

Acquisition of L2 English Article Semantic by L1 Tamil Speakers in Malaysia

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Abstract

Ionin (2003) proposes the Article Choice Parameter, a semantic parameter which establishes that articles across languages encode two values which are definiteness or specificity. The English articles are based on definiteness but the Tamil language lacks articles. This study examined the pattern of article choice among adult L1 Tamil speakers in Malaysia, to test Ionin's (2003) Fluctuation Hypothesis based on the Article Choice Parameter. The Fluctuation Hypothesis reveals that L2 English learners from article-less L1s upon encountering a language that has an article system access both the definiteness and specificity parameter provided by Universal Grammar (UG) and exhibit fluctuation between the two settings. As a result, they perform accurately in the [+definite, +specific] and [-definites, -specific] when both the settings are the same and overuse *the* with [-definites, +specific] and overuse *a* with [+definite, -specific] when both the settings are in conflict. The results of this study revealed that the L1 Tamil speakers had UG access to both the definiteness and specificity settings, as their pattern of English article choice demonstrated fluctuation between the two settings. Article omission error among these learners indicated limited negative-L1 transfer also existed in the article acquisition process.

Keywords: Article; semantic; definiteness; Fluctuation Hypothesis; Tamil

1.0 Introduction

The process of second language acquisition (SLA) looks at the stages involved in acquiring a different language after the native language has been acquired (Gass & Selinker, 2009, p.7). In the Malaysian context, this is most commonly discussed in relation to the learning and teaching of the English language. The nativist approach claims that language learning involves innateness, that is, humans have a natural ability to systematically be conscious of the language around them. In recent years the nativist theory has become more dependent on the idea of Universal Grammar (UG). UG is a system of universal linguistic rules that are genetically determined in every human being since they are born (Brown, 2000, pp. 24-25). UG refers to "the system of principles, conditions, and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages...the essence of human language" (Chomsky, 1975, p.29).

According to this theory, all human languages consist of a set of basic abstract principles of grammar that is applicable to all languages and parameters which vary according to languages (Cook, 1997, pp. 250-251). The theory encompasses the idea that language acquirers do not have to learn these basic principles because humans have an innate ability, which is derived from the UG, to discover these basic abstract principles that are common to all languages. On the other hand, parameters are differences across languages. These differences are encoded in UG. L1 learners, through the language input, will be able to establish the most suitable parameter. Input data will lead the learner to the most

appropriate parameter setting so that the learner is able to achieve proficiency in the language being acquired.

A topic of considerable interest in SLA studies is that of parameter-setting among L2 learners. The issue is whether L2 learners possess the ability to acquire parameter settings that are unavailable in their L1. Much L2 research work has been conducted on the setting of syntactic parameter in L2 acquisition, such as the V2-parameter (Robertson & Sorace, 1999) and the Governing Category Parameter (Finer & Broselow, 1986). The focal point of this research was whether L1 Tamil L2 English learners have the capacity to attain the semantic parameter value of definiteness in the Article Choice Parameter, which underlies English articles but is unavailable in their L1.

The L2 acquisition of the English articles is a worthwhile field to be researched because it is perceived to be a highly complex process for L2 learners (Wong & Quek, 2007; Momenzade et al., 2014; Lopez, 2017). This is especially so for learners whose native language lacks the article system. According to De Keyser, article choice in the English language conveys highly abstract notions that are extremely difficult to infer, either directly or indirectly, from the input (De Keyser, 2005, p.5). These views demonstrate that although articles are perceived to be simple function words, in actual fact, article choice in English is extremely complex, very dependent on the context and extends beyond simple rules.

The motivation for this research is to provide additional contribution to current literature in favour of access to UG in SLA, Article Choice Parameter and Fluctuation Hypothesis. In addition, to the knowledge of this researcher, no studies have been initiated that directly examined the acquisition of articles by L1 Tamil L2 English learners. Such knowledge will help to explain the process of SLA and also the influence of L1 on the acquisition of English articles among Tamil learners.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Ionin's (2003) Article Choice Parameter and Fluctuation Hypothesis as the theoretical framework and examined the pattern of English article choice among L1 Tamil speakers in Malaysia and investigated if adult learners have access to UG to attain the definiteness parameter of the English articles. The Article Choice Parameter, definiteness and specificity parameters followed by the Fluctuation Hypothesis is explained below;

2.1 Article Choice Parameter

The Article Choice Parameter is a semantic parameter of UG governing discourse-based distinction in article-based languages which ascertains if articles encode speaker knowledge or hearer knowledge. The Article Choice Parameter has two values: definiteness and specificity. According to Ionin (2003), languages which have articles distinguishes them on the basis of definiteness and specificity.

This is illustrated in the Figure 1 below:

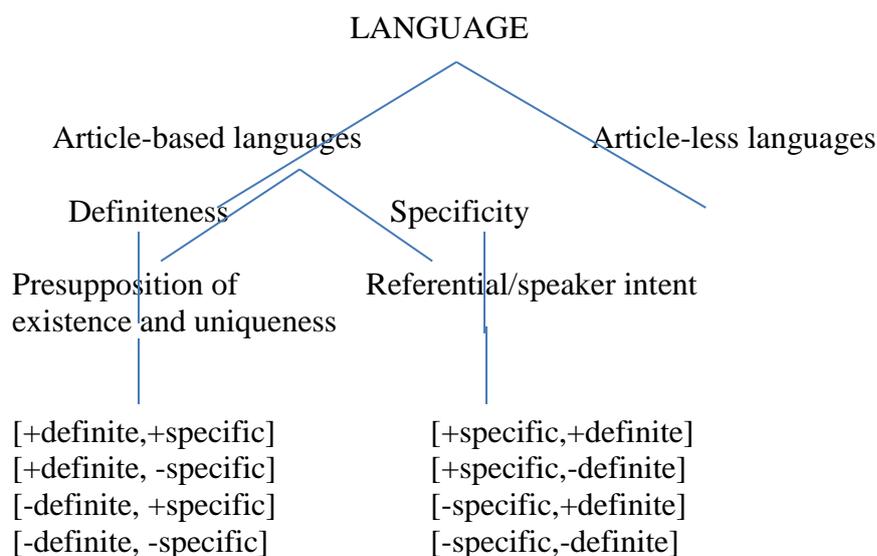


Figure 1: The Semantic Classification of Languages (Guella et al., 2008, p. 60)

The semantic classification of languages in Figure 1 above shows the classification of languages according to existence or non-existence of articles and a segregation of articles based on definiteness and specificity. Although Arabic, English and French languages belong to different language clusters (namely Semitic, Germanic and Romance, respectively), their articles have the same semantic property: Definiteness. Languages such as Samoan, Hebrew and Creole languages, articles are based on specificity (Ionin 2003, pp.87-90). Article-less languages are languages such as Tamil, Korean and Chinese.

2.2 Article Semantics: Definiteness and Specificity

Articles encode semantic values of definiteness and specificity. The concept of definiteness refers to the state of knowledge of both the speaker and hearer of a referent in the Noun Phrase (NP). The concept of specificity refers to the state of knowledge of only the speaker about a referent in the NP. For this study the definition of definiteness and specificity provided by Ionin et al. (2004) is adopted and provided ;

“If a Determiner Phrase (DP) of the form [D NP] is...

- a. [+definite], then the speaker and hearer presuppose the existence of a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP.
- b. [+specific], then the speaker intends to refer to an individual in the set denoted by the NP and considers this individual to possess some noteworthy property.”

(Ionin et al., 2004, p. 5)

Ko, Perovic, Ionin and Wexler (2008) explain that a referent is definite [+definite] when a speaker refers to it; the referent exists and is known to the hearer. On the specificity feature, Ko et al. (2008, p.119) put forth that specificity is a semantic characteristic that refers to the awareness of the speaker regarding a distinctively important referent in the discourse. This means that a referent is specific [+specific] when only the speaker has knowledge of the uniquely important referent mentioned in the discourse, regardless of whether the hearer has knowledge of that referent. The features of

definiteness in the English language, specificity and how definiteness is marked in the Tamil language is further explained below.

2.3 Definiteness in the English Language

In standard English, article choice is based on definiteness not specificity. The definite article *the* marks old and presupposed information and is used if both the speaker and hearer in the NP have shared knowledge of the entity referred to in the NP, while the indefinite article *a* marks new or asserted information and is used when only the speaker has knowledge of the referent in the NP (Irwin et al., 1982: p. 308). This is illustrated in example (1).

(1) Rani received **a doll** for her birthday. She loves playing with **the doll**.

In the first mention of the noun doll the indefinite [-definite] article *a* is used because the noun is introduced for the first time and is only known to the speaker. In the following sentence in example (1) the definite article *the* is used because the speaker is referring to the same doll, and the hearer is now aware of the doll from the previous utterance. The choice of the definite article *the* indicates the semantic condition [+definite], and the choice of the indefinite article *a* indicates [-definite] condition.

2.4 Specificity in Definite and Indefinite English Articles

Ionin (2003) proposes four different combinations of definiteness in the English language articles, which are [+definite, +specific], [+definite, -specific], [-definite, +specific] and [-definite, -specific]. The four different combinations of definiteness in the English language are illustrated in the following sentences:

(2) [+definite, +specific] context

I want to meet the president of Reliance bank – Dr Mustafa.

(3) [+definite, -specific] context

I want to talk to the president of Reliance bank – whoever that happens to be.

In examples (2) and (3) above, although there is no prior mention of the president, the use of the definite article *the* is appropriate in the first sentence. The definite article is used because for both the hearer and the speaker, the presuppositions of uniqueness and existence have been established by world knowledge that in a bank, there can only be one president. The statement following determines if it is specific or non-specific. The first illustration is specific because the referent is specifically referred to by his name Dr Mustafa. The second illustration is non-specific because the speaker has no knowledge of who the referent is.

(4) [-definite, +specific] context

She is having dinner with a friend from college- her best friend Sam Wong.

(5) [-definite, -specific] context

She is having dinner with a friend from college– I don't know which one.

For examples (4) and (5), the use of the indefinite article *a* is pertinent because the friend is mentioned for the first time in the discourse by the speaker. The next statement in example (4) gives

it a specific context because the friend has a notable characteristic of being the referent's best friend while example (5) shows that the speaker does not know the friend.

As shown in the examples above the choice of the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a* in the English language is determined by the definiteness or the indefiniteness of the NP. The feature of specificity does not determine article choice in the English language.

However, in specificity-based languages, such as Samoan, article choice is marked by specificity (Ionin et al., 2004). In the Samoan language article choice is distinguished between specific and non-specific nouns. The Samoan language uses article *le* in [+ specific] contexts and article *se* in [- specific] contexts regardless of whether the NP is definite or indefinite.

2.5 Definiteness in the Tamil Language

The Tamil language does not have articles to encode definiteness and specificity but, like in many other languages other strategies are used to mark definiteness and specificity and definiteness may be determined implicitly from the context (Cumming 1991, cit. in Chan, 1996 and Wong et al., 2007). For the Tamil language, going by the account given by Lehmann (1989) and Pope G.U. (1979:25), it can be basically agreed that there are no exact equivalents for the English articles in Tamil but, they do have the demonstrative determiners and the numeral *one* to mark these concepts in some cases.

There is no exact equivalent for the English definite article in Tamil, but *the* can be closely matched with the determiners *antha* (*that*) and *intha* (*this*) in Tamil. Both Lehmann (1989) and Pope G.U (1979) classify modifiers such as *indta* (*this*) and *andta* (*that*), which are demonstratives, as determiners. These demonstratives precede the noun in an NP and define or describe the referent of a NP depending on the nearness to the speaker. *Indta* (*this*) is the demonstrative that signifies proximity and *andta* (*that*) is the demonstrative determiner that signifies remoteness. English sentences that contain the definite article *the* which precedes a noun that is familiar to both the speaker and the listener, will have demonstratives *antha* (*that*)/*intha* (*this*) as equivalents in the Tamil language. It is noted that *antha* (*that*) is more common in several contexts. For example:

(6) I bought a book. The book was very expensive.
Naan ore puthagam vanginen. Antha puthagam migavum vilai ullathe.
'I one/a book bought. That/the book very expensive was.'

(7) I met him at the Church.
Naan avanai anta/inta aalayattil cantitteen.
'I him that/this church met.'

However, when the definite article does not specifically point out the noun it precedes and is not being used in the sense of a demonstrative, there is zero equivalent to the English definite article in Tamil. The English definite article, used as a result of mutual world knowledge (example 8), does not have any equivalent in Tamil. This is illustrated in the example below:

(8) The sun rises in the east.
Suriyan kizhakil uthikirathu.
'Sun east rises.'

The Tamil language also lacks the indefinite article. English sentences that use the indefinite article as a function word before a singular noun other than the proper noun and mass noun will get *oru* (one) which is also the adjectival form of the cardinal numeral *onru* (one) itself. The adjectival form always occurs in the pre-nominal position while the cardinal numeral always occurs in the post-nominal position. However, Tamil does not have a specific category for *a* and *an*. This is shown in example (9).

- (9) He bought a house.
Avan oru veedu vanginan.
'He a/one house bought.'
Avan veedu ondru vanginan.
'He house one bought.'

When an indefinite article is used to specify an individual as the representative of a group, the Tamil sentence lacks the equivalent form of the English indefinite article. This is shown in example (10):

- (10) A student should respect his teacher.
Maanavan aachiriyarukku mariyathai seluthe vendum.
'__Student teacher respect give should.'

From the above examples and explanation given above, it is clear that the Tamil language is an article-less language and the closest definiteness representative of the English article are the demonstrative determiner *indta* (this) and *andta* (that). The indefinite article in Tamil is also not existent but finds a close expression in the form of the numeral *ore/onru* (one). In many instances, there appears to be no equivalent to the English definite and indefinite article in Tamil.

2.6 Fluctuation Hypothesis

Substantial amount of research on article acquisition have documented that L2 English learners omit articles in both definite and indefinite contexts and misuse articles by substituting the definite article with indefinites and vice versa (Robertson, 2000; Lu, 2001; Ionin et al., 2008; Sun, 2016). Ionin et al. (2004) based on the Article Choice Parameter put forth a parameter-setting explanation in the Fluctuation Hypothesis for the variability in article acquisition among L2 learners.

The Fluctuation Hypothesis explains that L2 learners have UG-constrained L2 grammars and have full access to principles and several settings of the UG parameter. For instance, in L2 English article acquisition, if the L1 and the L2 settings of the parameter are the same, transfer is said to take place. However, if the new L2 setting differs, or is not at all represented in the L1, and L2 learners need to acquire a new setting of the article parameter, the hypothesis claims that during the acquisition process L2 learners will initially fluctuate between the definiteness and specificity parameter settings before sufficient L2 data enables them to set the correct parameter for their L2 grammar. During this acquisition process, Fluctuation Hypothesis claims that the English article errors of learners will be systematic and will be confined to an excessive use of *the* in the [-definite, +specific] category, and an excessive use of *a* in the [+definite, -specific] when both values differ, compared to the [-definite, -specific] and [+definite, +specific] category when both values are the same.

As described and presented above, the semantic classification of languages is a parameter which is part of Universal Grammar (UG). This study examined the pattern of article choice among adult L1 Tamil speakers in Malaysia, to test Ionin's (2003) Fluctuation Hypothesis and establish

whether L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners will fluctuate between the two semantic settings of the Article Choice Parameter.

3.0 Methodology

This study investigated the acquisition of English articles by L1 Tamil L2 English learners in terms of the use of the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a/an*. This study tested the Fluctuation Hypothesis to evaluate if L2 learners have access to semantic universals, specifically definiteness and specificity provided by UG. To test the consistency of this hypothesis, this study used the quantitative research design. The study investigated a group of adult L1 Tamil speakers from Malaysia. All the participants of the study took a standard proficiency test to ascertain their English language proficiency. Then, the participants took a forced-choice elicited production task to test the rate of fluctuation and pattern of definite and indefinite article choice

3.2 Participants

The participants who took part in this study consisted of 90 L1 Tamil L2 English learners. A purposive sampling procedure was used to select qualified participants among L1 Tamil speakers that fit the requirement of this research. First, the participants considered qualified were L1 Tamil adults age 18 years and above, who had acquired Tamil as their mother tongue since they were infants till 6 years of age. This was to ensure that Tamil was their mother tongue during the critical period of language acquisition. Second, the participants had to have started learning the English language in a formal way from 7 years of age and continued learning the language till university level. The mean age of first exposure to English for the L1 Tamil participants was 7.8 (standard deviation 1.3). The average length of formal exposure to the English language was about 13 years. Third, all the participants took an Oxford Placement test (Allan, 1992) to ascertain their English proficiency level. All the participants attained a score of above 50 with a mean score of 79.7 marks out of 100. Based on these criteria, the participants for this study were selected.

3.3 Materials and Procedures

The instruments used in this study was a standard proficiency test which is the Oxford Placement Task (Allan, 1992) to test the English proficiency level of the L1 Tamil speakers. Then, a questionnaire in English was administered to gather participants demographic information. This was followed by a forced-choice elicited production task which was adapted and modelled from the task used in Ionin et al. (2004). The elicitation task was used to test the rate of fluctuation and pattern of definite and indefinite article choice of the L1 Tamil speakers. The forced-choice elicited production task consisted of 40 items. Each item was a short dialogue consisting of a few sentences with one sentence containing a blank that required it to be filled by an article. Participants were asked to choose among the articles given (the, a, an, Ø). The items were divided into four different categories. The categories were definite-specific, indefinite-specific, definite-non-specific and indefinite-non-specific. Each category contained ten items. Below is an example for each of the four categories with the correct article filled in.

Definite/specific

Two friends are chatting

Hayati : Where's your mother?

Azizah : She is meeting _____ the _____ (Ø, a, an, the) principal of my brother's elementary school. He is my mother's friend.

Definite/non-specific

Anita : I'm looking for Hamzah. Is he home?

Angel : Yes, but he is on the phone. He is talking to ___the___ (Ø, a, an, the) owner of his company. I'm not sure who that person is.

Indefinite/specific

Grandfather comes for a visit

Grandfather : Where is my little granddaughter Sue Lee? Is she home?

Father : No... She is playing in the park with ___a___ (Ø, a, an, the) girl from class. Her name is Fatimah and Sue Lee really likes her.

Indefinite/non-specific

Father comes home

Father : Where is Rohit? Is he coming home for dinner?

Mother : No, he is having going for dinner with ___a___ (Ø, a, an, the) college friend. He did not tell me who it is.

The results obtained from the Oxford Placement Task was scored manually while the results from the Forced-Choice Elicitation Production Task was calculated and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0. Percentage, mean and standard deviation for each of the four categories were tabulated and analysed.

4.0 Results

Table 1 reports the elicitation task results of the L1 Tamil speakers in each [+definite, ±specific] article category.

Table 1: Elicitation task Results for L1 Malay Speakers
According to Article Category

| L1 Malay | [+definite] target the | [-definite] target a |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| [+specific] | 78.33 % - the 11.00 % - a/an 10.67 % - Ø | 17.89 % -the 79.33 % - a/an 2.78 % - Ø |
| [-specific] | 74.33 %- the 17.56 % -a/an 8.11 % - Ø | 11.89 % -the 83.33 %- a/an 4.78 % - Ø |

The results in Table 1 shows that the L1 Tamil participants performed most accurately in the [-definite, -specific] category at 83.33% of target article *a* use compared to 79.33% of accurate article *a* use in the [-definite, +specific] category, and exhibited more accuracy in the [+definite, +specific] category at 78.33% target article *the* use compared to 74.33% accurate target article *the* use in the [+definite, -specific] category, when definiteness and specificity were not in discord. However, when definiteness and specificity were in discord, on the categories of (-definite, +specific) and (+definite, -specific), the participants did not perform as accurately because they used *the* and *a* interchangeably. Paired sample t-tests for means showed that the difference in *a* and *the* use for specific and non-specific indefinites and the difference for *a* **and** *the* use for definites is significant at ($p < 0.00$; mean difference

significant at 0.05). Thus, for these learners the specificity effect is clear with both the definites and indefinites.

The above results of the L1 Tamil participants also show three main types of error which are 17.56% *a* overuse in the [+definite, -specific] category compared to 11.00% *a* overuse in the [+definite, +specific] category. Secondly, the results show 17.89% of *the* overuse in the [-definite, +specific] category compared to 11.89% of *the* overuse in the [-definite, -specific] category. Thirdly, the percentage of article omission is at 10.67% for specific definites items and 8.11% for non-specific definites items. Percentage of article omission was below 5% in the indefinites category. The results of the L1 Tamil L2 English participants are consistent with the pattern of article acquisition claimed in the Fluctuation Hypothesis. The pattern of article acquisition shown by these L1 Tamil participants is the excessive use of *a* with (-specific) than with (+specific) definite and the excessive use of *the* with (+specific) than with (-specific) indefinite.

However, the Fluctuation Hypothesis does not seem to address the issue of article omission errors which were found in the acquisition of articles by the learners in this study. A possible interpretation for article omission could be the absence of the inventory of functional projections, including definiteness D from UG in the initial state grammar of these article-less respondents (Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008). The results of the L1 Tamil L2 English respondents also registered higher error patterns of article omission for the definite items compared to indefinite items. The reasons for this maybe that the respondents had not understood how definiteness is represented in definite contexts. The variability of form in the input may have given rise to variability of mapping from representation to forms in the speakers' L2 grammars (Sarko, 2009, p.60).

5.0 Discussion

The results of the study revealed that the pattern of article choice of the L1 Tamil speakers exhibited more accuracy in the [-definite, -specific] and [+definite, +specific] categories when the definiteness and specificity was in accord but did not perform as accurately in the [-definite, +specific] and [+definite, -specific] categories when definiteness and specificity were in discord. It is observed that the L1 Tamil speakers made systematic article misuse errors in the pattern of article choice. They made errors of excessive use of *a* with non-specific definites and excessive use of *the* with specific definites when definiteness and specificity were in conflict compared to when definiteness and specificity were in accord. Example (11) below illustrates the (+definite, -specific) item where a high percentage of L1 Tamil respondents had responded inaccurately and were found to have substituted the target article with the indefinite article *a/an*:

(11): [+definite, -specific]

A student is talking to a students' affairs officer.

Student : Hi! I have some health problems, so I have to get permission to be absent for this term. May I know the procedure?

Officer : First, you need to bring me a formal letter from _the_(Ø, a, an, the) head of your department if a new one has been appointed.

In Example (11), *the head of your department*, the data registered a high rate of article *a* overuse at 46.7% for the L1 Tamil participants. This item was a non-specific definite which contained a definite description with a non-unique referent, *the head of your department*. It is assumed that if the L2 English learners in this study had assumed that offices have multiple heads of department, they could have treated the definite Determiner Phrase (DP) in Example (11) as an indefinite, and hence they overused *a*. The results of the L1 Tamil respondents seemed to indicate that, similar to the data gathered from

the comprehension task in Ionin et al.'s (2009) study which involved L1 Mandarin Chinese L2 English learners English, the L1 Tamil participants were not sensitive to different ways of establishing uniqueness although they knew that the semantic concept of uniqueness is at the core of definiteness. Compared to Ionin et al.'s (2009) study, the results of the respondents of this study seemed to indicate that the L1 Tamil respondents faced difficulty and were not good at establishing uniqueness even through association in a definite DP.

Example (12) below illustrates the (-definite, +specific) item where a high percentage of L1 Tamil respondents had responded inaccurately and were found to have substituted the target article *a* with the definite article *the*:

(12): [-definite,+specific]

Husband and wife are on the phone.

Husband : Siti, I'll be late for dinner tonight because I'm going to meet
_____ (Ø, a, an, the) friend from my last job, Johan.

Wife : Ok dear.

For this item, the prediction was that the L1 Tamil respondents would be able to supply the correct indefinite article or opt for article omission. This is based on the fact that L1 Tamil transfer of *ore Ātai (a dress)/ore Vāṭikkaiyālar (a client)/ore pannapai/puttakam (a wallet/book) ore/Ø nanpan (a friend)* requires the numeral *ore-one* to be used to precede the noun. The *ore-one* functions almost like the indefinite article *a* or zero article to precede a noun that functions as a singular noun, such as *nanpan/nanpargal (friend/friends)*. However, the data from the L1 Tamil participants for this item indicated otherwise. This finding is consistent with and supports the Fluctuation Hypothesis which states that error in L2 data stems from the learners fluctuating between two or more parameter settings. However, the data revealed that the respondents did not adopt the L1 nor the correct L2 setting.

The results revealed that the L1 Tamil speakers have full UG access and were influenced by specificity in article misuse which cannot be attributed to L1 transfer or L2 input. L1 Tamil speakers come from article-less L1s and L2 English article input is based on the definiteness value, yet they exhibited specificity effects both with definites and indefinites. The same pattern was also found in earlier studies on adult L2 English learners from article-less L1s (Ionin et al., 2008; Trenkic, 2008). Thus, the results suggested that the interlanguage grammars of these learners exhibited UG access to the article semantics parameter of definiteness and specificity. The L1 Tamil speakers exhibited fluctuation in article choice between the two binary values, which is consistent with the Fluctuation Hypothesis. According to the Fluctuation Hypothesis, in the non-availability of L1 transfer, L2 learners have access to both semantics universals of definiteness and specificity but do not know which article parameter to set. In the article acquisition process, they fluctuate between the two parameters and sometimes tend to treat article *the* as marking definiteness and at other times as marking specificity. As a result, they perform better in the specific definite category when both options are the same compared to the non-specific definite when the options are in conflict. For the L1 Tamil speakers in this study, the data revealed that they had UG access to both the settings of the Article Choice Parameter and exhibited fluctuation between the settings consistent with the Fluctuation Hypothesis.

The pattern of article choice of the L1 Tamil speakers also revealed article omission. The Fluctuation Hypothesis does not explain article omission but article omission among these learners is illustrated in example (13) below:

- (13) [+definite, -specific]
 ...because the coach didn't choose Susanna
 ...yennendral paitrunar avalai therve seiyavillai
 ...#because coach her select didn't

In the Tamil language, there is no equivalent to the definite article for this type of sentence. The definite article for this item is also not used in the sense of a demonstrative; as such, it is assumed that the choice of the 'zero article' was an indication of article omission, indicating some sort of a negative transfer from the L1. It was also noted that article omission error for example (13) was lower at 23.3% compared to article misuse at 37.6% for the same item. This indicates that for L1 Tamil speakers in this study, negative L1 transfer exist, but fluctuation overrides negative L1 transfer in article acquisition.

6.0 Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, these conclusions can be drawn. In L2 article acquisition, this study revealed that UG access was available to adult L1 Tamil speakers. The predictions of the Fluctuation Hypothesis are applicable to L2 acquisition of English articles by Tamil speakers. L1 Tamil L2 English learners initially exhibited fluctuation between the definiteness and specificity settings in their article acquisition process until sufficient L2 input lead them to the accurate definiteness parameter of the English article. In English article acquisition, L1 transfer of article semantics is not available to the article-less L1 Tamil speakers, as such their source of knowledge for second language acquisition of English articles is mainly L2 input and UG. Although negative L1 transfer exist but for these learners the fluctuation effect was found to override negative transfer effects. This research has provided an important understanding of article semantics in L2 acquisition and the pattern of article choice among L1 Tamil L2 English learners. The pattern of article choice observed among these learners contributes to current literature in favour of access to UG in SLA. The knowledge of the pattern of article choice of L1 Tamil L2 English learners is an important pedagogical tool that can be used by ESL instructors, so that better teaching strategies and methodologies can be adopted to help these learners overcome difficulties faced in the acquisition of English articles.

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