

Two sides of the same coin: *the* with indefinites and *a* with definites in L2-English

Second language (L2) learners of English whose L1's lack articles are known to have difficulty with the English article system (e.g., Thomas 1989). We have found that even L2-learners who scored as advanced on an independent proficiency test misused English articles, as shown in (1).

1. *The target article in each underlined DPs is a; there is no previous mention of the referent*
 - a) The most valuable object that I have received is the ball and the signature of the famous baseball player is signed on it.
 - b) My friends presented me the small Siamese kitten.

In this paper, we examine article use and interpretation in the L2-English of adult speakers of Russian and Korean, languages without articles. We show that L2-English article choice is not random, but rather reflects real semantic distinctions. While previous analyses of L2-English article choice (e.g., Huebner 1983, Thomas 1989, Ionin 2003) have concentrated on overuse of *the* with indefinites, we show that L2-English learners also overuse *a* with definites; we propose that these two errors are traceable to the same source. On the basis of new elicitation and naturalistic production data we show that **specificity as speaker knowledge (cf. Fodor and Sag 1982) affects article choice with both indefinite and definite DPs in L2-English.**

Background. Fodor and Sag (1982) argued that speaker knowledge of the referent is the crucial determinant of specificity in indefinites. Thus, *a book* is [+specific] in (2a) and [-specific] in (2b); narrow-scope indefinites (2c) are obligatorily [-specific].

2. a) Sarah read a book – *Lord of the Rings*.
- b) Sarah read a book – I have no idea which one.
- c) Sarah wants to read a book – any book will do.

A similar distinction was proposed for definites by Donnellan (1966). On the [+specific] reading of the definite in (3a), the speaker must be aware of the referent's identity. This is not the case on the [-specific] reading in (3b).

3. a) I am looking for the winner of this race – her name is Mary.
- b) I am looking for the winner of this race – whoever that is.

Putting these proposals together, we see that **DPs can be grouped according to the [±definite] dimension** (as in (4a)), **or along the [±specific] one** (as in (4b)). The English article system is based on the definiteness feature (as in (4a)): *the* is [+definite] and *a* is [-definite]. We will argue that, on the other hand, both definiteness and specificity play a role in L2-English article choice.

4. a) Article grouping by definiteness

	+definite	-definite
+specific		
-specific		

b) Article grouping by specificity

	+definite	-definite
+specific		
-specific		

Hypothesis. We hypothesized that the reason L2-English learners make errors in article choice is that they erroneously encode *the* as [+specific] and *a* as [-specific]. This predicts that they should **overuse *the* with [+specific] indefinites**, such as (2a), but not with [-specific] indefinites (2b), and, conversely, that ***a* will be overused with [-specific] definites** (3b) but not with [+specific] definites (3a). This is summarized in (5).

5. Predictions for L2-English article use

CONTEXT	+definite	-definite
+specific	correct use of <i>the</i>	overuse of <i>the</i>
-specific	overuse of <i>a</i>	correct use of <i>a</i>

Methods. To test our hypothesis, we used a forced-choice elicitation task with intermediate/advanced adult L2-English learners: 26 L1-Russian speakers (ages 19 to 56) and 39 L1-Korean speakers (ages 19 to 40). Our test was piloted with six L1-English speakers, who used articles appropriately. The test consisted of 76 short English dialogues; participants had to choose the appropriate article for the target sentence in each dialogue, based on the surrounding context. The four context types represented in (5) had 8 items each; examples are given in (6).

6. *The full contexts are not given here; the target article is underlined.*
 - a) [+definite, +specific] Tomorrow, I'm having lunch with (a, the, --) creator of this comic strip – he is an old friend of mine.

- b) [+definite, -specific] He is talking to (a, the, --) owner of his company! I don't know who that person is – but I know that this conversation is important to Erik.
 c) [-definite, +specific] I am meeting with (a, the, --) student from my English class – he needs help with his homework.
 d) [-definite, -specific] She is meeting with (a, the, --) student, but I don't know who it is.

Results. As shown in (7), overuse of *the* was higher with [+specific] indefinites than with [-specific] indefinites, and overuse of *a* was higher with [-specific] definites than with [+specific] definites. These differences were significant for both groups ($p < .001$). Repeated-measures ANOVAs showed that both definiteness and specificity had significant effects on use of *the* vs. *a* ($p < .001$) for both L1 groups, with non-significant interactions. While only article use is reported in (7), article omission was very low (<15% on any category).

7. Article use in L2-English: percentage of *the* and *a* use across all instances of use

a) L1-Russian participants (N=26)			b) L1-Korean participants (N=39)		
	+definite (Target: <i>the</i>)	-definite (Target: <i>a</i>)		+definite (Target: <i>the</i>)	-definite (Target: <i>a</i>)
+specific	91% <i>the</i> , 9% <i>a</i>	40% <i>the</i> , 60% <i>a</i>	+specific	96% <i>the</i> , 4% <i>a</i>	22% <i>the</i> , 78% <i>a</i>
-specific	63% <i>the</i> , 37% <i>a</i>	8% <i>the</i> , 92% <i>a</i>	-specific	85% <i>the</i> , 15% <i>a</i>	4% <i>the</i> , 96% <i>a</i>

The higher overall accuracy of the L1-Korean speakers is due to their higher L2-proficiency, as measured by the Michigan test. There was a strong developmental effect across both L1 groups: both overuse of *the* with [+specific] indefinites, and overuse of *a* with [-specific] definites were significantly higher for intermediate than for advanced L2-learners ($p < .02$).

Naturalistic production data. The elicitation task was supplemented by a collection of naturalistic production data: the L2-learners who participated in our study were asked to provide written answers to five questions related to their experience (e.g., *Describe a valuable object that you own; Talk about how you came to the U.S.; etc.*). In order to determine the appropriateness of article use in the responses, we subsequently had them coded by four L1-English speakers.

The results further support our hypothesis. Overuse of *the* across all [-definite, +specific] singular contexts was 26% for L1-Russian speakers and 14% for L1-Korean speakers (see examples in (1)). A similar pattern obtained with plurals. In contrast, there was almost no overuse of *the* in *there*-constructions or *have*-constructions, which are unlikely to involve specific indefinites. In these constructions, the L2-learners either correctly used *a* (as in (8)), or omitted the article. Due to the nature of the task, there were almost no [+definite, -specific] contexts in the data. As a result, there was very little overuse of *a* with definites.

8. a) There are a mirror, a desk, a computer and a bed something like that.
 b) It has a table for studying and a chair.

Discussion. We conclude that **both specificity and definiteness play a role in L2-English article choice**. The L2-learners' errors are not random. Overuse of *the* with indefinites is tied to the feature [+specific], and overuse of *a* with definites is tied to the feature [-specific]. At the same time, use of *the* is higher across all [+definite] contexts than all [-definite] contexts. We propose that **in L2-learners' article choice, there is fluctuation between the two systems in (4)**, so that *the* is sometimes specified as [+definite], and sometimes, as [+specific]. This fluctuation is a result of the L2-learners' difficulty generalizing from the input triggers which govern article specifications in English. We show that the same type of fluctuation between different grammatical options occurs in other domains of L2-acquisition, such as verb raising and tense/agreement morphology.

References

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