



The interlanguage of English articles of two Chinese learners of English at upper-intermediate level

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Abstract

The complexity of English articles poses great challenge for foreign language (FL) learners, especially for those learners from languages which do not have an article system (known as [-article] languages). As a result, it is generally acknowledged that despite early introduction to English article system, FL learners cannot use English articles properly even for those advanced learners. This paper reports findings from a study on the interlanguage of English articles for two Chinese learners of English as a FL (EFL) at upper-intermediate level by conducting error analysis on their academic assignments. Different from traditional error analysis, the study employed retrospective interviews to gain a deeper insight into the participants' metalinguistic explanation of their choice of articles. In general, the results supported findings of previous FL studies that (1) their non-nativelike article uses are attributed to L1 transfer; (2) confusion of specificity and definiteness; (3) misjudgment of countability of noun phrases. The present study also found some unique patterns: (1) the direct mental translation from L1 prevented learners from selecting correct articles; (2) the learners formulated some unique hypotheses; (3) and the complexity of writing tasks influenced the linguistic choice of articles. Although the present study of Chinese learners' errors in the use of English articles only involves a small sample size, it attempts to at least raise English teachers' awareness to the status quos so that enough attention will be given to explore new pedagogy of more efficient ways of English article instruction.

Key words: *English articles, error analysis, interlanguage, Chinese EFL*

Introduction

A growing number of Chinese students pursue studies either in a degree course or on an exchange program in an English-speaking country. Often they find that one of the most difficult academic challenges they face is to express themselves in English writing. Among errors in writing made by Chinese students, the most frequent one might be English article errors. In English, articles including *a*, *an*, *the* and the zero article \emptyset , are very frequent morphemes. According to the COBUILD corpus, which contains 20 million English words (Sinclair, 1991), the definite article *the* is ranked the most frequent word, with a rate of 25.1%; the indefinite article *a* is the fifth most frequent item, with a frequency rate of 10.5%. As for \emptyset , after analyzing a 197,644 words written corpus, Master (1994) found that it even outnumbers *the* (36.3%) and *a* (15.7%), and appears to be the most frequently used article with a rate of 48%.

Although English articles are commonly used words, it is surprisingly complicated, which is partly attributed to that there is no one to one form-meaning correspondence (Butler, 2002); and partly because these function words are normally unstressed and consequently affect the availability of input from spoken language (Master, 2002). This complexity poses a great challenge for foreign language (FL) learners, and this situation is especially true for learners whose mother tongues do not have an article system (known as [-article] languages), such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Russian (Thomas, 1989). Speakers of these [-article] languages denote definiteness or indefiniteness not by

inserting a particular article but by using demonstratives, demoting from contexts in utterances or alternating the position of a referent in a sentence (Thomas, 1989).

In article acquisition studies, learners' errors have been a focus for a long time. By conducting error analysis (EA), it is believed that learners' interlanguage can be reflected. Interlanguage is considered as a rule-governed system as well as a dynamic process since it opens to formation of new rules (Selinker, 1972). Researchers view interlanguage as a development along the continuum ranging from learners' first language (L1) to the target language, on which learners constantly refine the complexity of their interim system (Dulay & Burt, 1974). FL learning is then regarded as a creative-construction process which is responsible for the continual revision of the interlanguage system, where errors are considered as the manifestations of the hypothesis testing process (Corder, 1978). The present study explores the interlanguage of English article use by two Chinese EFL learners at upper-intermediate level by combining error analysis and retrospective interviews.

Theoretical background

Theoretical framework for studying English article system

There are three major theoretical frameworks to study English article acquisition, namely Bickerton's (1981) semantic wheel approach; Master's (1990, 1997) binary system approach; as well as Gundel, Hedberg, and Zacharshki's (1993) Givenness Hierarchy Approach. Among the three, the semantic wheel approach is the most widely used for article acquisition studies, hence it is adopted in the present study. In this model, the use of English articles is governed by the semantic function of noun phrases (NPs), which are classified by two features of referentiality: (1) whether information is assumed to be part of the Hearer's Knowledge [\pm HK]; (2) whether a NP is a Specific Reference [\pm SR]. These two aspects entail four basic contexts when combined, including Generic References [$-$ SR, $+$ HK], Referential Definites [$+$ SR, $+$ HK], Referential Indefinites [$+$ SR, $-$ HK], and Nonreferentials [$-$ SR, $-$ HK]. Semantic wheel framework and examples are summarized in Figure 1 and Table 1.

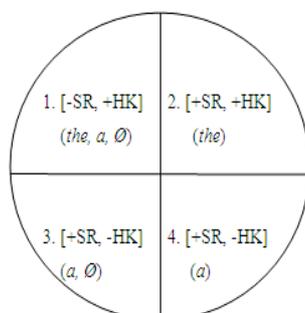


Figure 1. Semantic Wheel approach (Bickerton, 1981)

Table 1. Examples of four types of NPs (based on Bickerton, 1981)

Type of NPs	Articles used in English	Examples
Generics [-SR, +HK]	<i>a, the</i> or \emptyset with a plural noun	A rabbit eats carrots. <i>The</i> rabbit eats carrots. \emptyset Rabbits eat carrots.
Referential Definites [+SR, +HK]	<i>the</i>	A rabbit was eating carrots under the tree. <i>The</i> rabbit is hopping now.
Referential Indefinites [+SR, -HK]	<i>a</i> or \emptyset with a plural noun	A rabbit is eating carrots. \emptyset Rabbits are hopping.

Nonreferentials [-SR, -HK]	<i>a</i>	The hunter could not find a rabbit in the mountain.
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L1 article acquisition studies

L1 article acquisition studies are conducted by scholars, who are interested in English speaking children's acquisition of grammatical morphemes. Brown (1973) and de Villiers and de Villiers (1973) found that children acquire English article system at a comparatively early age, somewhere between 2 and 3 years. Other studies investigating children's acquisition order of articles showed that children make most type of errors of overuse *the* in [+SR, -HK] semantic context, but do not oversupply *the* on nonspecific occasions for both speakers and listeners [-SR, -HK] (Bressen, 1974; Cziko, 1986; Garton, 1983; Maratsos, 1976; Power, Del Martello, 1986; Warden, 1976). This seems to suggest that children initially associate (the) with the feature [+SR], and Bickerton (1981) also proposes that children have an innate sensitivity to distinguish between specificity and nonspecificity.

FL article acquisition studies

FL article acquisition research primarily focuses on the sequence through which learners acquire different types of English articles. Adopting Bickerton's (1981) semantic wheel framework, Huebner (1983) conducted a longitudinal case study of Ge, a Hmong learner of English. Huebner collected Ge's oral data by three-weekly intervals, and did a comprehensive analysis of Ge's definite article use. He found that Ge developed his own unique mapping of *the* in different stages. At first stage, *the* served to realize Referential Definites [+SR, +HK]. Later on, *the* was flooded to perform all four types of NPs and then it was no longer used in Nonreferentials [-SR, -HK] until it was gradually eliminated from Referential Indefinites [+SR, -HK]. From then on, *the* was used in much the same way by native speakers. Based on his analysis, Huebner concluded that Ge might initially associate *the* with the feature of [+HK].

Following Huebner, there are considerable FL article acquisition studies using semantic wheel approach (e.g. Chaudron & Parker 1990; Master, 1987; Tarone & Parish, 1988; Thomas, 1989; Parish, 1987; Young, 1996). Parish (1987) studied the acquisition of English articles by a 19-year-old beginning-level Japanese learner. He found that \emptyset was acquired first, followed by the definite article *the*, and *a* came to be the last. In accordance with Parish findings, a few studies found that learners from [-article] languages exhibited an overgeneralization of \emptyset and a delayed accurate use of *a* (e.g. Master, 1987; 1997; Thomas, 1989). The researchers argued that the overuse of \emptyset might be due to L1 interference since these [-article] FL learners use \emptyset in their L1. They also noticed the acquisition of *a* was erratic, which could be attributed to learners' detection of noun countability (whether a noun is countable or noncountable). In a study directly testing judgment of noun countability and article use, Yoon (1993) found a correlation between learners' judgment of countability of nouns and their correct use of *a* for Japanese learners, whereas no correlation was found for native speakers.

With regard to the definite article *the*, the flooding phenomenon was also observed in a number of studies with [-article] FL learners (e.g. Chaudron & Parker, 1990; Master, 1987; Parish, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Young, 1996). By examining the article use in FL learners' speech, Master (1987) found that almost all of his subjects flooded *the* in [+HK] and tended to use *a* or \emptyset in [-HK] contexts, which made him to support Huebner's hypothesis that FL learners might tend to relate *the* with the feature of [+HK]. In contrast to Master's (1987) and Huebner's hypothesis (1983), both Parish (1987) and Thomas (1989) hypothesized that FL learners initially associated *the* with [+SR] features based on the results of their studies. Parish (1987) observed that Mari's use of *the* was restricted to the features of [+SR]. Likewise, Thomas (1989) showed that her FL learners overgeneralized *the* in the [+SR, -HK] context, but not in the [-SR, -HK] context. Oversupplying *the* in the [+SR, -HK] context was also observed by Lu (2001), who examined 55 Chinese learners of English by using cloze tests. Lu noticed that her participants tended to overuse *the* for *a* or \emptyset , which she attributed to their difficulty in distinguishing [+HK] and [-HK]. Additionally, she postulated that the confusion between *a* and \emptyset might be caused by inaccurately judging the countability of NPs.

Contrary to the above results that FL learners overuse *the*, other studies revealed that FL learners have tendency to underuse *the*, and underusing *the* persists even at the advanced level of English proficiency (Ekiert, 2005). For example, Liu and Gleason (2002) reexamined Master's (1997) data and found "the underuse of the at the advanced stage" (p. 5). Likewise, with Czech and Slovak



learners of English, Young (1996) also obtained a similar result that the problem of underusing *the* existed at the advanced level.

Butler (2002) found that learners at different proficiency level formed different hypotheses with regard to English article use. With Japanese learners of English, Butler interviewed her participants to gather information on their choice of English articles immediately after they had completed a cloze test for English article use. She found that lower proficiency learners were unlikely to succeed in detecting [HK] knowledge accurately. Additionally, low-proficient learners had a fixed notion of the countability of NPs without considering a context. Although higher proficiency learners were better at taking context of NPs into account when choosing articles, they were still confused of which conditions “would make a reference identifiable to the hearer” (Butler, 2002, p. 472), and noun countability detection still remained problematic.

The present study

The present study explores the interlanguage of English article use by two Chinese EFL learners at upper-intermediate level. The present study differs from previous FL article acquisition studies in two ways. Firstly, the data of the present study come from a naturalistic setting, in which learners’ attention has not been raised on article choices compared with experimentally elicited data (e.g. cloze test). Second of all, rather than inferring interlanguage from EA, the study adds retrospective interviews to examine participants’ metalinguistic knowledge on the choice of articles. Interviews not only can reflect learners’ current interlanguage associated with the choice of articles but also can distinguish postsystematic errors (performance mistakes) from real errors.

The present study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What kind of article errors did the Chinese EFL learners at upper-intermediate level make in their academic writing processes; and what kind of metalinguistic knowledge did the learners have in selecting articles?
- (2) How similar or dissimilar are the patterns obtained from the present study to that of previous FL article studies?

Methodology

Participants

Two Chinese EFL learners at upper-intermediate level voluntarily participated in the present study. Chinese learners were chosen since Chinese is well known as [-article] language, which poses more difficulty in acquiring English articles. Participant A is 24 years old, and studied Master of Media Practice in one Australian university. Participant B is a 26-year-old postgraduate, who studied Master in Interactive Multimedia in a different Australian university. Both of the participants had lived in Australian less than one year when participated in the study, and they had studied English for more than 10 years. Before studies, they scored equal to or higher than 6 in IELTS academic modular. The demographic information and English proficiency of the two participants are presented in table 2.

Table 2. *Demographic information and English proficiency of the two participants*

Participant	A	B
Age	24	26
Education	Master of Media Practice	Master of Interactive Multimedia
Length of Learning English	about 11 years	about 13 years
Length in English-speaking Countries	about 6 months	about 11 months
IELTS	6.5	6



Data collection method

The data collection method consists of two parts. The first part is participants' academic assignments and the second is participants' metalinguistic explanation of the choice of articles in retrospective interviews. The two assignments are about the similar length with 1, 279 and 1, 282 for participant A and B respectively. Participant A's assignment was a comment on writing techniques of one essay selected from the magazine *The New Yorker*. The assignment of participant B' came from personal reflections of Interface Design reading materials.

Retrospective interviews require learners to report their thoughts after they complete the task. Retrospective interviews do not reflect exactly learners' on-line processing on selection of English articles, and are considered less reliable than concurrent think-aloud methods (Cohen, 1996; Ericsson & Simon 1993). However, retrospective interviews are more suitable in the present study because using think-aloud would interfere with participants' writing processes and sufficient time was needed to identify article use errors.

Data collection procedure

Each participant sent the researcher one latest assignment immediately after they typed it. The assignment was then sent to a native English speaker, who is also an experienced editor, to identify the mandatory use of articles without much delay. The identified article errors were numbered and brought to the participant shortly afterwards. In retrospective interviews, the researcher pointed at numbered article uses and asked the participant to explain thoughts during writing for articles choices without indicating the incorrectness. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and were tape-recorded.

Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out in two steps. The first step was the classification of article errors by using rubrics in traditional EA, such as overgeneralization of \emptyset ; overgeneralization of *a*; and misuse of *a* for *an*. Frequency and percentage of each type of errors were calculated. The second step was analysis of retrospective interviews by using content analysis, which is "a careful, detailed and systematic examination and interpretation" of unstructured word-based data in order to identify patterns and themes (Berg, 2007, p. 303). Before content analysis, the interviews were transcribed and then translated from Chinese into English by the researcher. The translation was checked by a Chinese postgraduate major in translation. The procedure of content analysis followed the suggestions by Brown (2002): marking key points and forming categories. Firstly, the translations were read thoroughly and the idea units were identified and highlighted with a code. The coded data were examined in a cyclical manner so that categories emerged (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then the emerging categories were labelled according to the existing literature on FL article studies as well as the nature of the data. Classification scheme and examples are presented in table 3. After categorization frequency and percentage of each type of metalinguistic explanation were calculated.

Table 3. *Classification scheme and examples*

Classification scheme	Examples
L1 transfer ¹	I didn't think too much which article should be used, it's up to my intuition ² .
ignorance of [HK]	I intended to refer to the specific quotations in the short essay.

¹ "L1 transfer" and "direct mental translation from L1" differs in that the participants did not explicitly say a Chinese word or a phrase for the former category; whereas for the latter category, the participants directly mentioned the equivalent words or phrases in Chinese.

² It should be noted that it is hard to decide whether the participants' intuition is solely influenced by L1, or by a combination of L1 and their interlanguage of English. For this article, the participants' intuition was treated as L1 transfer.

misjudgment of countability of NPs	Is voice a count noun or non-count noun?...It looks like a non-count noun, so no article should be used, I think.
direct mental translation from L1 ¹	I wanted to emphasize (commercial website), not other kinds of websites. You know like ... we say in Chinese <i>na zhong shangye wangluo</i> . It's kind of... <i>the</i> in English, you know.
specific hypotheses	When something is the only one in the world, <i>the</i> must be used.
postsystematic error	I am a silly thing, I know <i>a</i> should be used, such a stupid mistake.

Results and Discussion

Answer to research question 1

Participant A made 18 article errors whereas participant B made 20 altogether. According to the rubric of traditional error analysis with English articles, the participants' errors were classified into four types: overgeneralization of \emptyset ; overgeneralization of *the*; overgeneralization of *a*; and misuse *an* for *a*. The types of article errors of the two participants are presented in table 4 with frequency and percentage.

Table 4. *Types of article use errors*

Types of article use errors	Participant A (frequency and percentage)	Participant B (frequency and percentage)
overgeneralization of \emptyset	8 (44.4%)	8 (40%)
overgeneralization of <i>the</i>	7 (38.9%)	10 (50%)
overgeneralization of <i>a</i>	2 (11.1%)	1 (5%)
misuse <i>an</i> for <i>a</i>	1 (5.6%)	1 (5%)

With this kind of classification, it hardly tells us the causes of these errors. For instance, it is unclear the overgeneralization of \emptyset was caused by that the learners were largely unaware of supplying articles before NPs (L1 transfer) or was due to their misjudgment of NPs' countability. One may also wonder that learners' misuse of *an* for *a* was attributed to lack of discrimination of the two items in their interlanguage or simply a postsystematic error.

According to the information from retrospective interviews, the reasons for misuses of articles were categorized into six types, (1) L1 transfer; (2) ignorance of [HK]; (3) misjudgment of countability of NPs; (4) direct mental translation from L1; (5) specific hypotheses; and (6) mistake. The types the participants' metalinguistic explanation of article choice is presented in table 5 with frequency and percentage.

Table 5. *Types of metalinguistic explanation of article choice*

Types of errors	Types of metalinguistic explanation	Participant A (frequency and percentage)	Participant B (frequency and percentage)
overgeneralization of \emptyset	L1 transfer	5 (27.8%)	6 (30%)
	misjudgment of countability of NPs	1 (5.6%)	1 (5%)
	specific hypothesis	2 (11.1%)	1 (5%)
overgeneralization of <i>the</i>	ignorance of [HK]	5 (27.8%)	8 (40%)
	direct mental translation from L1	0 (0%)	1 (5%)
	specific hypothesis	2 (11.1%)	1 (5%)
overgeneralization of <i>a</i>	direct mental translation from L1	2 (11.1%)	1 (5%)
misuse <i>an</i> for <i>a</i>	mistake	1 (5.6%)	1 (5%)

From the table above, we can see that the error of overgeneralization of \emptyset could be caused by the influence of the participants' mother tongue since Chinese does not use articles; it could also be caused by misjudgment of countability of NPs or some unique hypothesis formed by the participants. The results demonstrated that both of participants predominantly overgeneralized \emptyset due to L1 transfer, accounting for 27.8% and 30% respectively, and overused *the* caused by ignoring [HK] (in the context of writing, readers' knowledge), reaching 27.8% and 40% each.

Answer to research question 2

First of all, consistent with the findings of previous studies, L1 transfer resulted most prominently the overgeneralization of \emptyset since Chinese does not have an article system. Speakers of Chinese detect indefiniteness and definiteness of a referent mainly from the context (Li & Thompson, 1991). For example, in the sentence, "The writer interviewed \emptyset republican to get his point of views." The NP "republican" has a nonreferential [-SR, -HK] semantic context, however, she failed to supply the indefinite article *a*. When asked to explain, she commented that: "I didn't think too much which article should be used, it's up to my intuition." In a similar vein, participant B commented that she never thought too much which article should be used during her writing, but chose the one by her intuition. In the sentence "Actually I do not have working experiences on interactive multimedia area, so all the ideas that \emptyset lecturer and \emptyset classmates introduced are interesting to me". The semantic context of the two above NPs should be Referential Definites [+SR, +HK], in which the definite article *the* should be used. "lecturer and classmates" can be easily understood by its context that participant B intended to refer to her lecturer and her classmates in the course of Interactive Multimedia. This was also confirmed during the interview. In another sentence: "My responsibility in the group is \emptyset creative role.", in which the NP "creative role" is Referential Definites [+SR, +HK]. However, participant B attributed her use of \emptyset to her intuition. It is not difficult to see that her intuition is heavily influenced by Chinese, since it is perfectly grammatical even if no article is used in this sentence. Even though the two participants have achieved a comparatively high level of English, in the academic writing context, they are sometimes unaware of considering using articles before NPs. Was other data elicitation methods used, such as cloze test, which deliberately draws learners' attention to English articles, the participants might commit fewer errors driven by L1 transfer.

Secondly, both the participants showed ignorance of [HK], which caused oversupplying *the* in [+SR, -HK] contexts. This finding is also similar to previous research results. For instance, in the sentence written by participant A, "After reading this short essay, I believe it is a piece of literary journalism. The whole article recorded *the* full quotes to show us what the Commander-in-Chief was talking at the



White House". The context shows that it is the writer's first time to introduce idea about "full quotes", which she clearly knew "full quotes" refer to quotations in "this short essay" [+SR], as reflected in her words: "I intended to refer to the specific quotations in the short essay". However, readers do not share the writer's intention of [+SR], hence leads "full quotes" in a [+SR,-HK] semantic context. In the interview, she did not make comments on anything about whether she should consider readers' knowledge about the specificity of "full quotes".

Similarly, participant B also seemed to use specificity [+SR] rather than definiteness [+SR, +HK] as a standard for her to choose articles, as can be seen in a sentence in her essay. "On Wednesday, after about half an hour talking with Linda, I understood that *the* better way of fulfilling a project is collaboration." Participant B commented that "If I want to refer to something specific, I opted to use *the*." In the sentence above, she thought "better way" is a specific way she and her group members would take to complete their final project. What her intended to mean, however, was not shared by the potential readers of the essay. Previous studies indicated that the oversupplying *the* for *a* was largely attributable to the misdetection of [HK] referentiality. However, in the present study, both participants even did not try to detect [HK] at all. It can be hypothesized that both participants choose the specificity rather than definiteness as a standard to supply *the* (see Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004 for a distinction between specificity and definiteness). This result also seem to support Parish's (1987) and Thomas' (1989) hypothesis that FL learners initially associated *the* with [+SR] feature rather than confirm Master's (1987) and Huebner's hypothesis (1983) that FL learners tend to relate *the* with the feature of [+HK].

Thirdly, the results of the study converged with previous findings that FL learners' confusion of countability of NPs misguides their choice of articles. Both the participants' showed sensitivity of selecting English articles by considering whether a NP is count or non-count. Their failure of supplying correct articles was caused by their inaccurate detection of countability of NPs. Take the sentence "The whole essay denoted \emptyset clear voice." as an example to illustrate. When participant A to explain, her first reaction was to ask the researcher: "Is voice a count noun or non-count noun?" She then said: "I am sure that it is uncountable when it refers to sound of a person... But I am not sure when it is used in the sense of someone's opinion... It looks like a non-count noun, so no article should be used, I think." A similar situation was also found in the other participants' article error and her explanation also pointed to that her misdetection of NP's countability led to her errors. In the sentence "He believes that visualization is \emptyset component for communication." Participant B explained: "The word 'component' looks like an academic word, so it should be non-count, therefore no article should be used." It is interestingly to note that the two participants seem do not have a clear idea about what constitute a count/non-count noun, they heavily depend on their guess or unique hypothesis (e.g. an academic word should be non-count).

Besides similar results found in the present study compared with previous literature, some different patterns also emerged. During writing the academic assignments, both the participants commented that they sometimes formulate the meaning in Chinese, and then translated word to word into English in their mind. The mental translation processes also influenced their choice of articles. In the sentence "I believed the interface design should present an atmosphere which is different from *the* commercial website.", participant B reported: "I wanted to emphasize commercial website, not other kinds of websites. You know like ... we say in Chinese *na zhong shangye wangluo* (that kind website). It's kind of... *the* in English, you know." She further commented: "You know, I organized this sentence in Chinese first and then I translated into English in my mind, and for me *na zhong shangye wangluo* (that kind website) is *the* in English." From the comment, it seems that participant B equalized the structure [definite demonstrative + classifier] in Chinese to *the*. In fact, in the Chinese expression, the definite demonstrative only constrains the definiteness of classifier, but does not define a particular website (Li & Thompson, 1981).

A similar error was observed in participant A's article use. In the sentence: "This essay starts with *the* third person writing technique." Participant A commented that she meant to say: "This piece of essay employed that kind of third person writing technique to start." She believed that *the* was the translation equivalent of Chinese structure [definite demonstrative + classifier].

Additionally, it was found that the participants formed some unique hypotheses in their interlanguage of English articles. These unique hypotheses and its corresponding examples were summarized in table 6.

Table 6. *Unique hypotheses and examples*

Unique hypotheses	Examples
1. When a NP is modified by adjectives, it is unnecessary to use any articles.	After the first class, we had \emptyset face-to-face meeting.
2. If two NPs are connected by a coordinating conjunction <i>and</i> , one article can modify both NPs.	On the second class, I presented the initial idea of my final project to the group and \emptyset supervisor.
3. When something is introduced for the first time, <i>the</i> must not be used.	In this book, \emptyset author explains and discusses different art issues.
4. When something has been mentioned before, <i>the</i> must be used.	<i>The Why Is That Art</i> can be used as theory to guide my interactive design.

Table 6 shows the four different hypotheses, which will be discussed one by one. Firstly, the participants believed that when a NP is modified by an adjective, it is unnecessary to use any articles. Therefore, in the sentence “After the first class, we had \emptyset face-to-face meeting.”, participant A explained that “I don’t think here...needs an article, you see, before ‘meeting’, I used an adjective ‘face-to-face’, it’s not necessary to use any article, which would make it redundant.” In the study conducted by Butler (2002), Japanese EFL learners were also reported to associate some collocation rules to the use of articles. Secondly, the participants believed that if two NPs are connected by a coordinating conjunction *and*, one article can modify both NPs. Thus, the participant explained in the sentence “On the second class, I presented the initial idea of my final project to the group and \emptyset supervisor.”, she referred to her supervisor: “Of course, you can see from the context, ‘the group and supervisor’ is my supervisor.” When she was asked why she did not use the definite article before ‘supervisor’, she said that she thought *the* used before ‘group’ also functions as a definite article modifying ‘supervisor’. Thirdly, the participants held the belief that when something is introduced for the first time, *the* must not be used, even in the situation that the contextual information clearly constrains the definiteness [+SR,+HK] of the NP. For instance, for the sentence “In this book, \emptyset author explains and discusses different art issues.”, the participant told the researcher that author is the author of this book. However, she commented: “Well, you know, I have not mentioned this author in my assignment before this sentence, and I remembered that my English teacher told me that I mustn’t use *the*, when I first mention something.” It seems that the participant strictly followed some rules of thumb provided by her EFL teacher without understanding the rules thoroughly. Lastly, in the sentence “*The ‘Why Is That Art’* can be used as theory to guide my interactive design.”, the participant even used the definite article before a book name, which again was attributed to that she strictly obeyed some simple rules provided by her English teacher without an understanding of underlying principles. The participant commented: “I mentioned this book in the last paragraph, you see here, so I have to use *the* when I mentioned it again.”

Interestingly, both participants exhibited misuse *an* for *a* once in their writings. This was not often observed in previous research using close test method. The interviews and other correct uses of *an* in their writings showed that this was the participants’ mistakes rather than their errors, since they have correct metalinguistic knowledge to distinguish *an* from *a*. For example, in the sentence “The author himself is a designer of *an* website.”, participant A commented that “I am a silly thing, I know *a* should be used, such a stupid mistake, maybe I was too concentrated on the meaning construction”. It can be inferred that compared with native speakers, who are quite automatic in distinguishing *an* and *a*, the current participants’ selection between *an* and *a* still requires much consciousness. According to Limited Attentional Capacity Model (Skehan & Foster, 1999) that cognitively demanding tasks may result in learners paying insufficient attention to language forms. Since the data come from the academic assignments, in which they paid much attention to constructing meaning rather than to forms. If they were given fill-in-blank task, they would succeed in supplying *an*.

In summary, employing retrospective interviews, which tapped the learners’ own metalinguistic explanation of choice of English articles during academic writing rather than based on inference from the researcher, the present study supported the findings of previous studies on [-article] learners that their non-native like article uses are attributed to L1 transfer; ignorance of [HK], which led to confusion



about specificity and definiteness; and misjudgment of countability of NPs. However, due to the nature of data elicitation method, which is more naturalistic and ecological, the present study also found some unique hypothesis; direct translation from L1; and misuse *an* for *a* due to the complexity of task demands.

Pedagogical implications and conclusion

The results of the present study indicate that even EFL learners at upper-intermediate level make article errors, which might raise both TESOL practitioners and learners' attention to the status quos. There is still dispute on the issue whether English articles are teachable or not. Some researchers maintain that English articles can be only acquired through exposure (e.g. Doughty & Williams, 1998; Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982); whereas other researchers believe that English articles are teachable and learnable (e.g. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Master, 1994). For most EFL learners, such as the present participants, they only have very limited exposure to English for language acquisition (Gu, 2003), therefore, it is not possible for them to acquire English articles just through exposure. Faced with this difficulty, English teachers in China should provide more valid and consistent article instructions to learners. Currently, article instruction in China tends to be only introduced at the early stage of English learning by the prescription of the basic rules. However, as learners' proficiency advances, these simple rules seem not able to fulfill learners' more complicated needs for article use. Therefore, article instruction should be implemented in different stages with different emphases (Master, 2002). For instance, after the concepts of count and non-count nouns are introduced, it might be more effective to combine article instruction with countability detection exercises (Butler, 2002).

Generalizations from any empirical research to a larger population should always be made with caution, let alone the present study only involving two participants. Some limitations should be pointed out. First of all, the data from academic writing samples do not cover a wide range of article use (Mizuno, 1985). In the future, academic writing could combine fill-in-blank techniques to elicit data. Secondly, article use in written data could also be compared and contrasted with data collected orally (Tarone, Parish, 1988). Although the present study involves a small sample size, it could act as a model for TESOL practitioners to conduct such research with their own students as a way to find out learners' problems and to provide feedback with regard to article uses. Besides, the current study is also a starting point for TESOL researchers in future article acquisition studies to combine traditional EA and retrospective/introspective interviews with a larger sample size, so that we can gain deeper insights on the acquisition of English articles by EFL learners.

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