Fluctuation in the Grammar of Japanese Child EFL Learners

Under the generative approach to second language acquisition (SLA), errors in article use by L2 learners of English have been studied extensively (e.g., Ionin, Ko & Wexler 2003, 2004, 2007, Ionin, Zubizarreta & Philippov, 2009, Hawkins et al. 2006, Trenkic, 2008, Snape, 2008, Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008). This paper focuses on Ionin, Ko & Wexler's (2004 : IKW) fluctuation hypothesis (FH). In essence, L2 learners fluctuate between two values of the parameter named the Article Choice Parameter (ACP); the definiteness setting and the specificity setting. This fluctuation results in non-native-like article choice in L2 grammar. Recently, however, partly based on Fuli (2007) and Tryzna (2009) who argue that definites in Samoan are marked with *le* regardless of specificity, Ionin, Zubizarreta & Philippov (2009: IZP) propose new article groupings, as shown in (1), and reconsider the original IKW's (2004) proposal. Given these new groupings, the FH now predicts that L2 learners should fluctuate only in specific indefinite contexts.

Article grouping by definiteness

	+definite	-definite
+specific	the	a
-specific		

Article grouping by specificity

	+definite	-definite
+specific	le	le
-specific		se

(IZP, 2009: 341)

This study deals with the Japanese subjects with special attention to the FH. The acquisition of articles by Japanese L2 learners of English has been discussed in the literature (e.g., Hakuta, 1976, Goto-Butler, 2002, Hawkins et al. 2006, Snape 2008), but no study has investigated acquisition of articles, focusing on the FH predicted by the new article groupings.

In the syntactic domain, the functional category relevant with articles is arguably DP. It is important to note first Miyamoto and Yamada's (2010) observation that NP-ellipsis triggered by D (and also Q) is available in the grammar of Japanese child intermediate EFL learners. Given the assumption that NP-ellipsis is triggered by a phrase in SPEC, the availability of NP-ellipsis with their subjects indicates that DP (and also QP) is present in the intermediate L2 grammar. Therefore, the fact that Japanese intermediate EFL learners still make errors with articles cannot be due to the absence of DP itself. Given the assumption that D is present in the grammar of Japanese intermediate EFL learners, we, then, need to examine the nature of D in their grammar.

The present study focuses on a question of whether the FH is equally applicable to child and adult Japanese L2 learners of English. In our study 11 children (aged 7 to 12 years), 19 adults (aged 20 to 22 years), and English controls participated. The task used was a forced-choice elicitation task, which is a similar one conducted in IKW (2004). We revised the task in order to enable children to fully understand the contexts where each test item was provided. Words were carefully chosen so that child learners did not receive any extra-linguistic influence. Dialogues were replaced with explanations of contexts. The explanations were in Japanese, and the target sentences were in English. The subjects were told to choose one of the three alternatives, *a/the/* Ø, for a singular noun involved in each target sentence. Our task consisted of 40 items including 10 types of sentences, each type having four tokens. Examples of the crucial target sentences where a specific indefinite context is given and L2 learners would show fluctuation are given below (with the underlined choice being the target).

(1) Type 6: [−definite, +specific]　wide scope

Monica's flight will arrive at the airport at 9:00. Mary came to the airport to meet Monica. Since Monica's hair is red, Mary thought she could find Monica immediately. However, the airport was so crowded that she could not find Monica. Then Mary asked a staff member at the airport, "I want to find (<u>a</u>, the, ---) red-haired girl; her flight arrived at 9:00."

Type 8: [−definite, +specific]

　　Chris saw Mary by chance. Mary looked so happy. Chris asked her what happened. Mary answered, "I saw (a, the, ---) player of the Hanshin Tigers."

We created two versions of the test (version A and B), both of which consisted of the same test items distributed differently on each test. Half of the subjects took version A, and the other half took version B to avoid any ordering effect.

Our results are consistent with that of IZP (2009) in the sense that Japanese child learners used both *a* and *the* in specific indefinite context (nearly 45% *the*, 45% *a*). This indicates that the child subjects fluctuated between its two values. Significantly, as the Russian adult learners in IZP (2009), the Japanese adult learners in our study also made the [+/- specific] distinction in definite contexts. This result strengthens IZP's conclusion that "adult EFL learners make use of an explicit statement of the speakers' familiarity with the referent" (IZP 2009: 352); that is, the statement of "explicitly stated knowledge (ESK)" involved in the relevant dialog. When ESK is present in a dialog, they link it to *the*, while if it is absent, they link it to *a*. Based on the results from Japanese adult and child L2 learners of English, this paper therefore provides cross-linguistic support for the FH.

The most obvious implication of our results is that entirely PF-based approaches do not have any straightforward way to explain why [-definite, +specific] context creates a problem for Japanese child L2 learners of English at the intermediate level.

More significantly, the finding that Japanese behaves parallel to Russian with respect to the ACP and the FH indicates that Japanese belongs to the specificity-based article group in spite of the fact that Japanese does not provide any morphological cue for either specificity or definiteness. In this respect, it is worth noting that Watanabe (2006) proposes that D encodes specificity in Japanese and explains various word-order phenomena in Japanese nominals. We may then take our results as supporting evidence from SLA for Watanabe (2006). Furthermore, Watanabe (2008: 533) states that "… the absence of overt articles of the English type is a major characteristic of those languages whose D enters into an agreement relation with some DP-internal element." If this is correct, we may further understand the fluctuation that we observe in this paper as the process of seeking the correct feature specification in D alongside with acquiring the non-agreeing nature of D in English.

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