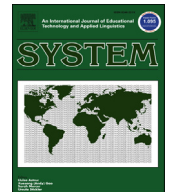




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# English article acquisition by Chinese learners of English: An analysis of two corpora

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## 1. Introduction

Non-native-like use of articles is one of the most common features of learner English (Chuang, 2005, p. 25). While variation between *the*, *a*, and absent articles occurs with high frequency in both spoken and written English, the nature and purpose of this variation can be opaque to learners (as well as native speakers). In addition to alternations between *the* and *a*, L2 speakers also have to learn that absent articles are of, at least, two types, what we will refer to as zero articles and null articles, following Master (2003).

There is a rich literature surrounding the issue of L2 article acquisition. Some researchers have investigated articles in terms of the order of acquisition of different morphemes (e.g., Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2005), while others have examined various factors that affect accurate article use (Amuzie & Spinner, 2013; Butler, 2002; Geng, 2010). The present study attempts to contribute further to our understanding of the factors that influence article use by English learners. We investigate the effects of several linguistic and demographic factors by examining two corpora of Chinese learners of English. Using these corpora, we ask whether speaker differences within and across the two corpora relate to article use and how factors like speaker proficiency, the pragmatic context of an article, and the abstractness and plurality of a noun influence article choice. One of the corpora, the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (hereafter ICNALE) (Ishikawa, 2013, 2014, 2017), contains the speech of Asians learning English at universities. The second, which we will refer to as the STAAAF data (from an acronym from the original project (Rivers et al., 2009; Kendall, Rivers, & Dodsworth, 2012)) includes Chinese adults who live in New York City. Much of the research on adult L2 article use has been done on college students, likely for practical reasons related to university-based research and teaching (Butler, 2002; Geng, 2010; Tarone & Parrish, 1988; Watcharapunyawong & Siriluck, 2013). While some studies have examined adult L2 article use (e.g., Jin, Afarli, & van Dommelen, 2009), those projects are outnumbered by those done on college students. Through corpus-based analysis of spontaneous speech data, and by considering both adults well past university age and university learners, we seek to build on the observations made by previous researchers.

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## 2. Background

The present study focuses on speakers from Chinese language backgrounds. Mandarin and Cantonese both lack articles. The L1 of a speaker has been shown to affect their L2 article use (Ghisseh, 2009). Research has found that a presence of articles in the L1 of a speaker promotes acquisition of an L2 article system, while an absence has the inverse effect (Ekiert, 2004; Ionin & Montrul, 2010). Article use improves with experience (Ekiert, 2004; Hua & Lee, 2005). However, it is often subject to fossilization in advanced speakers (White, 2003).

There are many different uses for each English article form, and determining the purpose of any given occurrence proves difficult, especially for those who have no L1 article system to support their understanding. Scholars have used various metrics to define the meaning of definite and indefinite articles. Butler (2012) created a semantic map which seeks to explain the production of every English article. His work is exhaustive but is perhaps too complex for an analysis of L2 articles. Another approach, developed by Huebner (1983), is widely used in second language acquisition studies. It makes use of two interacting factors, Hearer Knowledge and Specific Reference, to explain the distribution of articles (pp. 131–133). Hearer Knowledge (HK) is whether or not the listener knows about the speaker's referent. Specific Reference (SR) is whether or not the noun in question is "specific." For example, in the sentence "I like the strawberries grown in marshlands," "strawberries" refers to a specific kind of strawberry, but "marshlands" refers to marshlands in general, not to a specific instance of marshlands.

Research shows that oftentimes learners will associate the +SR feature with the definite article, after initially associating it with +HK (Butler, 2002, p. 474). However, in English, the distinction between a definite article and an indefinite article is not entirely determined by specific reference. The more common distinction comes from the difference between +HK and –HK. Table 1 presents the four possible permutations of the pairing of HK and SR, along with the articles expected in L1 English.

Huebner's (1983) classification system originally did not consider uses of the zero article form which indicate a very definite situation. These have been dubbed "null" articles in other literature (Master, 2003). For example, in the sentence "Dinner was delicious last night," the word "dinner" refers to a specific, known, definite noun. We have included cases of the null article in our analysis, and we differentiate these null forms from other zero cases, which are hereafter referred to as 0.

Beyond Huebner's (1983) work, several studies have found significant differences in how speakers use articles based on HK and SR (Ekiert, 2004; Geng, 2010; Tarone & Parrish, 1988; Young, 1996).

In addition to the pragmatic features of HK and SR, the semantic content of noun phrases is also an important factor underlying article realization. Researchers have considered the distinction between "abstractness" and "concreteness" in previous literature on article acquisition. Amuzie and Spinner (2013) describe "abstract nouns" as nouns that "denote a quality, an attribute, a feeling, or an idea that cannot be seen or touched, while concrete nouns name tangible items that have physical properties" (p. 416). Other studies have found that learners have more difficulty using abstract nouns in native-like ways than concrete nouns (Hua & Lee, 2005).

As indicated in Table 1, plurality also plays a significant role in the production of articles. Singular nouns, plural nouns, and non-count nouns, all interact with articles differently. For example, it is grammatical to say "I have a deadline" in the singular, and "I have 0 deadlines" in the plural, but not "\*I have deadline" or "\*I have a deadlines." The non-count status of a noun can be the difference between the grammatical "I like lava" and the ungrammatical "\*I like a lava." Other literature has found that articles which correlate with plurality, *the* and 0, appear earlier within the development of an L2 grammar (Master, 1997, p. 216). This suggests that plurals will encourage native-like speech, while singular nouns may discourage it. Considering that speakers can often use abstract nouns in both plural and non-count ways (for example, one can say "belief is the cornerstone of faith" and "we respect beliefs from all perspectives"), the issue of plurality becomes even more complex.

In order to cope with these complex and varied factors which affect article use, learners have to develop strategies to pick one article over another. Other researchers (e.g., Butler, 2002) have noted that L2 learners develop strategies to use difficult L2 features accurately. The most desirable strategy would be to internalize the English article system like a native speaker. However, learners may adapt simpler or non-native-like strategies, which they can then update as they gain proficiency. We conceptualize these strategies as methods to increase the overall rate of grammatical (or seemingly grammatical) utterances.

For example, *the* flooding is a phenomenon noted throughout the literature on L2 article acquisition (Master, 2003). It refers to the case of L2 speakers overusing the article *the* across many, often inappropriate, contexts. We argue that this is a strategy for increasing the rate of accurate articles in L2 speech. While the overuse of *the* does lead to its use in inappropriate

**Table 1**  
Hearer knowledge, specific reference, plurality, and articles.

Features	Singular	Non-count	Plural	Example
–HK –SR	a(n)	0	0	"I want an apple."
–HK +SR	a(n)	0	0	"I was carrying a baby."
+HK –SR	a(n), 0, the	0, the	0, the	"I'm looking for the best pizza in town."
+HK +SR	the, null	the, null	the, null	"The man over there is so ambivalent."

Adapted from Ekiert, 2004, p. 11.

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