

A corpus-based analysis of the acquisition of the English article system:

Contrasting French, Spanish, Russian and Greek learners of English

Words: 521

Since the advent of corpus linguistics, the study of the acquisition of the English article system has aroused considerable interest. Researchers agree that, even though English articles have a high frequency of occurrence, their acquisition remains a thorny area of the English grammar. Many important areas of the article system still have to be explored to obtain a complete picture of the phenomenon and provide more fine-tuned pedagogical tools for specific learners' populations.

The overarching goal of the study is to better understand the processes at play in the acquisition of the English article system by non-native speakers of English, namely French, Spanish, Russian and Greek students. Analyzing usage-based data, we aim to pin down the areas of the article system that pose problems to learners of English and try to identify the possible causes of such problems. The analysis is based on Bickerton's initial taxonomy (1981) and each article, be it correctly used or not, is manually classified according to an improved version of Díez-Bedmar & Papp (2008)'s tagging system (see tables 1 and 2). The focus on both correctly and incorrectly used articles makes it possible to get a precise picture of learners' mastery of that specific language feature.

The investigation has put forward that the most problematic area, irrespective of the mother tongue background, is related to the zero article as learners often use a definite article instead of a zero article with non-referential nouns. Results nonetheless show a different error profile for each language group. Russian learners have difficulties in correctly using the definite article with definite referents. They tend to inappropriately use the zero or indefinite article. This suggests that Russian learners, deprived of any signpost in their native language, still experience problems in grasping the correct English pattern of use of the definite and indefinite articles. Greek learners of English mainly produce one type of error, viz. the incorrect use of the definite article instead of a zero article. They perform quite accurately in their use of the other articles. Spanish and French learners of English present a similar error profile as both groups have, besides the shared problematic area, difficulties in correctly using the English articles in generic contexts.

Our analysis of cross-linguistic influences on learners' production has revealed that specificities of the L1 do not necessarily negatively impact the use of the English article system: for instance, Greek students use an indefinite article before proper nouns in their mother tongue but do not irrelevantly use an article before proper nouns in English. Second, apparent similarities between two languages can prove challenging for students. In Spanish, the use of the zero article is accepted in some contexts. Yet results indicate that Spanish students seem confused by this partial similarity between their L1 and English as they produce a larger number of errors in their selection of the zero article. Third, instances of positive transfer have also been clearly identified. Russian learners of English experience fewer difficulties than the other three groups in correctly using the zero article. The annotation system and detailed results will be presented in the talk and pedagogical implications briefly addressed.

1. Bibliography

Bickerton, D. 1981. *Roots of language*. Ann Arbor: Karoma Publishers.

Díez Bedmar, M.B. & Papp, S. 2008. The use of the English article system by Chinese and Spanish learners. *Linking up contrastive and learner corpus research*. Amsterdam/New York, Rodopi, 147-170.

2. Tables

Table 1. Tagging system for the correct uses of articles (Díez-Bedmar & Papp 2008)

Article used by the learner				
	Context 1	Context 2	Context 3	Context 4
Definite article	1DA	2DA		
Indefinite article	1IA		3IA	4IA
Zero article	1ZA		3ZA	4ZA

Table 2. Error tagging system for articles adapted from Díez-Bedmar & Papp (2008)

Article used by the learner					
	Context 1	Context 2	Context 3	Context 4	Context 5
Definite article	D1GAIA D1GAZA	D2GAZA D2GAIA			5GAIE
Indefinite article	I1GADA I1GAZA		I3GADA I3GAZA	I4GADA I4GAZA	
Zero article	Z1GADA Z1GAIA		Z3GADA Z3GAIA	Z4GADA Z4GAIA	