

Acquisition of the English Definite Article by Chinese and Malay ESL Learners

Wong, Bee Eng and Quek, Soh Theng
Department of English
Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia
43400 Serdang
Selangor
Malaysia

Ph: 60-16-3688180
E-mail: bee@fbmk.upm.edu.my

It is well documented that both Chinese Mandarin and the Malay language have no functional equivalents of the English article system and many Chinese and Malay ESL learners have difficulty using English articles accurately. Based on Hawkins' Location Theory (1978), Liu and Gleason (2002) suggest that the nongeneric uses of the English definite article *the* fall into four major categories: situation, cultural, structural, and textual. This study aims to determine whether the nongeneric uses of the English article *the* present different levels of difficulty for the Chinese and Malay ESL learners, and whether the four nongeneric uses are acquired at the same time. The theoretical approach adopted in this study is Bickerton's (1981, in Lu, 2001) semantic wheel model. One hundred (50 Chinese and 50 Malay) upper secondary students of three levels of English proficiency (advanced, intermediate and low) participated in this study. The participants were instructed to complete the fill-in-the-article-*the* test (consisting of 91 items) by inserting *the* in the items wherever deemed necessary. The measures employed for data analysis were SOC (Supplied in Obligatory Contexts), TLU (Target-Like Use), and UOC (Used in Obligatory Contexts). ANOVA procedures together with Scheffé post hoc test and *t*-test were performed to determine the acquisition orders of the nongeneric uses of *the*. The statistical analyses of the participants' performance revealed that: (i) the four nongeneric uses of the English article *the* pose different levels of difficulty; (ii) the acquisition order of the four nongeneric uses of English article *the* follows a natural order of situation > structural > textual > cultural, independent of the ESL learners' first languages (L1s); and (iii) the participants' accuracy rate on article usage improved significantly with increased proficiency level.