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EFL Learners' Acquisition of the English Article System: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This talk is based on an empirical study that has explored the acquisition of the English articles by speakers of an L1 that has an article system encoding definiteness (Syrian Arabic), and an L1 that lacks articles (Japanese), at different proficiency levels in English. The analysis of the quantitative data from a forced-choice elicitation task demonstrated clear and strong similarities between the high-proficiency Syrian and Japanese learners and a control group of native speakers in their article accuracy in all definite and indefinite contexts, suggesting that L2 learners can acquire properties of the functional Category D (Determiners) in a target-like way. However, the low proficiency learners in both groups showed different behaviour, both from the native controls and each other. The low-proficiency Syrian Arabic participants did not fluctuate between definiteness and specificity, but over-used 'the' in indefinite generic and relative clause contexts, suggesting transfer from the L1. The low proficiency Japanese counterparts fluctuated between allowing English articles to encode definiteness and specificity, replicating the results of previous studies, and consistent with the assumption that L2 grammars are derived from Universal Grammar. The findings of this quantitative study highlighted the role of the first language in second language acquisition, the ability of L2 learners to acquire properties of functional categories not realised in their L1, the nature of L2 development itself, and the extent to which such development is constrained by innate linguistic capacities (Universal Grammar).

Keywords: Universal Grammar, Fluctuation Hypothesis, L1 Transfer, Definiteness, Specificity, Arab and Japanese L2 Learners