THE ACQUISITION OF ARTICLES IN CHILD SECOND LANGUAGE ENGLISH

FATIMAH ALI EATAYAH

Abstract: The aim of this study is to determine the role of L1 transfer in acquisition of the article system in English. This study is heavily based upon previous research findings, which are, in fact, a starting point and a necessary background for this study. 20 children learning English as a second language were studied for two years. Some used [-Art] L1 (Hindi) and some used [+Art] L1 (Arabic). The performance of learners was studied after every 6 months. The children were divided into 2 groups depending on whether their L1 was [+Art] or [-Art]. Picture books were designed based on line drawings. The children narrated the stories by looking at the pictures which were not visible to the interviewers. The study was limited to singular common nouns. Use of articles was recorded for both definite and indefinite contexts. The mean percentage of accurate use of articles in obligatory contexts was prepared separately for 'a' and 'the.' The percentage scores confirm that learners grew steadily more accurate over time with their use of articles. They were more accurate with 'the' than with 'a'. Only children with [-Art] L1 lagged behind [+Art] group at first round in use of article 'the'. Hence it can be said the article type was a more important factor than L1. Most children in both groups were more accurate with '**the**' than with '**a**', throughout the 2 years.

Key Words: L1 Transfer, acquisition, definite contexts, indefinite contexts, obligatory contexts, -Art. + Art.

Introduction: English as a second language is taught in many schools across the world at the primary and secondary levels. It is generally noticed that certain aspects of the English language are typical and important but children learning English as a second language find it difficult. The most common errors occur in case of prepositions and articles. The use of prepositions is unique in case of English. The article system in English is another important yet difficult area for second language learners. Some of them believe that articles in English are unnecessary, superfluous decorations. One can communicate verbally and in writing without using articles. This trend is observed widely nowadays when people communicate through short messages on cell phones and while chatting on the internet and other forms of social media. However, this is not true. Although the gist of a message can be understood without giving attention to the use, omission or misuse of articles, there is possibility of increasing the ambiguity of the message. At the same time, the English language sounds accurate, polished and perfect and conveys correct information when articles are appropriately used. It must be admitted that in highly sophisticated and academic writing, article errors can affect the quality and create a bad impression. It is the responsibility of teachers to help their students to understand the English article system.

Some languages in the world have an overt article system (+Art) and some do not have an article system (- Art). This study hypothesizes that children who have a mother tongue which is +Art can acquire the article system better and more quickly and easily than children who have a mother tongue which is –Art, when they study English as a second language. Thus transfer of the knowledge of article system takes place in case of children who have a mother tongue which is +Art. This study aims at

understanding whether transfer takes place and the extent of the transfer.

This research is based on another theory proposed by Noam Chomsky. Chomsky spoke about Universal Grammar (UG), according to which there are certain grammatical universals common to all languages in the world. Chomsky argued that although an overt article system does not exist in every language, the idea of definiteness and indefiniteness are part of universal grammar. It is on account of this universal aspect of definite and indefinite that every individual is capable of understanding and acquiring an article system, whether it is part of his/her mother tongue (MT) or not. The researcher tries to find out whether transfer of knowledge in the MT (LI) is promoted by UG.

Background Of The Study: It has been repeatedly said that the English article system is difficult to acquire and since article errors rarely lead to miscomprehension, there is no point in wasting valuable classroom time in teaching articles. While language acquisition is a natural and unconscious process, language learning is a conscious process and can be influenced only by classroom instruction. Shwartz (1993) has termed it as learned linguistic knowledge (LLK). Moreover, a second language is always a second one and inter-language grammar is different from native competence. LLK is thus necessary to supply competence. The explanation – production model was followed traditionally in classrooms but Van Patten and Cadierno (1993) followed explanation with non-production activities. They recommend instruction focussed on input processing. Whatever the method, it is now agreed that formal instruction does have a positive effect.

Articles In English: In English, countability, number and definiteness, all 3 elements must be considered in arriving at the correct choice of articles.

Frequency and Function:Articles are most frequently occurring free morphemes in English. According to COBUILD '*the*' is the most frequent word in a corpus of 20 million words and '*a*' is in the fifth position. Among the 3 English articles, zero is most frequent, followed by '*the*' and then '*a*'.

Palmer (1939) suggested that zero article has 2 forms – one used with non-count nouns (milk, gold) and the other used with proper nouns (London). The first is referred to as zero article and the second is called null article.

The null article is the most definite of articles. It generally names a one-member set and occurs with singular count nouns and with singular proper nouns.

The indefinite '*a*' signifies a boundary that makes an entity concrete and countable. It occurs with singular count nouns.

Definite '*the*' indicates an identity intended by the speaker and/or shared by the hearer. '*The*' is not limited by countability or number. It is primarily used with non-generic nouns. Generic '*the*' indicates a class of entities and must be used with singular count nouns.

According to Krashen's Critical Age Hypothesis and Input Hypothesis, children pick up a language easily and quickly. They are able to make generalizations about the rules of a language on the basis of input in first or second language. For this reason, this study focussed on children who were learning English as a second language. In order to study the effect of L1 transfer on the acquisition of English article system, two groups of children were selected for the study. One group consisted of 10 students whose MT was Arabic which is a +Art (For Example: AL madrasah and AL samah – AL is the article in Arabic) language. The second group consisted of 10 children whose MT was Hindi, which is a –Art language.

Research Questions:

- To test whether [+Art] and [-Art] L1 groups fluctuate between article parameters.
- To test whether [-Art] group is more likely to omit articles than [+Art] groups.
- To test whether there is a difference between accuracy in article use in definite and indefinite contexts, and whether this changes as a function of L1 background.

Methodology: The selected children from both the groups studied English for two years. While they pursued their regular syllabus, the researcher conducted story sessions every three months. Four story sessions were conducted for four consecutive days in a specific week. The stories were specially designed for the research. They consisted of a deliberate selection of singular and plural common nouns. During these sessions, the researcher displayed pictures and simultaneously narrated stories, specially emphasizing the countable common nouns. The zero article instances were reflected in the use of proper nouns.

Every six months, a test was conducted. The children were given picture cards and they narrated stories by looking at the cards. Children narrated the story by looking at the pictures which were not visible to the interviewers. The study was limited to singular common nouns. Use of articles was recorded for both definite and indefinite contexts.

Data Analysis: The mean percentage of accurate use of articles in obligatory contexts was prepared separately for '*a*' and '*the*'.

The percentage scores confirm that learners grew steadily more accurate over time with their use of articles. They were more accurate with *the* than with *a*. [-Art] group showed lower accuracy with definite article in the first test round. A post-hoc independent sample t-test was conducted and it showed that overall, L1 did not much influence acquisition of articles. Only children with [-Art] L1 lagged behind [+Art] group at first round in use of article '*the*'. Hence it can be said the article type was a more important factor than L1. Most children in both groups were more accurate with *the* than with *a*, throughout the 2 years. Misuse, rather than omission was clearly the major error type for both the groups.

Results: Regarding fluctuation it can be said that both L1 groups demonstrated fluctuation pattern in article choice, and little L1 influence. Hence, in case of children, fluctuation overrides transfer because unlike adults they are more efficient in accessing UG to establish a new, language specific grammar. '*The*' was used more often in definite contexts than in indefinite contexts at all stages of acquisition by learners in both groups. This could be due to greater semantic complexity of '*a*' and has nothing to do with L1 transfer.

Discussion: The FH – Learners with [+ART] L1 transfer knowledge of articles in English L2 acquisition. But for those of [-Art] L1s there is no question of transfer. Hence, they fluctuate between '*a*' and '*the*' until they converge on a target system as a result of sufficient L2 input. If it is hypothesized that fluctuation overrides transfer, then all L2 learners should fluctuate between article choices. But Ionin et al found evidence to support the hypothesis that transfer overrides fluctuation, that is, L2 learners whose L1 has articles, transfer article semantics from L1 to L2. The same results were obtained by Hawkins et al (2006).

Ionin et al (2004) did not carry out a full investigation on child learners but they expected child L2 learners to converge on the definiteness pattern with greater success than adult L2 learners from the same L1, because children are better at making grammatical generalizations from various input.

Incorporation of misuse/omission of null article is possible in the approach of Hawkins et al (2006). Schwartz and Sprouse

(1996) proposed Full transfer/full access (FT/FA) based account. According to this, the L2 learner's knowledge of L1 grammar as well as UG accessed directly plays a role in L2 acquisition. Hence, both approaches are mutually compatible.

Lardiere (2004), Robertson (2000) and White (2003) found the directional difference in accuracy. Their studies have widely reported that L2 English learners are more accurate in choosing the definite article in definite contexts than they are in choosing the indefinite article in indefinite contexts. This might be because English need not take into account the number/count/mass in case of the definite article 'the'.

Hawkins et al (2006) also concluded that 'a' is inserted in singular contexts. Hence, learners have to identify the feature (singular) for accurate use of a. If this featural complexity is responsible for errors, then L2 learners could be expected to display this pattern regardless of L1 background.

Acquisition of articles in L2 English is different as it is governed by the presence or absence of articles in the L1. Articles are learnt earlier by [+Art] speakers than by [-Art] speakers. Overuse of zero article is observed in the initial stages in case of [-Art] L1 speakers. But zero use can actually be omission of articles since they do not exist in the L1. Hence it can be called acquisition by default. Overuse of zero article decreases with increasing proficiency. Performance of [+Art] L1 speakers shows a U shaped curve on graph in the use of zero article.

When [-Art] learners realize that zero article is not always appropriate, they overuse 'the' with all nouns. [+Art] users overuse 'the' from the start. They are ahead of [-Art] learners because it takes the latter some time to realize that something like an article system exists. But this difference is observed only in the initial stages.

According to Chaudron and Parker (1988) 'a' is learnt only after 'the' is mastered. Pica (1983, 1985) found that acquisition of 'a' was unique because it did not seem to be influenced by instruction. It is different because it is a marker of countability. L2 English learners do understand that context is important in the choice of indefinite article but they fail to understand how English speakers use this context. More research is necessary on this psycholinguistic mechanism.

Conclusion: In the initial stages, it is not advisable to emphasise rules of article usage. Words should be introduced in the classroom with the help of actual objects or pictures and should always be used with the articles, as and how they occur with the words. Beginning with concrete countable nouns, the teacher should proceed to mass nouns. Focus on 'the' should be avoided at this stage.

Systematic teaching of articles using cognitive methods is more effective than marking errors in composition. Sufficient practice until a single distinction is mastered is necessary. Berry (1991) has provided several interesting article tasks to encourage comprehension and application rather than a simple selection of correct articles. Van Patten and Cadierno's model (1993) has designed an exercise based on their notion of input processing which is also useful.

Rules are not useful – they are often forgotten. Focus should be on lexical items instead of syntactic rules. Rules are internalised at the advanced level. Students should be encouraged to maintain records so that they will avoid them on their own. But errors should not be criticised, as Lewis argues, (1993) " --- error is essential part of learning process."

Finally, it is suggested that English articles are difficult to learn and teach and should be introduced over a long period of time. Articles can and should be taught in the classroom.

References

1. Berry, R. 'Re-Articulating The Articles'. *ELT Journal* 45.3 (1991): 252-259. Web.
2. Castleberry, S. B. 'Videotaped Role Playing In The Personal Selling Classroom: A Practical Guide'.*Journal of Marketing Education* 11.1 (1989): 33-39. Web.
3. Chaudron, Craig, and Kate Parker. 'Discourse Markedness And Structural Markedness'. *Stud. Sec. Lang. Acq.* 12.01 (1990): 43. Web.
4. Garthright, Wallace E. 'Response To Response To Article By Hawkins Et Al.'. *Food Microbiology* 14.5 (1997): 523. Web.
5. Lardiere, D. 'What Is A Rule Of Grammar?'. *Second Language Research* 30.1 (2014): 41-46. Web.
6. Palmer, H.E. *A Grammar Of Spoken English On A Strictly Phonetic Basis*. 2nd ed. Heffer, Cambridge, 1939. Print.
7. Schwartz, Bonnie D. 'On Explicit And Negative Data Effecting And Affecting Competence And Linguistic Behavior'. *Stud. Sec. Lang. Acq.* 15.02 (1993): 147. Web.
8. VanPatten, Bill, and Teresa Cadierno. 'Explicit Instruction And Input Processing'. *Stud. Sec. Lang. Acq.*15.02 (1993): 225. Web.

* * *