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ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH ARTICLE SYSTEM
BY POLISH LEARNERS
IN DIFFERENT PROFICIENCY GROUPS

The aim of my article will be the analysis of the results of the empirical research concerning the process of acquisition of English article system by Polish learners, carried out at three different levels of L2 acquisition.

English articles, as a semantic category non-existent in Polish, constitute a notorious source of difficulties in their acquisition by Poles. Polish learners of English at the beginning of their education, being at the elementary level, do not actually acquire articles because of the lack of associations with Polish counterparts. The semantics of English articles differs while compared to Polish, where instead of the articles: *a/an*, *the* demonstrative pronouns occur, e.g. *ten (this)*, *tamten (that)* or there exists a different word order, different intonation, verbal aspects and many other syntactic-semantic processes.

While teaching English, we may easily observe that the process of acquisition of English article system by Polish learners differs depending on the level of advancement in learning English.

In my article I would like to familiarize the addressees with the question of acquisition of articles by young teenagers, late teenagers and young adults. I hope the results of my research will evoke an interesting source for scientific discourse.

1. Introduction

1.1. Acquisition of English article system by L2 learners – a theoretical background

The English article system, which comprises the indefinite article *a / an*, the definite article *the* and the zero article, is one of the most difficult structural elements for L2 learners to be acquired, causing even the most advanced non-native speakers of English to make errors. These errors occur even when other elements of the language seem to have been mastered. According to Master (2002), the difficulty results from three principle facts about the article system:

(a) articles constitute the most frequently occurring function words in English (Celcie-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999), making continuous rule application difficult over an extended stretch of discourse;

(b) function words are normally unstressed and consequently are very difficult, if not impossible, for a non-native speaker of English to notice, thus affecting the availability of input in the spoken mode;

(c) the article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme, or constitutes a considerable burden for the learner, who generally looks for a one-form-one--function correspondence while learning the language until the advanced stages of acquisition.

The difficulties inherent in the foreign/second language learning processes constitute the complexity of the target system. From a language processing perspective it appears reasonable to state that function words, unlike content words, are generally overlooked by learners when processing language primarily for meaning. In the case of articles, the difficulty of meaning is determined by the novelty and abstractness of the concept (Pienemann, 1998). Learners' changing hypotheses about article usage at different stages in interlanguage development, as well as the influence of the first language (L1), complicate the task even more.

There has been an enormous amount of research carried out pertaining to the processes of L2 acquisition of English articles. Research on article acquisition in English language learning comprises two areas: pedagogy and its effectiveness on the one hand, and the process of acquisition on the other hand.

This article tests the process of the acquisition of the English article system by Polish native speakers (learning English for some years as their L2) at three different proficiency levels: elementary, intermediate and advanced, it analyses the percentage of acquired article type juxtaposed with different proficiency level of subjects as well as it indicates mean proportion disparity of unnecessary use of *zero*, *the* and *a* across proficiency levels.

2. History of research on articles

There has been an extensive research on L2 acquisition of articles, although often fragmentary, concentrating on separate features of the English article system (Chaudron & Parker, 1990; Goto Butler, 2002; Jarvis, 2002; Kharma, 1981; Liu & Gleason, 2002, Mizuno, 1999; Yamada & Matsuura, 1982; Yoon, 1993). Some studies that have brought important findings (Hakuta, 1976; Huebner, 1979, 1983; Tarone, 1985), were not specifically on article acquisition, but on the acquisition of grammatical morphemes in general. Only Master (1987), Parrish (1987), Tarone & Parrish (1988), and Thomas (1989) studied the acquisition of articles exclusively. In terms of the terminology specific to article acquisition research, the early studies focused mostly at the presence or absence of articles in obligatory contexts. It was Huebner (1983) who opened a new avenue of research on L2 article acquisition by employing Bickerton's (1981) noun classification system. Huebner did not only look at the presence or absence of articles

in obligatory contexts, but he also analysed various types of noun phrases and the articles used with each semantic type, as well as the development of foreign language learners' grasp of the article system.

From these sources, some preliminary generalizations emerge concerning the development of article use by L2 learners. Master (1987) was the first to point out that articles seem to be acquired differently, depending on whether or not they occur in the learner's L1. The definite article *the* emerges early and *a* later in L2 acquisition (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989). *The* may be overgeneralized. Both Huebner and Master call this phenomenon '*the-flooding*', although neither of them defines the notion, except generally as a dramatic rise in usage. The researchers find *the* dominating in [+ SR, + HK], [- SR, + HK] and [+ SR, - HK], (e.g. referential indefinites and definites as well as generics) contexts. Thomas (1989), on the other hand, was of the opinion that the *zero* article overgeneralized across proficiency levels.

For the learners whose L1s lack articles [-ART], e.g. Polish, researchers (Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987) reported that *zero* dominates in all environments for articles in the early stages of L2 acquisition. Parrish (1987) proposed that the *zero* article was acquired first, followed by the definite article, and finally the indefinite article. Similarly, Master (1997) concluded that, '*the first article that seems to be acquired by [-ART] speakers is **zero**'* (p. 216). However, he admitted that since researchers cannot tell the difference between the *zero* article and non-use or omission of the article, '*acquisition is largely by default*' (p. 216). Master's data showed that *zero* accuracy is close to 100% for the low-ability level participants, which then drops, and rises to nearly 100% again for the high-ability level participants. Master also reports that overuse of *zero* decreases with an increase in proficiency level, although the overuse of *zero* persists more than overuse of the other articles.

Liu and Gleason (2002) reexamined Master's data and offered a new interpretation of the overuse of the *zero* article and underuse of *a* and *the*:

'*this overuse of the zero article and the underuse of <u>the</u> at the advanced stage would suggest that the two articles are acquired rather late*' (p. 5).

This hypothesis is supported by Young's (1996) data on the use of articles by Czech and Slovak [-ART] learners of English. Definiteness was not encoded by *the* at the early stages of acquisition. That problem persisted even more at the more advanced stages. However, at all levels of proficiency, participants encoded indefiniteness by means of the indefinite article *a*, and the pattern became more consistent as acquisition progressed.

Summing up, it has to be stated that the previous investigations into the acquisition of English articles by [-ART] speakers have brought somewhat conflicting results. The early research findings (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989) suggest the integration of the definite article into the learner's interlanguage before the integration of the indefinite article. Liu and Gleason (2002) and Young (1996), however, conclude the opposite: early and accurate control of the indefinite article. Another controversy generated by the research relates to the interpretation of *zero* article overproduction. Master's (1997) and Parrish's (1987) '*acquisition by default*'

position with regard to *zero* article overuse fails to account for L1 transfer effects at the initial stages of adult L2 acquisition, which is especially severe for [- ART] speakers. Thomas (1989) described a very similar phenomenon occurring in her data as '*the zero article overgeneralization, or equivalently, failure to use any article*' (p. 349).

3. Classification of noun phrases

Article acquisition research traditionally begins by identifying contexts for the appearance of articles. Huebner's (1983) classification (which itself was based on Bickerton, 1981), has been one of the most widely used models for the analysis of English noun phrase (NP) environments.

In Huebner's model, the use of English articles is determined by the semantic function of the noun phrase in discourse. In accordance with this model, English noun phrases are classified by two discourse features of referentiality – namely, whether a noun is a specific referent [+/- SR], and whether it is assumed as known to the hearer [+/- HR]. These two aspects of referentiality thus give rise to four basic noun phrase contexts that determine article use. Nouns classified as Type 1, [-SR, +HK] are generics, and are marked with *a*, *the* and *zero*. Nouns classified as Type 2, [+SR, +HK] are referential definites and are marked with *the*. Type 3, [+SR, -HK], contains first mention nouns, whose referent is identifiable to the speaker but not to the listener, e.g. nouns that the speaker is entering into the discourse for the first time. These are marked with *a* or *zero*. Type 4 nouns, classified as [-SR, -HK] are nonreferentials. This type contains nouns that are nonspecific for both the speaker and the hearer; *a* and *zero* are the relevant articles. Except for these four types, idiomatic expressions and conventional uses were classified as Type 5, based on Goto Butler (2002) and Thomas (1989).

4. Research purpose

The purpose of my research was to test the order of acquisition of the English article system by Polish learners (the users of [-ART] L1) in different proficiency groups (elementary, intermediate and advanced), to find the differences in the acquisition of articles among three groups of subjects and to indicate the difference in article use as well as to analyze the results of empirical research by means of statistics.

5. Research method

60 Polish learners participated in the study. These were 20 elementary level 2nd grade junior high school learners, 20 intermediate level 2nd grade high school learners and 20 3rd year students at the English Philology. All subjects had some experience in English, but the difference in the level of English resulted from former diverse exposure to this language.

6. Instrument

The instrument consisted of fifty sentences adapted from Goto Butler (2002), Liu & Gleason (2002) and Master (1994). These were a total of 87 deleted obligatory uses of *a/an*, *the* or *zero* in 5 semantic types described earlier. The subjects were given written instruction to correctly complete the test. They had to read the sentences carefully and complete them with an appropriate article.

7. Data analysis

In order to understand the results, the author of the research test carried out the analysis of article use: *a/an*, *the* and *zero* article in obligatory contexts.

In order to understand how the subjects acquire English articles, the author of the research carried out percentage calculations of the correct answers for each semantic article type and for each level the subjects represented.

In order to indicate the developmental sequences for each semantic article type, the percentage results of the correct answers were shown in the table.

Moreover, the analysis of the order of acquisition of articles: *a*, *the* and *zero* was carried out.

Finally, the results of the research were evaluated by means of statistics.

8. Results

Article use by Polish learners at three different proficiency levels is shown in the tables below. It contains the results categorized in accordance with types of obligatorily used contexts. They are juxtaposed with three different proficiency levels of Polish learners.

Table 1. Tabular Illustration of Results – the Percent of Acquired Article Type

LEVEL	Type 1: Generics [-SR, +HK] (a, the, 0), e.g. 0 Fruit flourishes in the valley.	Type 2: Referenti – al definite S [+SR, +HK] (the) e.g. Pass me the pen.	Type 3: Referential indefinites [+SR, -HK] (a, 0), e.g. Chris approached me carrying a dog.	Type 4: Nonreferentials [-SR, -HK] (a, 0) e.g. Alice is a dancer.	Type 5: Idioms (a, the, 0) e.g. All of a sudden, he belched.
Elementary	**47,5%**	**50,2%**	**74%**	**58,5%**	**27,8%**
Intermediate	**66,2%**	**70%**	**75,3%**	**78,7%**	**46,8%**
Advanced	**71,8%**	**85%**	**92%**	**87%**	**68,1%**

A number of interesting facts result from the data. The most difficult article type to acquire for subjects across all proficiency levels was Type 5 (idiomatic expressions and conventional uses) – the percentage of correct answers is shown in red colour above, 27,8% for the elementary group, 46,8% for intermediate group and 68,1% for the advanced group. The difficulty related to acquisition of this article type is due to the fact that the subjects lacked sufficient exposure to this type of article.

Type 3 (referential indefinites) was acquired properly by all groups of subjects, similar percentage of acquisition is reflected in elementary (74%) and intermediate groups (75,3%) with a slightly higher result in the advanced group of subjects (92%). As far as the acquisition of this article type is concerned, it was clearly visible that the subjects were aware of usage of indefinite and zero articles.

Type 1 (generics) was properly acquired in two groups of learners – intermediate (66,2%) and advanced (71,8%). Elementary group scored worse in this type, presenting only 47,5% of correct answers. Elementary level subjects were unable to react properly to this article type, they chose the article randomly.

Type 2 (referential definites) and Type 4 (nonreferentials) were acquired properly at two higher levels (intermediate – 70 %, advanced – 85 % for Type 2; intermediate – 78,7%, advanced – 87% for Type 4). Here, as in the case of Type 1, elementary level students proved to grasp referential definite insufficiently (Type 2) – just 50,2% and 58,5% for nonreferentials (Type 4).

The analysis of the order of acquisition of articles: *a*, *the* and *zero* was carried out and is illustrated by Table 2 below.

Table 2. Mean Proportion Disparity of Unnecessary *Zero*, *the* and *a* by Proficiency Level

ARTICLE	ELEMENTARY	INTERMEDIATE	ADVANCED
zero	10,4%	10,4%	7,9%
the	11,7%	9,5%	5,6%
a	21,5%	11,8%	3,9%

Elementary level students found the indefinite article *a* (symbolized by a red colour in the table) the most difficult article type to acquire, later it was *the* and the easiest article turned out to be *zero*.

In the intermediate group of subjects, the situation was similar. The definite article *a* was the most difficult, later *zero* article and the easiest was *the*.

In the advanced group, however, the most difficult article was *zero*, later *the* and finally the indefinite article *a* (symbolized by a green colour in the table) was found as the easiest article type.

The results of the empirical research on English article system are illustrated below by a statistical tool ANOVA. All the results are statistically highly significant.

Table 3. Global Juxtaposition Among Groups
$F_{(2,57)} = 23.480, p = 0.0000**$

Group; LS Means
Current effect: F(2,57) = 23,480, p = ,00000
Effective hypothesis decomposition
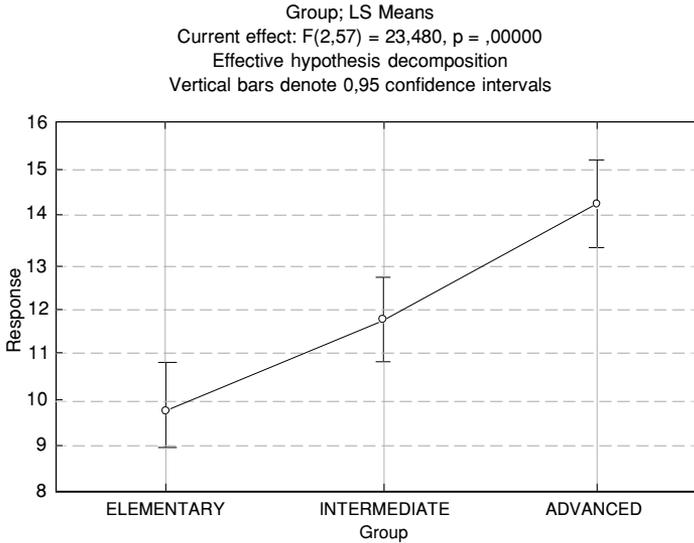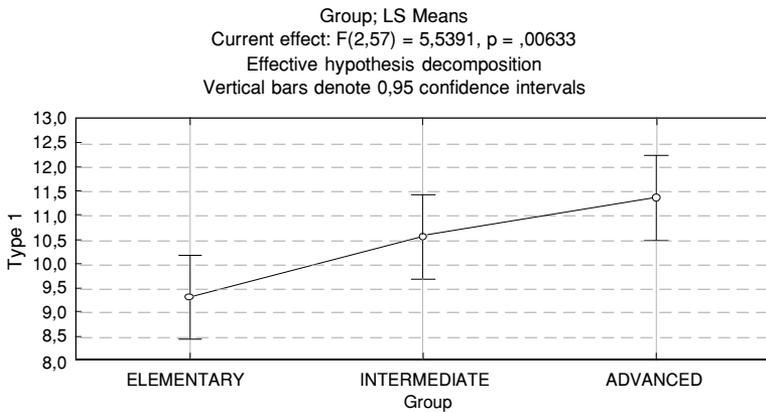Vertical bars denote 0,95 confidence intervals

Table 3 above indicates highly noticeable differences among three groups of Polish learners. The advanced group obtained the highest overall score in comparison with two remaining groups of learners: elementary and intermediate ones.

Table 4. Comparison of Groups for Particular Types of Article
Type 1 $F_{(2,57)} = 5.5391, p = 0.00633**$

Group; LS Means
Current effect: F(2,57) = 5,5391, p = ,00633
Effective hypothesis decomposition
Vertical bars denote 0,95 confidence intervals

Type 1 [-SR, +HK] – generics, has been acquired best by the advanced group of testees. However, as the statistical result illustrates there were no significant differences between the advanced and the intermediate group in the proper use of this ar-

ticle type. One can notice a significant difference between the elementary group and the other remaining groups in using English articles.
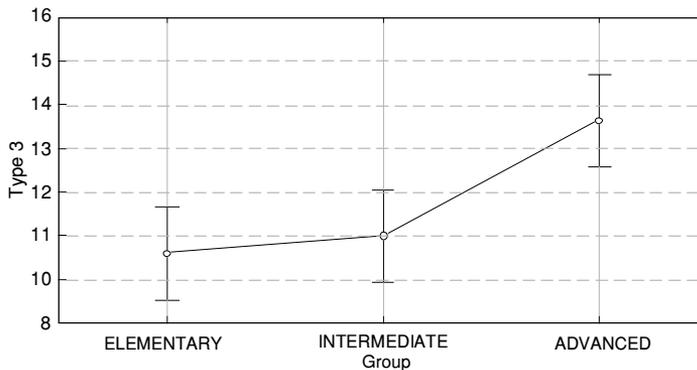
Table 5. Type 2
F(2,57) = 42.357, p = 0.0000**

Group; LS Means
Current effect: F(2,57) = 42,357, p = ,00000
Effective hypothesis decomposition
Vertical bars denote 0,95 confidence intervals
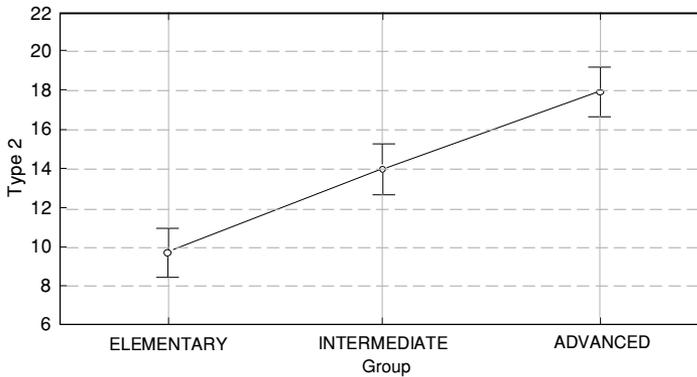
Type 2 [+SR, +HK] referential definites, has been acquired best by the advanced group of learners as well. With this type of article there were significant differences between advanced and intermediate group in its use. One can notice a significant difference between an elementary group and the other remaining groups in using English articles, which is similar to Type 1.
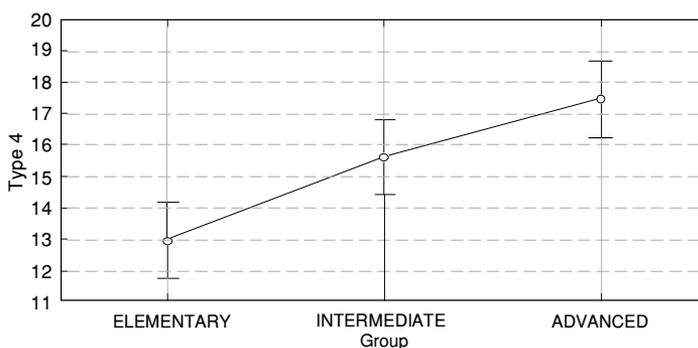
Table 6. Type 3
F(2,57) = 9.8697, p = 0.0002**

Group; LS Means
Current effect: F(2,57) = 9,8697, p = ,00021
Effective hypothesis decomposition
Vertical bars denote 0,95 confidence intervals

Type 3 [+SR, -HK], containing first mention nouns, has been acquired best by the advanced group of subjects as before. Although there were significant differences between advanced and intermediate group in its use, one could not notice any remarkable difference between elementary and intermediate groups of students in appropriate use of this type of article.

Table 7. Type 4
$F(2,57) = 14.131$, $p = 0.000$**

Group; LS Means
Current effect: $F(2,57) = 14,131$, $p = ,00001$
Effective hypothesis decomposition
Vertical bars denote 0,95 confidence intervals

Type 4 (illustrated above), classified as [-SR, -HK] and comprising nonreferentials, has been again acquired best by the advanced group of subjects. Although there were no significant differences between advanced and intermediate group in its use, one could easily observe significant differences between elementary and two remaining groups of students in appropriate use of this type of article.

Table 8. Type 5
$F(2,57) = 28.275$, $p = 0.000$**

Group; LS Means
Current effect: $F(2,57) = 28,275$, $p = ,00000$
Effective hypothesis decomposition
Vertical bars denote 0,95 confidence intervals
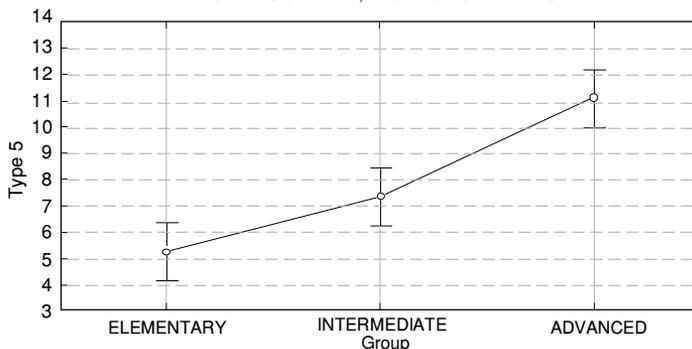
Type 5 (illustrated above), possessing idiomatic expressions and conventional uses, has been acquired best by the advanced group of subjects, which occurred earlier. However, this kind of article turned out to be extremely difficult for the elementary group to use and acquire. The intermediate group of subjects coped with this article type slightly better. The advanced group, scoring best as usual, found this type of article the most difficult to use and acquire of all other types described above.

9. Conclusions

The study described in this article has provided a rather general evidence in support of the hypothesis that the sequence of L2 article acquisition mostly reflects the L1 natural order of article acquisition.

It is clearly visible that the elementary group of subjects had problems with acquisition of articles and their types as well as with the proper use of the corresponding articles in English, indicating a visible transfer from their L1 and obviously lacking fluency in article use. Two other groups of subjects – intermediate and advanced – proved to be quite proficient in article use, which is clearly indicated in the tables above.

The research was carried out by means of a cloze type test. Therefore, only written data was available to the researcher. Collecting spontaneous oral data from the subjects in the future to calculate research results on the acquisition of English article system by non-native [-ART] learners of English would enrich the scope of the research, and it is an issue of some upcoming publications.

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