



How much do Cantonese ESL learners know about the English article system?



Alice Yin Wa Chan*

Department of English, City University of Hong Kong, 83 Tat Chee Avenue, Kowloon, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This article investigated Cantonese ESL learners' explicit knowledge of the English article system. A total of 33 Cantonese ESL learners majoring in English participated in a questionnaire survey consisting of both ranking questions and open-ended questions requiring them to give detailed descriptions about their use and knowledge of English articles. The results of the study showed that many respondents were confident of their use of English articles, but they did not regard articles as very important for speaking, reading, writing or listening. They did not possess the metalanguage that enabled them to articulate the functions and semantics of different English articles and had some misconceptions and/or confusion about the system. These misconceptions may be the source of certain article errors, such as substitution errors. It is suggested that formal and systematic teaching be given to enhance ESL learners' explicit knowledge of the English article system and to strengthen their use of English articles.

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1. Introduction

English articles are one of the most frequent grammatical forms available to ESL learners in their second language learning input, yet the use of these grammatical forms creates much difficulty to learners of English, especially those whose native languages lack articles, like Chinese (Ionin, Zubizarreta, & Maldonado, 2008). Different kinds of article problems have been documented in the literature, but most previous research on Chinese ESL learners has focused on learners' actual use of English articles.¹ Their knowledge of the English article system has largely been neglected. The present study bridged this research gap by probing into Cantonese ESL learners' explicit knowledge of the English article system in an attempt to understand learner problems and to obtain insights into the teaching of English articles.

2. Literature review

The acquisition of English articles by second language learners has often been found to be a difficult process (Huebner, 1983; Ionin et al., 2008; Master, 1987; Parrish, 1987; Pica, 1985; Robertson, 2000; Thomas, 1989). Even learners whose L1 have articles also show a fluctuating pattern in English article choice (Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008, 2012). It is sometimes

* Tel.: +852 3442 9752; fax: +852 3442 0288.

E-mail address: enalice@cityu.edu.hk.

¹ The phrase "use of English articles" here, and in the rest of the manuscript when learners' use is at issue, refers to learners' selection of an article in a particular context.

regarded by English as Second Language (ESL) teachers as their students' number one difficulty (Covitt, 1976; cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Han, Chodorow, & Leacock, 2006). The complex ways in which meaning is mapped onto form, such as the way *the* is used for generic reference, anaphoric reference and uniqueness, are regarded as one main source of learner problems (Young, 1996). Noun countability, which has often been seen as an underlying feature in the English language system, is also a source of problems, as "the perceptual system of noun countability used by native speakers of English is not necessarily describable, explainable or acquirable by second language learners" (Yoon, 1993: 284). Native speakers of languages which do not have an article system do not perceive the countability of nouns in the same way as those of languages which have an article system, and this difference often results in deviant choices of English articles by the non-native English speakers (Yoon, 1993).

Different kinds of ESL errors in the use of articles have been documented in the literature, including co-occurrence errors (e.g. **His an umbrella* is self-opening), word-order errors (e.g. **Young a man* took it up), under-extension errors (e.g. **Old man* came here this morning), overextension errors (e.g. **The corn* is a traditional food in America), and substitution errors (e.g. **A sun* becomes red) (Mizuno, 1999). The definite article *the* has often been found to be overused in contexts where the indefinite article *a* is required instead (Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008, 2012).

The effects of the existence or non-existence of structural parallels of English articles in a learner's mother tongue on acquisition have also been the focus of investigation. For example, in their study of the acquisition of English articles by two monolingual English speaking children and a Serbo-Croatian-English bilingual child, Mede and Gurel (2010) found that for the bilingual child whose native language was article-less, cross-linguistic transfer overrode other factors such as maturational/pragmatic or semantic factors. Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004), likewise, showed that ESL learners whose mother tongue lacked articles appeared to fluctuate between their use of definite and indefinite articles. Conflicting results were, however, reported in Dai and Wei (2008), that Chinese speakers, whose native language also lacked articles, did not fluctuate between definiteness and specificity, so they could acquire the former setting whereas the latter had no effect on their choice of articles. Zdorenko and Paradis (2008, 2012) also found that *the* was overused for *a* in indefinite specific contexts by children irrespective of whether their native languages had articles or not.

Given the diversity and severity of the problems that English articles present to ESL learners, it may be taken for granted that explicit teaching in the area is urgently needed. Nevertheless, arguments for and against the teaching of the use of English articles are both found. It has been claimed by some researchers, such as Krashen (1981) and Pica (1985), that explicit teaching has no impact and leads to no useful long-term effects on learners' acquisition of the English article system (Master, 1997). On the other hand, there is evidence showing that learners' use of articles in obligatory contexts improves significantly with proficiency level (Liu & Gleason, 2002) and that guided careful online planning has positive effects on learners' production of English articles (Ahmadian, 2012). Other research has shown that in terms of long-term learning, both direct correction and metalinguistic explanations impact positively on learners' ability to use English articles (Kao, 2013).

In view of the various difficulties that the English article system presents to second language learners, as well as the contradictory arguments about related pedagogy, a systematic investigation into this area of learning is of paramount importance to researchers in the field and to English teaching professionals. One way of understanding ESL learners' acquisition of a learning area is to examine their explicit knowledge (or declarative knowledge) of that area. In information processing approaches to second language acquisition, explicit knowledge, which "exists as declarative facts that can be stated" (Ellis, 2009: 13), is thought to be what most learning starts with. Explicit knowledge of an area to be acquired is also regarded as a major educational goal by proponents of language awareness (van Lier, 1995), as it is assumed to facilitate the attainment of proficiency in that area (Roehr, 2004). Through practice, it will become implicit knowledge (or procedural knowledge) which forms the basis of fluent performance (DeKeyser, 2001, 2007).² ESL learners' explicit knowledge of the English article system is, thus, worth investigating. Although, previous research has studied Chinese/Cantonese learners' use of English articles, to the author's best knowledge, no systematic studies have been conducted to investigate Chinese/Cantonese ESL learners' explicit knowledge of English articles. The present study aimed to bridge this research gap.

3. Research questions

The study consisted of a questionnaire survey which aimed at investigating Hong Kong Cantonese ESL learners' declarative knowledge of the use of English articles³ and identifying the relationship, if any, between their explicit knowledge of the system and their learning problems. The following research questions underlay the questionnaire design:

- (1) What are learners' perception of their own use of English articles?
- (2) What is their declarative knowledge of the descriptive system of English articles?

² There is no attempt on the author's part to claim or assume that investigating learners' explicit knowledge of the English article system is *the* method to understand ESL learners' acquisition. This is only one way of doing so. Other methodologies, especially those which collect empirical data on learners' actual use of English articles, are definitely useful and complementary to the present research (see Section 7).

³ The phrase "use of English articles" here, and in the rest of the manuscript when the English article system is at issue, refers to how and when an article is used, i.e. the usage.

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