

The Acquisition of the English Article System: A Case Study*

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This paper reports the findings of a longitudinal study that investigated the acquisition of articles in English L2 by a thirteen-year old learner who had previously received no explicit article instruction. Data were taken from the subjects journal writing, collected over 27 successive 1-2 week periods for nine months. The major findings are (1) accuracy in article usage increased with proficiency; (2) zero articles were overgenerated to all Noun Phrase environments at an early stage; (3) the most frequent was the marking of shared knowledge NPs with zero articles. It is argued that transfer from L1 without an article system explains the tendency of overusing zero.

Key Words: SLA, longitudinal study, article, morpheme study

1. Introduction

The English article system is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for students of English as a second language to understand. Although the articles rarely cause misunderstanding when misused in spoken English, ESL/EFL students are faced with difficulties in article use when they have to write, realizing that they lack the basic concepts required to choose the correct article. Even students at advanced proficiency levels, after years of exposure to usage rules through classroom instruction and textbooks, seldom attain mastery of the article system.¹⁾

1) According to Kharma (1981), Arab university students with 12 years of academic learning scored only as high as 71.2 percent on a test which does not

The difficulty of learning English articles has been reported in a number of studies (Celce-Murcia and Larson-Freeman 1999; Pica 1983; Parrish 1987; Robertson 2000; Master 1993, 1995; Yoon 1993; Young 1996 and others). For example, Celce-Murcia and Larson-Freeman, citing Covitts (1976) survey of ESL teachers, point out that article usage was their[ESL teachers] number one problem and they feel that this result would still be true today if the survey were repeated (p. 295).

Many researchers have analyzed the difficulties of English article acquisition from the perspective of interlanguage variation. Robertson, in his recent study of the use of articles by advanced Chinese speakers, claims that a range of linguistic and pragmatic factors account for missing articles in contexts in which a native speaker would use one. Robertson (2000: 135) suggests that the L2 learners lack of consistency in article use may be due to learners difficulty with the multiple surface morphological realizations of the abstract features of the noun phrase in English. Tarone and Parrish (1988), investigating task-related variability in interlanguage in terms of accuracy, recognize that learners show more accurate use of articles when narrating stories than in interviews. They argue that higher accuracy in a narrative is due to the greater need for clear anaphoric tracking of referents.

As stressed by Young (1996: 136), part of the problem for learners lies in the complex relationships between form and function: Similar meanings are expressed by different forms, as exemplified in (1).

- (1) Chapter 4 of *Biological Foundations of Language* presented what has since been called the critical-period hypothesis. It suggested that *the brain* is able to learn *a primary language* during a certain early period, . . .

In (1), the definite article, *the*, marks *the brain* with the generic meaning, as does the indefinite article, *a*, in *a primary language*.

incorporate some of the most difficult uses of those articles (p. 341).

A further difficulty for learners is noted by Master (1990), who claims that the difficulty experienced by learners lies in the relationship between articles and number. As Master describes it, the countability and the number of the noun is one way where indefinite and zero articles are distinguished: the article *a(n)* cannot be used with plural count nouns or with non-count nouns. Yoon (1993) argues that the choice of an indefinite article by second language learners depends on their perception of noun countability. The Japanese subjects in Yoon's study were asked to judge intuitively the nouns extracted from essays in terms of countability and then to supply articles as needed. The results suggest that non-native speakers have difficulties using indefinite articles because mass and count nouns are not always easily distinguishable to them.

Some situations in which English learners find confusing are those where mis-specification of the countability or number of the noun occurs. The assignment of [+count] to a noun in interlanguage can differ from the target language such as in (2) through (4).

- (2) There were many big *fishes* in the river.
- (3) Mr. Dusley was forced to buy *a* cheap *ice cream* for Harry.
- (4) I have *many homeworks* to do today.

It may be possible that those speakers whose first language does not have an article system experience more difficulty in mastering the English article system than those whose L1 has articles. Researchers have been interested in determining how the learners without L1 article system use English articles to distinguish among NP contexts, that is, (i) to indicate whether a NP refers to a specific or nonspecific entity and (ii) to indicate whether speakers/writers assume that the referent of a NP is known to the hearer/reader or not (Chaudron and Parker 1990; Master 1993, 1995; Mizuno 1999; Parrish 1987; Tarone and Parrish 1988; Hakuta 1976; Huebner 1979). However, it is a fact that there are not many longitudinal studies about the acquisition of the English article system by beginning learners in a natural setting. The attention of the

majority of researchers has focused on advanced learners in academic situations. The research reported here is on second language learning of an adolescent, focusing on what he learns of the English article system at different stages of his interlanguage development.

2. The NP in English and Korean

This section examines areas where there are differences in the noun phrases between English and Korean. The focus is on the marking of (in)definiteness²⁾ and number.

A number of scholars have used his system (Huebner 1983; Parrish 1987; Robertson 2001; Young 1998), since Bickerton (1981) analyzed the semantic function of NP in terms of two binary features: [\pm specific referent], [\pm information assumed known to the hearer]. The former indicates that speakers refer to a specific entity or nonspecific entity, while the latter indicates whether they assume that the referent of a NP is known to the hearer or not. Table 1 illustrates the four NP types in terms of these two features and the article used in conjunction with each NP, in Standard English. In English, articles are the principal means used to distinguish among the four NP contexts.

2) A definite NP is one that is known to the speaker and the hearer; otherwise, a NP is indefinite.

Table 1. Four NP type categories and their semantic functions in Standard English (after Bickerton, 1981)

Features of NP types	Articles
[-Specific Referent][+Hearer Knowledge]	<i>the, a, zero</i>
[+Specific Referent][+Hearer Knowledge]	
Unique referent	
Referent physically present	<i>the</i>
Referent previously mentioned	
Specific referents assumed known to hearer	
[+Specific Referent][-Hearer Knowledge]	<i>a, zero</i>
[-Specific Referent][-Hearer Knowledge]	<i>a, zero</i>

As mentioned earlier, the Korean language does not have functional equivalents of the English article. Here a question is raised: How can the semantic and pragmatic distinction of a NP be marked in Korean? Unlike English, Korean allows the use of zero anaphora or full NPs, rather than pronouns, when NPs refer to referents previously mentioned in the discourse or otherwise recoverable from the context. Drawing on Chu's (1998) study on the function of zero anaphor in topic chains³⁾ in Mandarin Chinese, Yang (2001:83-84) argues that much the same holds true in Korean. Observe his example⁴⁾:

- (5) a. Yewu-nun mwul-ul masilyeko
fox-TP water-ACC drink:PURP
b. 0 mom-ul kuwpwulyess-supnita.
body-ACC bend:PST:FE
c. Kulentey kuman 0 pal-I mikkulecye
DM by mistake foot-NM slide:CONN

3) Chu (1998: 329) defines topic chain as a set of clauses linked by a topic in the form of zero anaphor.

4) TP: topic marker, DM: discourse marker, CONN: connective, LOC: locative, NM: nominative, ACC: accusative, PURP: purposive, FE: formal ending

- d. 0 wumwul sok-ey ppačko malass-supnita.
 well inside-LOC fall-into AUX:PST:FE

In (5), the referent *yewu* fox is introduced in (5a). Yang (2001: 83–84) argues that this referent is established as the topic in (5b) and its topic status continues by the help of a zero anaphor in each of the following clauses, i.e., (5c) and (5d).

Korean speakers tend to use full NPs to refer to minor participants even after the referents were introduced into the discourse. As proposed in Clancy's (1980) study on Japanese narrative, this use in Korean serves not only to avoid ambiguity but also to indicate the peripheral status of the participants as compared to the main participant. The following example illustrates this use:

- (6) a. cip-ulo okoiss-nuntey, Tony-lang pwuticyesse.
 home-to come:CONN -and run into: PST:SE
 b. Tony-lang gang-i cocawasse. Tahaenghito, kyengcal-lul mannasse.
 -and -NM chase:PST:SE fortunately, cop-ACC meet:PST:SE
 c. Tony-lang gang-un tomangkako cip-ey wasse.
 -and -NM run away:PST:CONN home-LOC come:PST:SE

When (Kevin and Max) were going home, (they) ran into Tony. Tony and his gangs chased (them). Fortunately, (they) met a cop. Tony and the gang ran away and (they) could go home.

In (6), the main participants, *Kevin and Max*, are encoded by zero anaphors throughout the discourse, since they have been previously introduced. Note that *Tony and the gang* with the peripheral status is repeatedly encoded by the full NP, rather than the zero anaphor.

Demonstratives *i* this and *ku* that can be used to mark definiteness and *han(a)* one is used to signify indefiniteness, as shown in (7).

- (7) a. Uche han sonyun-ul mannassta. Ku sonyun-un chungmal kessta.
 yesterday one boy-ACC meet:PST. the boy-NM really tall:PST
 (I) met a boy yesterday. The boy was really tall.

- b. enchaenka han shiin-i haengbok-eykwanhae malhaessta.
 Once one poet-NM happiness about say:PST:SE
 A poet once said about happiness.

Since Korean does not require the use of determiners to signify definiteness and indefiniteness, an unmarked NP can still be interpreted as definite or indefinite, depending on the context of discourse. In the following example, the interpretation of NP is dependent on the context:

- (8) mae-ka pyungari1-lul po-ko naeri tepchese
 hawk-NM chicken-ACC see:CONN down swoop:PST:CONN
 pyungari2-lul chae olakassta.
 Chicken-ACC snatch:CONN go up:PST:SE
 A/The hawk saw a/the chicken and swooped down and snatched
 her up.

In (8), the words *mae* hawk and *pyungari1* chicken are interpreted as definite if they can be so understood between the speaker and the hearer. They will be interpreted as indefinite if this interpretation is not allowed in the context. The word *pyungari2*, which must refer to the previously mentioned word, *pyungari1*, shows the preferred choice in Korean of a full NP rather than a pronoun.

While English nouns must accommodate the count/noncount distinction, Korean nouns disregard this distinction. When there is a need to specify the number of an object, a classifier is used according to the nature, shape, or size of what the noun refers to (Yoon 1993). For example,

- (9) PENNSYLVANIA tongmwulwon pangmwunkaeg cung
 zoo visitor among
 oshipil-myeng-eykeysu katun cungsye-ka natanassta.
 51-CLASS from same symptom-NM appear:PST:SE
 Fifty among Pennsylvania zoo visitors showed the same symptom.

In (9), *myeng* is a classifier preceded by *oshipil* meaning 51; a classifier

with a cardinal number follows a singular noun, *pangmunkaeg* meaning visitor.

3. Subject and Data Collection

The subject for this study is a thirteen-year-old Korean boy, DK, who arrived in the U.S. in late March of 2000. He entered a junior high school three weeks prior to the start of data collection. Despite having studied English by a communicative method for 35 weeks (three 50-minute periods a week) in Korea, he had only limited facility for either understanding or producing English. He knew a few memorized formulas such as *Whats your name? Where are you from? How old are you?*

DK spoke Korean at home, watched English TV programs, and read his textbooks and children's books in English. Monday through Friday from 8:45 A.M. to 3:10 P.M., he attended classes: he had two 50-minute ESL classes a day for about three months (after that, he had only one period of ESL class a day) and attended the regular classes for the rest of the curriculum.

For two one-hour periods each week he worked with an English tutor. These periods consisted of informal conversations on topics about DK's school and daily life, vocabulary work, and journal editing. The tutor corrected vocabulary choice and grammatical errors.

Data collection started in the second week of April when the subject was 13:1 and had been in school for three weeks. Only written language samples were collected for the present study. It continued for a nine-month period through the last week of December 2000, at regular intervals (1-2 weeks). This yielded a total of 27 samples by the end of the study.

The samples are mostly of two kinds: summaries of stories and journal entries. The journal entries are generally about the subjects daily activities (hanging around with friends, studying) and variations on the routines such as traveling and going to parties. One of the samples is provided in Appendix 1.

4. Analysis

We will use the term article to refer to the use of *a/an*, *the*, and zero. Demonstratives and quantifiers occur in positions where articles are used, but they are not included in the present study because of their low frequency of occurrence. The NPs preceded by possessives are not counted either, because they preclude the use of *a/an* or *the*. Following Huebner (1983) and Master (1993, 1995), idioms and commonly used expressions such as *once upon a time*, *in the morning* are not counted because they seem to be learned as formulae.

NPs are tallied according to which of the three articles, *a/an*, *the*, zero is produced in every pre-NP position. Nine categories which show the distribution of the article use are: zero for *the* (the use of zero when *the* was required), *a* for *the*, *the* for *the*, zero for *a*, *the* for *a*, *a* for *a*, *the* for zero, *a* for zero, and zero for zero. The distribution is shown in Appendix 2.

With regard to the rate of accuracy for article use, two measures are used: Produced Accuracy and Obligatory Context Accuracy. Produced Accuracy (hereafter, P-ACC) is the ratio of the number of times it was used correctly over the number of times an article was supplied. The Obligatory Context Accuracy (hereafter, OC-ACC) is the ratio the number of times it was actually supplied over the number of times an article should have been supplied.

5. Results

This study explores the patterns of article use that a Korean adolescent learner shows as he develops proficiency in English. The patterns over the duration of the study are looked at in two ways: (1) the accuracy of the use by the learner of the article system in English (2) the uses and overuses of each type of articles.

5.1. Accuracy of the Article Use

The time during which the data were collected is divided into nine periods. Three written productions are analyzed in each period. Table 2-1 and Table 2-2 display the accuracy rate of *a*, *the* and zero, calculated for each period in terms of two measures, P-ACC and OC-ACC, respectively (see the corresponding Figure 1a,b).

Table 2-1. Produced Accuracy over the period

Per	The			A			Zero		
	# of suppli	# of corre	Acc (%)	# of suppli	# of corre	Acc (%)	# of suppli	# of corre	Acc (%)
1	20	11	55	3	3	100	22	12	55
2	15	12	80	3	2	67	21	9	43
3	20	14	70	10	9	90	19	2	11
4	34	30	88	32	27	84	24	15	63
5	25	22	88	13	12	92	32	20	63
6	30	28	93	11	10	91	25	12	48
7	17	16	94	26	22	85	33	15	76
8	26	24	92	26	19	95	22	16	73
9	40	38	95	25	23	92	20	16	80

Table 2-2. Obligatory Context Accuracy over the period

Per	The			A			Zero		
	# of obli-co	# of corre	Acc (%)	# of obli-co	# of corre	Acc (%)	# of obli-co	# of corre	Acc (%)
1	18	11	61	7	3	43	20	12	60
2	20	12	60	9	2	22	10	9	90
3	28	14	50	17	9	53	4	2	50
4	38	30	79	32	27	84	20	15	75
5	30	22	73	18	12	67	22	20	91
6	37	28	76	15	10	67	14	12	86
7	22	16	73	27	22	81	27	15	93
8	29	24	83	22	19	86	17	16	94
9	42	38	90	25	23	92	18	16	89

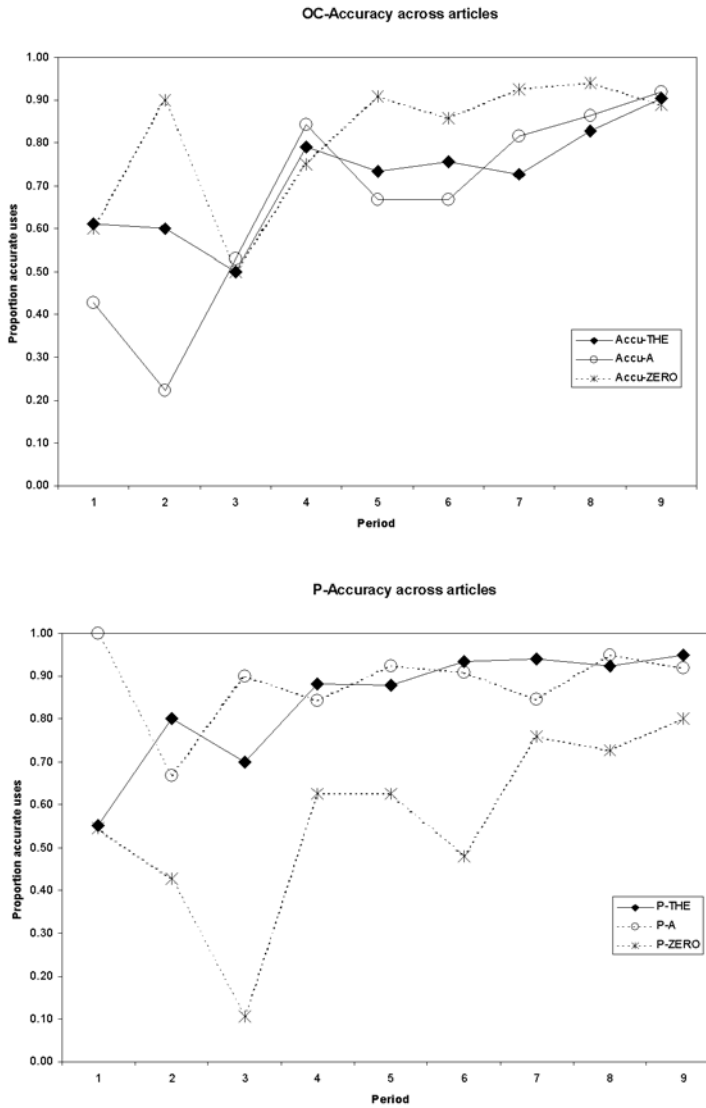


Figure 1a,b. Accuracy over the period

The fluctuation between Periods 1 through 3 seems to indicate that DKs provision or omission of articles is unsystematic. The irregularities may also be attributed to the small numbers of occurrences at those times, 45, 39, and 49, respectively. We would expect such fluctuations at the earlier stages when the writings are shorter in length.

The differences between the graphs using P-ACC and those obtained using OC-ACC are as follows.

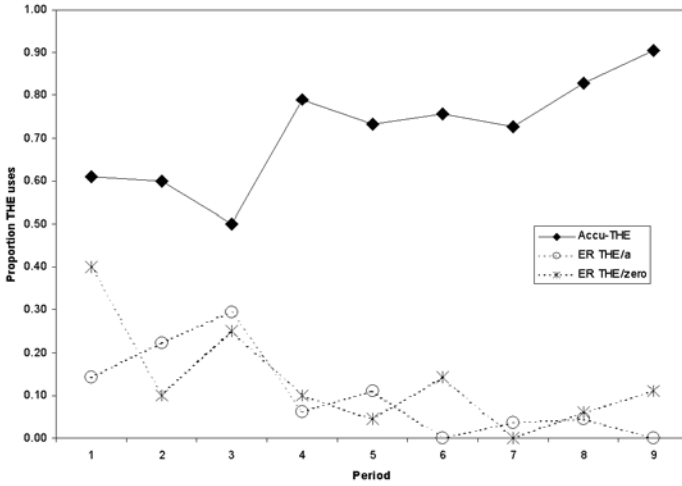
- (i) There is a much higher percentage for the zero article in OC-accuracy.
- (ii) The rates of accuracy of the articles *a* and *the* are higher in P-accuracy than in obligatory context.

The findings show that the subjects most noticeable pattern of article use is the omission of articles, i.e., the overuse of zero articles. Due to the easily noticeable tendency of omitting articles, the proportion of the number of zero articles accurately supplied in obligatory contexts appears to rise in accuracy in obligatory contexts. Whereas, the percentage of the number of zero articles correctly used out of the total number of occurrences appears to be lower.

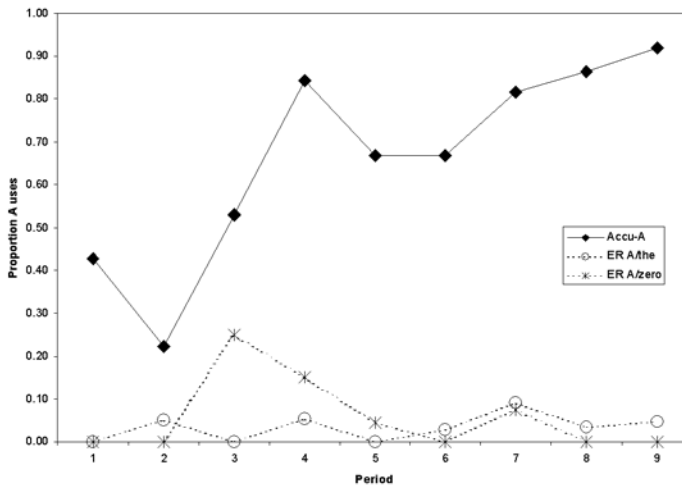
Note that there is a big difference between the two measures for *a* between Periods 1 through 3. It is evident that the small number of instances of *a*, only 3 each in Periods 1 and 2, did bias the data somewhat. For example, the percentage of accuracy for *a* in Period 1 was 100% since all of the three instances supplied by the subject were grammatical. When calculated in obligatory context, it dropped to 42% in OC-accuracy, showing the similar amount of drop in Periods 3 and 4. More importantly, however, the graphs using both measures show the same pattern in curves.

5.2. Uses and Overuses of Articles

Uses of THE



Uses of A



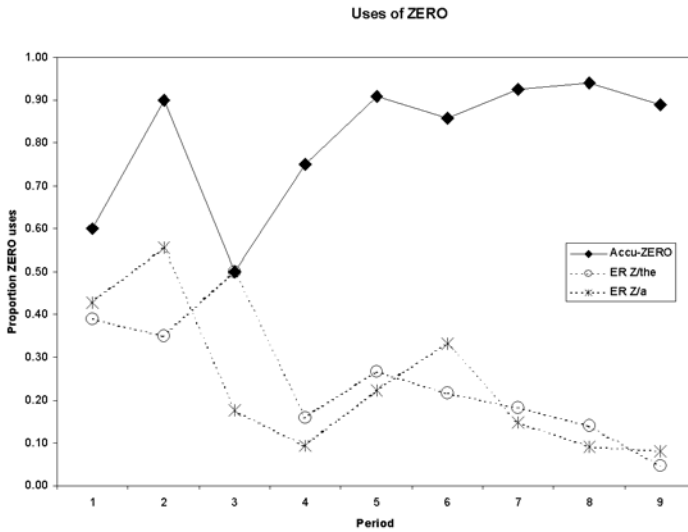


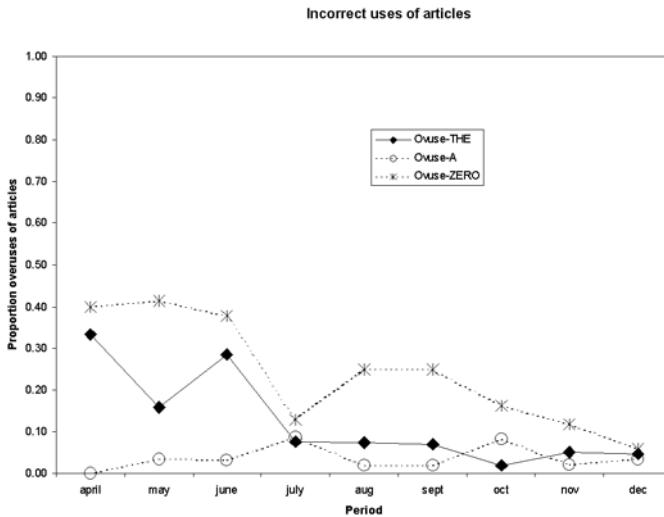
Figure 2a,b,c. Uses of *the*, *a*, zero

Figure 2a,b,c displays the use of each article in obligatory contexts. For example, in Figure 2a, the line with filled squares shows the proportion of accurate use of *the* in the context where *the* is required. The line with circles and the one with stars represent the proportion of errors by using *the* in the context in which *a* and zero are required, respectively. The use of *the* in Period 1 may imply that the subjects use of articles is totally random; the proportion that *the* was correctly used was 0.61 but the errors that he used *the* when *a* or zero should have been used comprised 0.14 and 0.40, respectively. Figure 2b shows that the proportion of accuracy of a substantially increased between Period 2 and Period 4. Though after Period 4 there was a slight decrease of the accuracy, the accurate use of *a* was on the steady increase, reaching .92 at the end of the study. The use of zero in Figure 2c appears to show an interesting pattern of the subjects production of articles. In Period 3, after a big variation between Periods 1 and 2, the use of zero when *the* is required accounted for 50 percent and then consistently decreased to

5 percent in Period 9. In sum, first, it seems that DK senses the need to mark singular nouns with something other than zero, since we can see a rising percentage of NPs marked with *the*. Secondly, a gradual rise was displayed over time in the use of articles, *the*, *a*, and zero, with a 90%, 92%, and 89% rate of accuracy, respectively, in Period 9.

As shown in Figure 3, DK exhibits a noticeable pattern in the incorrect uses of articles, *the*, *a*, and zero, overusing them with a 29%, 3%, and 38% rate of accuracy, respectively, in Period 3. The overuse of zero consistently decreased after Period 5, it still constituted the greatest proportion of overuse overall. The tendency of overgenerating zero to *the* and *a* contexts in his development seems to be derived from the characteristics of his L1.

Figure 3. Incorrect uses of articles



It is of interest to compare DK's data with an analysis by Master (1995) where he breaks down zero for the errors into three categories: ranking adjectives, shared knowledge and identifying postmodification. According to Master (1995: 189), ranking adjectives include superlatives

(e.g., *the best, the largest*), sequence adjectives (e.g., *the first, the second, the next*), and unique adjectives (e.g., *the same, the only*). Shared knowledge includes second or subsequent mention as well as those things of which we share knowledge (e.g., *the sun, the bank*). Identifying postmodification refers to nouns that are postmodified so that the head noun can be identified (e.g., *the cost of meat*). DK's data was analyzed by using the same method of coding as Masters (1995), of which the results appear in Table 3.

Table 3. A comparison of zero for *the* errors for the subjects (Master, 1995) and DK

Category	19 graduate students from S. Asia (from Master 1993)	DK
Shared Knowledge	49.13% (n=226)	73% (n=42)
Postmodified Noun	39.57% (n=182)	10% (n=6)
Ranking Adjective	11.30% (n=52)	17% (n=10)
Total	460	58

The results support Masters (1995) finding that shared knowledge produces the greatest number of errors. Of the three types of zero for *the* errors tallied, the most frequent was the marking of shared knowledge NPs with zero articles.

6. Discussion

There are two broad generalizations which emerge from the results. First, we note that there was a noticeable progress toward acquisition of the English article system over periods. It is quite clear that DK's knowledge of English article was extremely limited when the data collection started 24 days after his arrival in America. Only a few of his sentences included the articles, *a* and *the*. After his random use of articles for the first three months, DK appeared to continuously revise his hypotheses about article use, reaching over a 90 percent of accuracy in obligatory contexts. Specifically, accuracy rates for indefinite contexts were almost the same as for definite contexts, 92% and 90% respectively. Though the learners need to refer to indefinites was low,

as shown in low number of occurrences of *a/an* in his writing, DK started to mark [-HK] context by an indefinite article at an early stage. Furthermore, it should be noted that even though the subject, DK, received feedback from his tutor, there was no explicit instruction on article use.⁵⁾ The significant increase in accurate use seems to be due to the exposure to the functions of the articles by writing journal and summaries.

Secondly, the present study finds overuse of zero to be predominant, supporting the findings in Master (1995). Contrary to this, however, it is a common finding in studies of article use that learners experience an early stage of overgeneralizing the definite article to all NP environments (Chaudron and Parker 1990; Huebner 1985; Parrish 1987; Young 1996), after the use of the definite article has stabilized. It is not sufficient to agree with Masters explanation that the disparity may be resulted from differences in proficiency of the subjects, since the subjects in the studies mentioned above, except for Huebner (1985), are advanced learners. A possible explanation could be that DK's use of the definite article has not stabilized yet. It would be more accurate to say that transfer from his L1 without an article system may explain the tendency of overusing zero, that is, omitting articles in contexts where a native speaker would use one.⁶⁾

Of the three types of zero for the errors tallied, the most frequent was the marking of shared knowledge with zero articles, compared to postmodified noun and ranking adjectives. This is consistent with Master (1995). The subject whose L1 has no article system is likely to think that there is no need to keep marking NPs by articles, with the result that inaccurate use of zero when *the* is required to mark shared knowledge NPs had the highest proportion.

5) Interestingly, Pica (1985) reports that the overall production accuracy of indefinite article, *a*, does not differ according to whether it has been taught to the subjects.

6) Contrary to the prediction from the subjects L1 that he would use demonstratives and one for definiteness respectively, the frequencies of *i* this, *ce* that and *han(a)* one were not high enough to be coded in this study.

The findings reported here indicate that the English L2 learner without previous instruction on English articles shows overall increasing production accuracy over time in a mostly naturalistic setting. Given that L2 learning is a process which is responsible for the continual revision of the interlanguage system, as Corder (1976) points out, the subject went through hypothesis-testing process of second language acquisition of English article. It would be safe to say that he got the knack of it within a relatively short time.

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Appendix 1. The sample journal written by DK (April 15, 2000)

Lizards

Today I ate the lunch with Sejuns family. I ate the three tacos. It was first time and its too good When I eating lunch, I heard some lizards. Sejun told me about breeding two lizards. Then I decided to catch some lizards. So I borrow the insect net from Sejun and I found it.

I saw some lizards but I cant catch them. Because their are very fast. Their are escaped ahead and escaped in advance.

Im angry. I decided and decided to catch lizards. Finally I found it. When I went toward lizard, the lizard hide behind the box. But I hited the lizard with net but the lizard hurted his leg. Then I catch him but I find almost the lizard was died.

But some time later I know the lizard was live. I puted in a can the lizard and I went out find another lizard again. But second lizard was too hard to catch. Finally I found one in good place so I felt its good chance.

It was fact. I catch another one. But first lizard was cant use the two legs. But it was enough to Im happy.

Appendix 2, Categories of article distribution and their frequencies in each period

Time period	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
ZERO for THE	7	7	14	6	8	8	4	4	2
A for THE	0	1	0	2	0	1	2	1	2
THE for THE	11	12	14	30	22	28	16	24	38
ZERO for A	3	5	3	3	4	5	4	2	2
THE for A	1	2	5	2	2	0	1	1	0
A for A	3	2	9	27	12	10	22	19	23
THE for ZERO	8	1	1	2	1	2	0	1	2
A for ZERO	0	0	1	3	1	0	2	0	0
ZERO for ZERO	12	9	2	15	20	12	25	16	16

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