a result most of the learners used definite article without considering the context's itself.

Keeping this in mind, it is possible to suggest that while introducing the article system, formulaic and rigid rules should be avoided. Articles should be taught in context, not separately. Moreover classroom activities should be more meaning-based rather than rule-based. Article system is too complex and detailed to be explained via simple formal rules and assigning the correct article depends on discourse.

In language acquisition, the role of comprehensible input cannot be denied. During the article system acquisition process, students should be provided as much comprehensible input as possible because input triggers have a crucial role in discourse analysis, so in assigning the correct article. For that purpose, it is possible to use communicative activities in the class while explaining the article system because communicative activities are the best way to provide students with real life comprehensible input with a real discourse.

Another important point is that studies in literature have revealed that there is a natural order in article system acquisition. The indefinite article is acquired later than the definite article because its semantic conditioning is more complex than the definite article. While teaching the article system, teachers should bear this order in mind. Following this order may help classroom teaching.

Lastly, acquisition of the English article system is a long, difficult and painful process so learners need time to master over articles in English. As a result teachers should be patient during the process.

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