



The Acquisition of English Definite Article “the” by Mandarin and Indonesian Speakers

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Abstract

By replicating Feng (2019) with some modifications, this study aimed to identify the acquisition pattern of two kinds of English definiteness, anaphoric and non-anaphoric. Being a language without article system, Mandarin Chinese employed demonstrative determiners to function as definite article and shared the same features as English definite article “the”. In the current study, the participants were 3 L1-Chinese and 3 L1-Indonesian L2-English learners, who engaged in an Acceptability Judgement Task (AJT) and a post-task interview. Align with Feng’s finding, this study revealed that Chinese participants encountered less difficulties than their Indonesian counterparts in the use of ‘the’, as a possible result of L1 transfer; and that Chinese participants underperformed in bridging conditions, indicating the challenge of presupposition at the semantics-pragmatics interface.

Keywords: English definite article; second language acquisition; L1 transfer

Introduction

English article system is considered to be one of the most difficult parts for second language learners, especially whose native languages lack an article system, as learners cannot rely on metalinguistic awareness of grammatical rules to reason their usage (Zhao & MacWhinney, 2018). This article only focuses on the definite article 'the' for its multifunction in complex conditions (Crosthwaite, 2014). Although there have been many studies focusing on learners' performance and use of the definite article, the underlying strategies learners employ to address the problems have relatively been understudied (Chan, 2019). Being an article-less language, Chinese has been widely studied to identify the acquisition pattern of the English definite article. Indonesian, also lacking article systems, however, has received little attention in second language acquisition. Aiming to build up these gaps, this study conducted the AJT and interviews to discuss Chinese and Indonesian speakers' acquisition of the definite article.

Literature Review

Expression of definiteness in English, Mandarin and Indonesian

We employ the uniqueness theory and familiarity theory to establish our AJT test regarding the definite description in English. The uniqueness theory argues that the definite noun phrase (NP) refers to a unique entity that fits the definite description (Lyons, 1999; Schwarz, 2013). In the second theory, familiarity means that a referent is known to both the speaker and the hearer (Feng, 2019). Bridging is a special and indirect case of anaphoric use. It means that the definite NP is new to the discourse, but it is in a salient thematic relationship with antecedent references. In order to distinguish the metaphorical anaphoric relationship, it requires both semantic and pragmatic knowledge to accommodate the connection between the anchor and the bridging definite NP (Cho, 2017).

Previous studies argue that Mandarin Chinese, lacking the article system, employs demonstratives to function as the definite article (Chen, 2004). A particular demonstrative determiner 'na' shares the same features as the English definite 'the', namely, [+definite, +/-anaphoric].

The definiteness in Indonesian has been rarely reported. Some early researches indicate that there is no equivalent substitute in Indonesian like 'na', definiteness should be performed by other syntax to semantic means (Els Oskaar, 1994).

Theories of second language acquisition (SLA)

There is a consensus that at least some aspects of SLA are affected by the learner's native language, the process of which is called L1 transfer (Ionin & Montrul, 2010). Heejeong Ko et al. investigated Cantonese ESL learners' judgment of the use of the English definite article through grammaticality judgment tasks and found that learners tended to resort to their native language despite the fact that there is no structural equivalent in their native language (Heejeong Ko et al., 2010).

Lardiere (2009) divides L2 acquisition into two phases, which she defined as Feature Reassembly Hypothesis. The first phase constitutes the process of mapping features and forms based on similar features between L1 and L2. The second phase refers to learners adjusting and

attuning to the target set of mapping based on input and exemplars. Based on this theory, it is assumed that feature reassembly is not needed for Mandarin speakers as the demonstrative 'na' in L1 shares the same features as the definite article in L2.

Previous researches also studied the role of presuppositionality in the L2 acquisition of English articles (Cho, 2017; Heejeong Ko et al., 2010), concluding that presupposition at the semantics-pragmatics interface contributes to the acquisition of 'the' in some specific aspects where not only enough semantic and pragmatic knowledge but also the competence to integrate them are required, such as the bridging condition.

Previous studies on the acquisition of the definite article

Most of the previous related researches targeted Korean and Mandarin representing Asian languages to study foreign language learners' acquisition of English articles (Cho, 2017; Crosthwaite, 2014; Feng, 2019). Korean, like Indonesian, has no equivalent article substitute. And the results always align with the assumption that Mandarin speakers outperform their Korean counterparts at the same proficiency level. However, Feng (2019) also points out that Chinese participants still cannot achieve native-like level in certain conditions where presupposition accommodation is needed.

In order to make up for the gap in the comparative study of Mandarin and Indonesian in English article acquisition, this article explores in depth the acquisition of English definite article by English learners of the two countries. The two following research questions were to be answered.

- Is there any difference in acquisition of definite articles between L1-Chinese and L1-Indonesian L2 English learners?
- Is the presupposition accommodation ability acquired automatically for L1-Chinese L2 English learners?

Methodology

Participants

Six English learners participated in the study, 3 of them are Indonesian speakers, whose average IELTS scores are 6.5, 6.5, 6.5; 3 of them are Mandarin speakers, whose average CET scores are 500, 500, 510 (which are lower than their counterparts if converted into equivalent IELTS scores). The names of the participants are pseudonyms.

Data collection

Participants were asked to complete a paper-based AJT test (Appendix A) within 30 minutes, including 16 items in four categories, namely *direct anaphoric definite* (n=4), *taxonomic anaphoric definite* (n=4), *anaphoric bridging definite* (n=4), and *non-anaphoric bridging definite* (n=4), using the four-point scale (4 was completely acceptable, 3 was acceptable, 2 was not acceptable, 1 was totally unacceptable).

Below were the sample items of each category.

- Harold got a microwave for Christmas. He put **the** microwave next to his new toaster.
- Howard wrote a book. He sent **the** novel to three publishers already.
- Hillary was performing for the first time. So, her parents attended **the** play.
- Brad just proposed. His fiancée accepted **the** ring happily.

Direct anaphoric definites condition occurred in the typical anaphoric context, the new referent was introduced in the form of indefinite NP, and the definite NP was used in the second mention. Similar to the first one, in taxonomic anaphoric definites, the attributive NP had a clear antecedent in the text, but it was not identified as the same NP. Anaphoric bridging definites represented a special type of metaphorical attributive, whose antecedents were implicit. And for the last type, the appearance of NP had no antecedent hint at all, it depended on the context.

After the AJT test, participants attended an interview (Appendix B). The focus of the interview was on the interviewees' common sense of article use, the problems they encountered in the general use of English articles and grammar judgment tasks, and the strategies used in grammar judgment and interpretation. The interview were recorded and transcribed into text.

The native data of AJT came from Cho (2017). The content of the AJT test came from both Cho and the replicated study Feng (2019).

Results and Discussion

Because of the use of Likert Scale, we were not able to calculate the mean, instead we described the ordinal data from this kind of test.

AJT result

As shown within Table 1, overall, among participants, the results indicated that participants never opted out to choose the "I don't know" option.

From the data of Mandarin speakers, we could see that there was a clear contrast between acceptable and unacceptable ratings in first two conditions (i.e., direct anaphoric and taxonomic anaphoric), as was shown by 4 (totally acceptable) in contrast to 1 (totally unacceptable). Although contrast also could be observed in the last two bridging conditions (i.e., anaphoric bridging and non-anaphoric bridging), they were in smaller scale (only in item 11&12, 13&14) and not obvious (the contrast decline from 4/1 to 4/2).

Table 1.

Participants' ratings to the AJT

Number of questions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Indonesian speakers' response																
Benny	4	2	2	2	4	1	2	2	4	1	4	2	4	4	4	2
Rais	3	3	2	1	1	3	2	3	3	4	4	3	1	2	2	3
Sita	4	4	3	4	2	4	2	4	1	2	2	3	4	3	4	4
Chinese speakers' response																
Ji	4	1	4	1	4	1	4	1	3	4	4	1	4	2	4	4
Chen	4	1	4	1	4	1	4	3	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	4
Lily	4	1	4	1	2	1	1	3	3	1	4	1	4	2	1	4

On the other hand, contrast ratings were not detected in all four conditions in Indonesian data. It was also interesting that Indonesian speakers rated more 4 (totally acceptable) in the last two bridging conditions than in the first two conditions.

Interview result

In this part, we present the use of “the” retrieved from the participant on the interview. We specifically investigated how they use definiteness “the”. On top of that, we also mainly wanted to elicit some spontaneous qualitative data from the interview session investigating each participant’s strategy and routine in learning English that might affect the way they acquire definiteness that would be discussed in the next section. The interview questions were presented in appendix.

Based on the interview’s result, we classified the level of each participants proficiency in light of their performance using the definiteness “the” from the rater evaluation.

Table. 2

Participants’ level of proficiency based on their performance on the interview.

Participants	Level of proficiency in using “the”
Benny	Intermediate
Rais	Intermediate
Sita	Basic
Ji	Intermediate
Chen	Basic
Lily	Basic

Table. 3

Some striking differences of how some participants use article definiteness.

Participants	Extractions
Ji	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have been to <u>the</u> UK • I like to listen to <u>the</u> English music and watching <u>the</u> English films • I think this weakness can be avoid by <u>the</u> pronunciation • I learnt about <u>the</u> grammar and the reading about the article • a very long time from <u>the</u> middle high school to <u>the</u> university • I can't check <u>the</u> dictionary every time I meet <u>the</u> problem of <u>the</u> article • my experience learning language through my elementary school to <u>the</u> university • I learnt about <u>the</u> grammar
Chen	He never used article “the” at all.

Discussion

As expected, Chinese speakers have showed distinct contrast in the first two conditions. But what is different from Feng's finding is that they fail to show a contrast between acceptable and unacceptable in both bridging condition (while Chinese participants in Feng's study succeeded to show a contrast in anaphoric bridging). The results suggest that Chinese speakers allow the use of the in both anaphoric and nonanaphoric conditions, but they fail to realize that definiteness is obligatory in these conditions (they rated both high).

The possible reason for the difference from Feng's study is that the Chinese participants in Feng's study are English ESL learners who were university students in United States, and thus have the opportunities to the exposure of authentic use in real life to develop their pragmatic competence. The Chinese participants in this study, however, are English EFL learners who have never been abroad. And in the bridging conditions, as the definite NP is new in the discourse, learners have to apply their knowledge from the semantics-pragmatics interface to presuppose the definite NP. Namely, pragmatic knowledge is required in the bridging conditions.

On the other hand, Indonesian speakers show a various opinion towards different conditions. However, they perform better particularly in using definiteness 'the' in oral production when being interviewed, showing the implicit pragmatic knowledge, which may also well explain the higher rating in bridging conditions.

Moving to their routines and strategies in approaching English language both Chinese and Indonesian speakers have somewhat similar techniques to study the language. They prefer to listening to the music, watching movies, and reading books. On top of that, they claim that they also follow their instructors at schools. This might mean that what influences their ability to acquire definiteness is their first language knowledge interruption. As Chinese language has alternative option to definiteness "the" of English, it shares similar contextual to the use of "the". On the contrary, Indonesian language is an article-less language, where definiteness should be performed by other syntax to semantic means (Els Oskaar, 1994). This makes Indonesian speakers acquire definiteness "the" not as rapid as Chinese speakers.

Conclusion

Conclusion

The results of the AJT shows that Mandarin speakers outperform Indonesian speakers, indicating L1 transfer and feature reassembly account for a contributory role in the acquisition of the definite article. The results also suggest that Mandarin speakers encounter difficulties in bridging conditions, where presupposition assumption is required, indicating that pragmatic knowledge is not acquired automatically.

Limitation

The limitations lie in that the participants are at the equivalent proficiency level, failing to indicate the L2 acquisition of the definite article through development stages; and that the interviews focus on the perceived, failing to identify the in-depth thinking to specific test items

to show the immediate strategies.

Future direction

Future comparative studies of the AJT performance between focused-instruction group and non-instruction group may yield constructive teaching implications for the teaching of English articles to people speaking other languages.

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Appendix A

This Acceptability Judgement Task aims to investigate how second language (L2) learners with an article-less first language acquires English definiteness. The AJT contained 16 test items, in each item, please offer judgements on whether the second sentence was a good or felicitous continuation of the first sentence. Please highlight the evaluation of (4) if you consider the second sentence is totally acceptable whereas an evaluation of (1) means totally unacceptable ((3) somewhat acceptable and (2) somewhat unacceptable). We also provide the "I don't know" option. If you choose 1 or 2 or "I don't know," we encourage you to identify the source of the problem by either underlining words in the sentence or leaving a short comment.

**We promise that the results will be only use for academic purpose.*

1. Timothy and Franny went to see a play last night. They discussed the play for an hour afterward.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
2. Todd's high school is showing a play this weekend. Todd and his parents are going to see a play.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
3. Jackie made a cake for the party. She served the cake with coffee and tea.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
4. Kevin ordered a cake from the grocery store. He went to pick up a cake, but it was not ready.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
5. Nancy bought an appliance online. The post office delivered the microwave to her home.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
6. Jerry has an appliance in his dorm room. His roommate uses a microwave more than he does.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
7. Lydia's family purchased a dessert. They ate the cake after dinner.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
8. Marianne and her daughters shared a dessert. They enjoyed a cake.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
9. Hillary's brother was reading in the bus this morning. He accidentally left the novel when he got off.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
10. Jonathan read for three hours last night. He found a novel very interesting.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
11. Tori baked for her office this morning. Her co-workers enjoyed the cake.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
12. Rachel baked for her husband. He enjoyed a cake.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
13. Sandra is working in her kitchen. She cleaned the microwave first.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
14. Andrea just walked into her kitchen. She opened a microwave and put her dinner inside.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
15. It was Sophie's first birthday. She smashed the cake with her hands.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'
16. Patrick celebrated his birthday with his friends. They enjoyed a cake.
 (1) (2) (3) (4) 'I don't know'

Appendix B

Introduction

1. How long have you resided in Australia or speaking country? (Length of stay)
2. In what age do you start to learn English? (onset age in learning English)
3. What are your learning strategies when?
4. What aspect of English do you find is your weakness and strength? (listening, speaking, reading, writing)

Content-based questions

1. Do you think your knowledge of the English article system helps you in your selection of articles? If so, how? If not, why?
2. What difficulties did you encounter in the use and/or understanding of English articles?
3. What strategies did you use to overcome the difficulties? Have you been taught these strategies?

*You can change the tone of the questions and ask extensive questions based on the answers but still need to get the intended point like above questions

*And try to limit the duration of your interview, so you can analyze the discourse easily.

Hint for the interviewers (do not share this to the participants):

This data from the participants will be analyzed in terms of how proficient they are in English language. This will be a part of discussion section and support their score of AJT test.

Illustration: participant A scores excellent in his AJT test. Then, the data from this interview will provide justification of it (why participant A is capable of mastering definiteness compared to other participants).

Number	1	2	3	4	5	6
Name						
Total sentences in the interview						
Total error in the interview						
Total use of article "the" in the interview						
Participants' overview from result of the interview						
Findings						

*the analysis will adapt the spoken Unit Analysis technique.