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Abstract

Many ESL/EFL practitioners, especially writing teachers, realize that the article system (i.e., *a*, *the*, and Ø) is a very difficult aspect of English syntax to learn and acquire. A few methods of teaching the system have been published, but in order to develop an efficacious methodology, it must first be determined how the spoken use of the article system is acquired in a natural (i.e., non-classroom) setting.

This study provides a picture of article acquisition by analyzing the spoken English interlanguage of speakers of five different native languages, three with no article system (Chinese, Japanese, and Russian) and two with article systems (Spanish and German). Informal interviews of four speakers of each language at successive interlanguage levels provide the basis for a pseudolongitudinal analysis of article usage for each of the five languages represented. The interlanguage level is primarily determined by the negation criteria described by Cazden et al. (1975). The use of the article system was determined in two distinct ways. The first analyzed the accuracy of article usage in regard to the English target. The second analyzed the way in which articles were used without regard to target accuracy in order to provide a picture of what speakers actually do in their evolving interlangauges.

Analysis revealed that subjects whose first languages contained an article system differed markedly in English article acquisition from those whose first languages did not contain such a system, showing that English article usage, especially at the beginning levels, is clearly influenced by the first language. The most dramatic change in article usage appears to occur between the basilang and low mesolang levels for *the*- and Ø-usage. *A* appears to be acquired at a slower and more gradual rate, perhaps reflecting its linkage to the [±count] system.