



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***ACQUISITION AND INTERPRETATION OF ENGLISH ARTICLES BY
L1 MALAY AND L1 TAMIL SPEAKERS***

PREMALA A/P V JACOB

FBMK 2018 43



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By

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

May 2018

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Chairman : Helen Tan, PhD
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The L2 acquisition of the English articles is perceived to be an extremely difficult process for L2 learners especially those whose L1s lack articles. The English language uses articles to encode definiteness and indefiniteness but the Malay and Tamil languages lack articles. Due to the difficulty faced in article acquisition, this research investigates how article-less L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners acquire the concept of definiteness in English articles using an article system proposed in the Article Choice Parameter (ACP) by applying the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH) and examines how they interpret the English definite articles using Wolters' Semantic Proposal (WSP).

The ACP establishes that articles encode a semantic parameter with two values which are definiteness or specificity. The English language has the definiteness setting of this parameter, and languages like Samoan has the specificity setting. The FH leads to the prediction that L2 learners from article-less L1s upon encountering a language that has an article system will fluctuate between the two settings of the ACP. The FH also predicts that L2 English errors of article use should come in two types: overuse of *the* with specific indefinites and overuse of *a* with non-specific definites.

The respondents in this study are L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners and native English speakers. All these respondents were administered a forced choice elicitation task (FET) to examine the ability of the L2 English learners to acquire the English articles and accurately set the definiteness parameter and a picture-based comprehension task (PCT) to investigate how these learners interpret English definite articles. It focused on whether these learners can differentiate between the definite and demonstrative descriptions as proposed in WSP.

The empirical data showed that the L2 English learners article choice is not random but demonstrated sensitivity to the definiteness and specificity of the ACP. This is consistent with the predictions of the FH. Also, the performance showed that learners are more target like as the proficiency level increases.

The findings from the PCT indicated clear differences in the responses between the native speakers and the L2 learners in both the definite and demonstrative plural condition. The findings in this task indicated the possibility of the interpretation of the definite article by these article-less L1 learners being influenced by L1 transfer from a closely associated category namely the demonstrative.

In conclusion this research has highlighted and explained the process of L2 article acquisition and interpretation among both the L1 Malay and L1 Tamil groups of L2 English learners, that learners on the whole draw upon the L2 input, L1-transfer and UG to acquire the target language. This knowledge will also serve as an important pedagogical tool for ESL instructors to plan the L2 input to address the areas in which L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners would face difficulties.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PEMEROLEHAN KATA SANDANG BAHASA INGGERIS OLEH
PENUTUR B1 BAHASA MELAYU DAN B1 BAHASA TAMIL**

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Pemerolehan kata sandang bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua (B2) dianggap sebagai proses pemerolehan yang amat sukar terutamanya dalam kalangan pelajar yang bahasa ibundanya (B1) tidak wujud sistem kata sandang. Kata sandang bahasa Inggeris berperanan mengekod kepastian atau ketidakpastian. Sistem kata sandang pula tidak wujud baik di dalam sistem bahasa Melayu mahupun bahasa Tamil. Memandangkan kesukaran yang dihadapi oleh pelajar-pelajar B2 Inggeris dalam pemerolehan kata sandang, kajian ini telah menumpu kepada bagaimana pelajar-pelajar B1 Melayu dan Tamil yang mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris sebagai B2 menguasai konsep kepastian dalam sistem kata sandang Bahasa Inggeris. Kajian ini menerapkan konsep kata sandang yang diutarakan di dalam Parameter Pilihan Kata Sandang dan mengaplikasi Hipotesis Berubah-ubah untuk mengesan kaedah penguasaan kata sandang Bahasa Inggeris oleh pelajar-pelajar B2 Inggeris. Seterusnya kajian ini juga mengkaji bagaimana mereka mentafsir kata sandang bahasa Inggeris dengan menggunakan Cadangan Semantik Wolter.

Parameter Pilihan Kata Sandang mengemukakan bahawa kata sandang mengekod satu parameter semantik yang terdiri daripada dua nilai iaitu kepastian atau kekhususan. Bahasa Inggeris menerapkan nilai kepastian manakala bahasa Samoan menerapkan nilai kekhususan. Hipotesis Berubah-Ubah menjangkakan bahawa pelajar-pelajar B1 Melayu dan Tamil yang di dalam bahasa ibundanya tidak wujud kata sandang, akan beranjak antara parameter kepastian dan kekhususan, dalam proses mempelajari kata sandang bahasa Inggeris. Hipotesis ini juga menjangkakan 2 jenis kesalahan penggunaan kata sandang yang bakal dilakukan oleh mereka iaitu; penggunaan kata sandang definit secara keterlaluan dalam kategori spesifik indefinit dan penggunaan kata sandang indefinit secara keterlaluan dalam kategori definit tidak spesifik.

Responden-respondent di dalam kajian ini terdiri daripada pelajar-pelajar B1 Melayu dan B1 Tamil serta penutur asal Bahasa Inggeris. Ke semua responden telah diberikan satu set tugas berbentuk soalan objektif dengan pilihan terhad untuk menguji tahap penguasaan kata sandang bahasa Inggeris dan keupayaan menetapkan parameter kepastian secara tepat. Mereka juga telah diberikan satu set tugas pemahaman bergambar untuk menyelidik bagaimana mereka mentafsir kata sandang definit Bahasa Inggeris. Tumpuan tugas ini adalah untuk mengesan samada para pelajar B2 Inggeris tersebut dapat membezakan antara konsep kata sandang definit dan kata penentu, atau sebaliknya memberikan tafsiran yang serupa kepada kedua-duanya.

Data empirikal menunjukkan bahawa pemilihan kata sandang oleh pelajar-pelajar B2 Inggeris tidak dibuat secara rawak tetapi menggambarkan kepekaan mereka terhadap parameter kepastian dan kekhususan di dalam Parameter Pilihan Kata Sandang. Dapatan ini konsisten dengan Hipotesis Berubah-ubah. Selain daripada itu, kadar ketepatan penggunaan kata sandang pelajar-pelajar ini juga meningkat selaras dengan peningkatan tahap penguasaan bahasa Inggeris.

Dapatan daripada tugas pemahaman bergambar dengan jelas menunjukkan perbezaan yang ketara di dalam pentafsiran kata sandang definit dan kata penentu jamak antara penutur natif berbanding dengan pelajar B2 Inggeris. Dapatan ini juga menunjukkan kemungkinan, tafsiran kata sandang definit oleh pelajar-pelajar B2 Inggeris, yang di dalam bahasa ibundanya tidak wujud kata sandang dipengaruhi oleh kata penentu.

Secara kesimpulan, kajian ini telah menonjolkan dan memaparkan proses pemerolehan dan pentafsiran kata sandang bahasa Inggeris dalam kalangan penutur B1 Melayu dan B1 Tamil. Kajian ini seterusnya memaparkan peranan input B2, pengaruh B1 dan Universal Grammar dalam proses penguasaan B2. Pengetahuan ini merupakan suatu alat pedagogi yang penting, yang dapat membantu pendidik Bahasa Inggeris Sebagai B2 menjangka aspek yang sukar dikuasai oleh pelajar B1 Melayu dan Tamil B2 Inggeris dan seterusnya merancang pengajaran mereka bagi membantu pelajar-pelajar tersebut mengatasi kesukaran tersebut.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this thesis is the pinnacle of my academic journey. It was highly challenging but an eye-opening and mentally stimulating experience for me. This completion would not have been possible if not for the strength, guidance, wisdom, favor, grace and mercy given to me by God Almighty. “Thank you, Lord, for making everything beautiful in your time”.

My sincere gratitude to the Chairman of my Supervisory Committee Senior Lecturer, Dr Helen Tan, PhD for the intellectual guidance and thoughtful reminders. Your encouragement, patience and kindness made my return to studying after 20 years a rewarding experience.

My sincere appreciation also goes to Dr Wong Bee Eng, PhD for enlightening me on the recent developments that have taken place in SLA when I initially started. I also extend my gratitude to Assoc. Prof. Dr Shamala Paramasivam and Dr Zalina Mohd. Kasim for your time.

I would also like to record my gratitude to Assoc. Prof. Dr Tania Ionin from the University of Illinois, Urbana Champagne for the permission granted and willingness to share the full instrument for the Picture Based Comprehension task. It gave me great honor to have shared your latest materials and comprehension booklet as well as the feedback received from the author and proposer of the Fluctuation Hypothesis itself.

Most importantly, my love and gratitude to my husband Rajagopal for his love and support. Thank you for being there for me and believing that I will do it despite my own doubts. To my three children Reyshmi, Rohit and Rishan for allowing their mother the time to complete this research. I hope I’ve taught you that with faith in God even an impossible dream becomes possible. To my parents, Appa and Amma, thank you for your constant love, encouragement and prayers. I hope I’ve made you all proud of me.

This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SLA	Second Language Acquisition
L1	First language
L2	Second Language
UG	Universal Grammar
CPH	Critical Period Hypothesis
ACP	Article Choice Parameter
FH	Fluctuation Hypothesis
FTFA	Full Transfer/Full Access
WSP	Wolter's Semantic Proposal
DP	Determiner Phrase
NP	Noun Phrase

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 puts forth and discusses the background to the study, the statement of problem, the theoretical perspectives of the study, the objectives, the research questions and the scope of the study. This chapter ends with the significance and limitations of the study followed by a summary that gives an overall view of the thesis.

1.2 Background to the study

The process of second language acquisition (SLA) looks at the stages involved in acquiring a different language after the native language has been acquired (Gass & Selinker, 2009, p.7). In the Malaysian context, this is most commonly discussed in relation to the learning and teaching of the English language. Research into this field commenced in the late 1960s, followed by a small number of important developments in the next decade. However, many scholars concur that after 40 years of rapid growth the academic coming of age of SLA as an independent discipline happened some time at the end of the 20th century. Since then an extensive growth in research and theorizing has taken place and continues until today (Van Patten & Williams, 2014, p.245). The development in the field of SLA falls into two basic phases. In the first phase, the use of behaviourism and the structural description of language were very prominent. However, the behaviourist explanation of language learning faced crucial difficulties which brought the field of SLA into a post-behaviourist period.

The behaviourist theory perceives the learning of an L2 as a process of acquiring a new set of language principles that is blocked by L1 habits. To predict learner difficulties Contrastive Analysis was used to compare the L1 and the L2 (Van Patten & Williams, 2014, p.20). For many decades, based on this hypothesis, most linguists and teachers assumed that most errors made by L2 learners developed from the dissimilarities between the L1 and the L2. However, researchers subsequently discovered that the first language has considerably less effect on the acquisition of an L2 than was previously thought (Van Patten & Williams, 2014, p.24).

In the post-behaviourist period, research carried out mainly on L1 demonstrated that it was highly improbable that children could learn a language merely through repetition and imitation. They were seen to produce words not possibly heard in the input and seemed to have gained complex language rules that were unlikely to have been learned merely through the process of repeating and imitating (Pinker, 1994). These findings became an influential aspect in SLA.

In the post-behaviourist period, the nativist approach claims that language learning involves innateness, that is, humans have a natural ability to systematically be conscious of the language around them. This spurs the establishment of an internalised language system (Eckman, 1996). The nativist theory initially applied the notion of the Language Acquisition Device which was recognised more as a theoretical structure than a real and definite part of the brain. In recent years the nativist theory has become more dependent on the idea of Universal Grammar(UG). UG goes beyond what was initially proposed in the Language Acquisition Device and expanded into a system of universal linguistic rules that are genetically determined in every human being since they are born (Brown, 2000, pp. 24-25).

Chomsky (1965) arrives at the existence of UG after observing the divide between what is learned from existing language input and what can be learned from the available input. He concurs that despite the input being degenerate and sometimes ungrammatical in form, the output or what is learned is an extensive, abstract and very instinctive theory of grammar (Ellis, 1994,p.713; Johnson, 2004,p.32). The supposition of an innate language system was propelled by the conviction that children, despite the lack of input, are consistently successful and quick in acquiring their first language. This “poverty of stimulus” issue guided Chomsky (1965) to put forward the idea that UG guides the language acquisition process of a child.

The assumption that UG drives a child’s acquisition of language has been supported and sustained by many, but only in the last couple of decades has it been adopted to the study of SLA. The Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vroman,1989) is of the view that there is a notable difference between children and adults with regards to language learning. Children in a typically normal situation are seen to be able to achieve “complete” knowledge of their native language. This, however, is not observed in the acquisition of an L2 by an adult, in which “complete” knowledge is very rarely achieved, if ever attained (Van Patten & Williams, 2014).

Johnson and Newport (1989, 1991) found that English learners who came to the United States as children and received rigorous exposure to the English language performed one step ahead than L2 learners who came during their teenage years. Subsequently, the children and teenagers performed better than the adults. Johnson and Newport gave evidence in support of a critical period for L2 acquisition. The Critical Period Hypothesis is of the view that the capacity to attain a language decreases with age.

While children nearly always succeed in acquiring their L1, a very controversial and much debated issue in L2 writings is whether L2, just like L1, is in like manner restricted by UG, and if this form of acquisition is available to adult L2 learners. One hypothesis is the Full Access to UG Hypothesis (White, 2003) which maintains that the innate language provision is also available to L2 learners continuously during the acquisition process and that parameter resetting is viable. Others (e.g., White & Genesee, 1996; Birdsong & Molis, 1998) also found almost native-like fluency among adult L2 learners, with a lack of age effects on acquisition, creating uncertainty regarding the CPH for L2 acquisition.

1.2.1 Parameter Setting in L2 Acquisition

UG refers to “the system of principles, conditions, and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages...the essence of human language” (Chomsky, 1975, p.29). According to this theory, all human languages consist of a set of basic abstract principles of grammar that is applicable to all languages and parameters which vary according to languages (Cook, 1997, pp. 250-251). The theory encompasses the idea that language acquirers do not have to learn these basic principles because humans have an innate ability, which is derived from the UG, to discover these basic abstract principles that are common to all languages. On the other hand, parameters are differences across languages. These differences are encoded in UG. L1 learners, through the language input, will be able to establish the most suitable parameter. Input data will lead the learner to the most appropriate parameter setting so that the learner is able to achieve proficiency in the language being acquired.

A topic of considerable interest in SLA studies is that of parameter-setting among L2 learners. The issue is whether L2 learners possess the ability to acquire parameter settings that are unavailable in their L1. Much L2 research work has been conducted on the setting of syntactic parameter in L2 acquisition, such as the V2-parameter (Robertson & Sorace, 1999) and the Governing Category Parameter (Finer & Broselow, 1986). The focal point of these researches was on whether L2 learners have the capacity to attain parameter values unavailable in their L1.

Much research has also been conducted on the L2 acquisition of articles by speakers of L1s that do not have articles, such as the Korean and Russian languages (Murphy, 1997; Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004; and Ko, Ionin & Wexler, 2010). According to Ionin (2003), the Article Choice Parameter (ACP) is a semantic parameter with two values. She further contends that languages use articles to encode either specificity or definiteness (Ionin, 2003, p.85). Ionin et al. (2004) propose that articles across different languages are able to encode the property of [+definite] or [+specific]. In the definiteness parameter, articles denote the [+/-definite] distinction, and in the specificity parameter, articles denote the [+/-specific] distinction.

Although much research on L2 article acquisition has been done, to the researcher's knowledge no research on L2 article acquisition has been done among L1 Tamil speakers of English. Moreover, the interpretation and comparison between the article acquisition of speakers of these two languages and native speakers is yet to be done. This research mainly examines the ability of L2 English learners of L1 Malay and L1 Tamil, which are article-less languages, to acquire the English articles *the* (definite) and *a/an* (indefinite) in an elicitation task. It also investigates if these learners have the capacity to obtain a new semantic parameter and accurately set the ACP that is not present in L1. The related linguistic aspect of the Malay and Tamil languages will be further explored in Chapter 3.

This research proposes that in article acquisition, these L2 learners have access to the two values of the ACP which comes from neither L1 transfer nor the L2 input. Ionin et al.(2004) claim that L2 learners fluctuate between the definiteness and specificity parameters until the input enables them to fix the appropriate value. This research will also examine if these L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners also go through similar fluctuations. By integrating the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH) with the ACP, a prognosis is that L2 learners who encounter English will initially fluctuate between the definiteness parameter and the specificity parameter for articles until the target language input enables them to fix the appropriate value. The concepts of definiteness and specificity will be defined and further explained in the theoretical framework in the following chapter.

This research also explored the possibility of the L1 Malay and L1 Tamil learners giving the demonstrative interpretation to the English definite articles. Languages that lack articles, such as Korean, Malay and Tamil, have demonstrative expressions. As such, apart from investigating the acquisition of articles by these learners, this research also investigates how these learners interpret English articles in comprehension compared to native English speakers. It will focus on whether these learners can differentiate between definite and demonstrative descriptions, or whether they treat both the descriptions in an identical way, for example, *the boy* as equivalent to *that boy*.

For this analysis, the semantic proposal of Wolter (2006) will be adopted. From Wolter's analysis, "definite descriptions are defined relative to the default situation parameter while demonstrative descriptions are described in relation to a non-default situation parameter" (Wolter 2006, p.76). A possible prediction is that L2 English learners will initially regard definite features as equivalent to demonstrative features before the input leads that to select the appropriate parameter value. These parameters will be further explained in the theoretical framework in the following chapter.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The L2 acquisition of the English articles is a worthwhile field to be researched because it is perceived to be a highly complex process for L2 learners (Wong & Quek, 2007). This is especially so for learners whose native language lacks the article system. According to Lu and Fen (2001, p.44), articles are unstressed function words, hence they are perceptually non-salient and semantically light-weight. However, according to De Keyser, article choice in the English language conveys highly abstract notions that are extremely difficult to infer, either directly or indirectly, from the input (De Keyser, 2005, p.5). These views demonstrate that although articles are perceived to be simple function words, in actual fact, article choice in English is extremely complex, very dependent on the context and extends beyond simple rules. Bilinguals learn novel features better than monolinguals, but bilinguals are rarely proficient in all domains of the linguistic system, including abstract notions (Wang & Saffran, 2014).

Functionalist approaches to language view language in terms of form to function and function to form mappings. One functionalist approach to SLA is the concept-oriented approach. The basic perspective of this approach to SLA is that L2 learners have already received the complete set of semantic notions from their prior linguistic exposure. Thus, L2 learners do not need to acquire these concepts; they merely acquire a precise way and means to express it (Von Stutterheim & Klein, 1987, p.194). The one-to-one principle states that an interlanguage system “should be constructed in such a way that an intended underlying meaning is expressed in one clear invariant surface form” (Andersen, 1984, p.79). This tends to make it easier for the learners to absorb the concepts and rules of the language. According to Andersen (1984) only in later stages of language acquisition does the multifunctionality principle come into play and allows numerous forms for a single definition and numerous definitions for a single form.

Thus, the article system is extremely difficult for L2 learners because it conveys extremely abstract and complex ideas that are dependent upon the context and one surface form does not have one immediate and direct meaning connection. De Keyser asserts that when the semantic structure of the L1 is unlike the L2, or where identical ideas are not explicitly expressed in L1 except through discourse patterns, the learning difficulty is severe and perpetual (De Keyser, 2005, p.5).

Studies which investigated the SLA of English articles by speakers of L1s that lack articles (Parrish, 1987; Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004; Trenkic, 2008) found that L2 English learners make errors such as article omission and article misuse, and that such errors are especially prevalent among L2 learners whose first languages do not have articles. However, the work of Ionin (2004) also shows that article misuse is not erratic but rather reflects possible UG parameter settings of definiteness and specificity.

Studies which have made comparisons with regards to article choice among L2 learners with contrasting L1s (e.g., Thomas, 1989; Snape, 2006, among many others) predominantly agree that speakers of L1s that lack articles, such as Japanese and Korean, tend to exclude or leave out English articles in a compulsory context at a considerably higher degree compared to speakers whose L1s have articles such as Spanish. However, a recent study by Sun (2016) on the acquisition of English articles by diverse L1 learners challenges the perception that learners from L1s that have an article system acquired English articles faster than L2 learners from article-less L1s. The study found that learners from both groups faced similar difficulties in the acquisition of English articles. While some studies have found that L2 learners with article-less L1s overuse article *the* in indefinite contexts (Baek & Sarker, 2013), others have found that article-less L2 learners accurately use a(n) in indefinite contexts (Ekiert & Park, 2010). In contrast, not much is known of how L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners acquire the concept of definiteness and interpret English articles.

The motivation for this research is to provide additional contribution to the current literature in favour of access to UG in SLA, Article Choice Parameter and Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH). In addition, to the knowledge of this researcher, no studies have been initiated that directly examined the acquisition and interpretation of articles by L1 Tamil L2 learners in Malaysia although some work has been done with L1 Malay L2 English learners. Such knowledge will help to explain the process of SLA and also the influence of L1 on the acquisition of English articles among Malay and Tamil learners.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

1.4.1 Universal Grammar in L2 Acquisition

UG is proposed as an innate language faculty that specifies the limits of a possible language (Rosenthal, 2011, p. 37). This theoretical notion of an innate language provision is derived from observing that children intuitively tend to know particular characteristics of grammar that are not explicitly learnt from the input (White, 1989). In most instances, the language learning environment a learner is exposed to, do not provide sufficient input in terms of quantity and quality. Despite this, children are able to learn a language with considerable ease and speed although the input is underdetermined when compared to the output. This ‘poverty of the stimulus’ problem led to the proposal of a language faculty known as UG (Chomsky, 1965).

A significant point of inquiry that this research focuses on is whether the mental abstract competence of language that L2 speakers possess is similar to that of L1 speakers. One important feature when considering SLA is how learners acquire an L2. Associated with the inquiry is the notion of access to UG which a number of L2 researchers assert that L2 speakers should have. This is because if one is endowed with an innate system that compels grammar formation, the task for learning a language is greatly reduced.

The discussion of whether adult L2 acquisition is restricted by UG is still a debatable one. General research on SLA and UG initially focused on whether the Principles and Parameters of UG constrain the L2 learner (Grondin & White, 1996). However, in recent years, some of the researchers carried out have begun to focus on the features of the linguistic knowledge with which learners begin the SLA process, namely, the transfer from L1 grammar and the extent of UG access.

1.4.2 L1 Transfer and Access to UG

In this section, this researcher provides a general review of differing approaches to the function of the L1 grammar and the extent of access to UG in SLA.

1.4.2.1 No Access

Researchers who hold this view, such as Bley-Vroman (1989), argue that the acquisition process concerning child language acquisition is not similar as what happens in adult SLA. An early work in favour of this position is the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vroman, 1989). The fundamental claim of this hypothesis is that adult L2 learners do not have access to UG. Instead, what they know is formed through their native language and their common problem-solving capabilities. Clahsen and Muysken (1986) report on L2 acquisition of German word order and state that adult L2 learners do not have access to UG anymore and lack the ability to reset the parameter from L1 to L2. They maintain that L2 learners acquire the L2 through learning strategies and impromptu rules.

1.4.2.2 No Transfer/Full Access

This view perpetuates that, similar to child language acquisition, there is full access to UG in SLA, without L1 transfer (Epstein, Flynn & Martohardjono, 1998; Flynn, 1996). This view predicts that the L1 final state is not carried through and does not become the initial L2 state. It supposes that L1 and L2 acquisition will continue in the same manner and UG is accessible at the beginning state of L2 acquisition. This position also assumes that age is not a factor and full access to UG is available at any point during the acquisition. As such, acquiring new parameter settings along with functional categories is possible. Thus, learners should be able to reach similar levels of proficiency as native speakers in L2 acquisition.

1.4.2.3 Partial Transfer/Full Access

Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994, 1996), in their Minimal Trees Hypothesis, argue that both L1 and UG are available concurrently. They contend that in the early stages of L2 grammar, only lexical items and not functional items are passed on from the learners' L1 grammar. Lexical items project substantive content words that project objects and ideas such as nouns and verbs, whereas functional items carry the grammatical content such as determiners, auxiliaries and pronouns. As such, at the L2 initial state, input is required to trigger the functional items. It is assumed that, gradually over time, L2 learners will move towards the L2 grammar and advance towards Full Access (Vainikka & Young-Scholten, 1996).

1.4.2.4 Full Transfer/Partial Access

The Full Transfer/Partial Access Hypothesis under the Representational Deficit Hypothesis (Hawkins 2005, Hawkins & Franceschina 2004), formerly known as the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis (Hawkins & Chan 1997), puts forth that L2 learners possess partial access to UG. Full Transfer claims that the beginning state of L2 acquisition is made up of the grammar of L1 acquisition (White, 1989). Partial Access assumes that if parameterised UG properties are not present in the L1 grammar, then specific functional categories are not transferred in adult L2 acquisition. The Partial Access view states that L2 learners either fail to reset parameter settings or are unable to attain certain features of the L2 owing to certain shortfall in the syntactic component (Hawkins & Liszka, 2003).

1.4.2.5 Full Transfer/Full Access

The Full Transfer/Full Access hypothesis claims that L2 learners draw on both the L1 and UG for the learning task at hand. The learner is presumed to initially utilize the L1 grammar as a foundation in L2 acquisition but has full access to UG when the L1 is considered inadequate for the learning state in L2 acquisition (White, 1989). Based on this claim, Full Transfer Full Access predicts that L2 learners, regardless of their L1s, can acquire native-like use of articles, given that there is sufficient relevant linguistic data supplied to the L2 learners. This denotes that, with sufficient time, advanced L2 learners of English will be able to reset the ACP to [+definite].

1.4.3 Article Choice Parameter (ACP)

The Article Choice Parameter (ACP) is a semantic parameter governing discourse-based distinction which ascertains if articles encode speaker knowledge or hearer knowledge. The ACP has two values: definiteness and specificity. According to Ionin (2003), specificity and definiteness are semantic universals of UG exhibited in some way in all languages. She proposes that these distinctions can be expressed through parametric differences, with the languages differing as to whether they use articles to reflect the [+definite] feature, or the [+specific] feature, or both. Languages such as English selected +/- definite while languages such as Samoan selected +/- specific (Kim & Lakshmanan, 2009, p. 91). Ionin (2003) proposes four different combinations of definiteness in the English language article, which are [+definite, +specific], [+definite, -specific], [-definite, +specific] and [-definite, -specific]. The ACP is not activated in L1s that do not have articles. As such, upon encountering a language that has an article system, L2 learners will go back and forth between the parameters before the language input takes them to the target value.

1.4.4 The Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH)

The Fluctuation Hypothesis (Ionin, 2003) is a theory that supports the FTFA position in language acquisition. The FH posits that L2 learners have UG-constrained L2 grammar as well as full access to principles and various parameter settings (Ionin et al., 2004). This hypothesis claims that L2 learners will initially fluctuate between parameter settings before sufficient data enables them to set the correct parameter. During this acquisition process, FH claims that the errors of learners should be systematic and will be confined to an excessive use of *the* in the indefinite specific category, and to an excessive use of *a* in the definite non-specific category. This hypothesis does not discuss the role of L1 transfer, but assumes that at very advanced levels, L2 learners are able to attain the appropriate parameter for their L2 grammar.

1.4.5 Wolter's Semantic Proposal (WSP)

Wolter (2006) proposes that definites and demonstratives have almost identical semantics. Both definites and demonstratives indicate uniqueness/maximality. The variation is within the field corresponding to which uniqueness/maximality is evaluated. From Wolter's analysis, definite descriptions refer uniquely to the situation corresponding to the discourse context (default situation), whereas demonstratives descriptions refer uniquely relative to a salient or prominent situation in the discourse context (non-default situation) (Wolter, 2006, p.76). The semantic proposal by Wolter will also be further elaborated in the following chapter.

1.5 Objectives of the Research

The main objective of this research is to examine the second language acquisition and interpretation of English articles by L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners in terms of UG access and if L2 learners can gain access to semantic elements in UG to attain parameter values unavailable in their L1. The specific goals are three-fold. The first goal examines and compares the patterns of English article acquisition by L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners to determine the extent of the correct use of articles by these learners according to proficiency levels. Since Malay and Tamil are languages that do not have articles, a comparison of the findings is made to see the differences in the pattern of article acquisition or otherwise between the two groups of learners.

Second, this study also investigates whether both L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners have UG access in the acquisition of the definiteness parameter in the English article which is not present in their L1s. The study specifically examines the acquisition of English articles according to the proficiency level of these learners and whether the learners go back and forth between the definiteness and specificity settings that is not represented in their respective L1s before they set the parameter to the accurate setting for English. For this purpose, the ACP and the FH are adopted as part of the framework for this study.

Third, the study also focuses on how these L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners interpret English articles in comprehension compared to native speakers. Article-less languages such as the Malay and Tamil languages have demonstrative expressions. This research investigates whether L2 English learners from article-less L1 Malay and L1 Tamil set the same semantic description to definites similar as native speakers, and in particular, whether they can differentiate between definites and demonstratives or misinterpret English definites as demonstratives as in their native language. As such, the research is able to establish whether the comprehension of articles is influenced by the semantic representation of demonstratives. Thus, the semantic proposal of Wolter (2006) is adopted as part of the framework for this study.

Many studies to-date tend to focus solely on the L2 acquisition of English articles among article-less L1s such as Russian, Chinese and Korean (Ionin et al., 2004; Robertson, 2000). This research investigates the acquisition and interpretation of English articles among L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners in Malaysia and compares the acquisition and interpretation of English articles between these two groups of learners and native speakers.

1.6 Research Questions

Based on the objectives of the research discussed in the previous section, the following research questions are formulated to provide an insight into the state of acquisition and interpretation of the English articles among native speakers, L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 learners of English. In view of the fact that Malay and Tamil are article-less languages, the study will address the following:

1. To what extent have the L1 Malay and L1 Tamil learners of English acquired the correct use of articles in relation to their English proficiency level?
2. Do the L1 Malay and L1 Tamil learners register fluctuation between the definiteness and specificity setting for English articles?
3. Is there a difference in the interpretation of English articles in comprehension between the native speakers, and the L1 Malay and L1 Tamil learners?

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study emphasizes the acquisition and interpretation of English articles by adult non-native learners from article-less L1s such as Malay and Tamil. It will specifically investigate whether these learners have access to syntactic and semantic features in UG to acquire the concept of definiteness that is not present in their L1. This study is restricted to the production and comprehension of the English articles by these learners. For the interpretation of English articles, the scope of the study is restricted to the interpretation of the article *the*. This study will involve L1 Malay and L1 Tamil adult L2 English learners of above 18 years of age and of two different proficiency levels, namely, advanced and intermediate. The participants have used their respective L1s as the main medium of communication since birth and begun learning the English language as their L2 from the age of seven. Only L2 English learners with advanced and intermediate proficiency were selected for this study based on a pilot study conducted by the researcher. It was discovered during the pilot study that the language proficiency of L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners at the Beginner level was not sufficient for them to understand and comprehend the task and to give the correct choice of the items in the task. This selection process was to ensure that the L2 English learners selected for this study would fit the requirement of this study, which in turn, would ensure that the outcome of the study is valid and credible.

1.8 Significance of the Study

The findings of the study will be significant in contributing in a small way to the existing literature on UG access in SLA, specifically on ACP and FH. Apart from that, the study will be able to assist L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 learners of the English language because it will give them a better understanding of the English article system. These learners will also be more aware of areas where they commonly misuse the articles. This knowledge will enable them to be more aware of how to avoid such errors and gain better understanding of the use of English articles.

The findings from this study will also be able to offer Malaysian TESL teachers a better insight into the common areas of weakness in the use of English articles among L1 Malay and L1 Tamil learners of L2 English. This may help them to better understand the reasons behind article misuse among learners from these native languages and eventually be able to better assist the learners to acquire the language.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

The results of this study on the acquisition of the English article system by L1 Malay and L1 Tamil learners of L2 English is limited to the acquisition of articles in the definiteness distinction. The study is also limited to populations similar to the study samples, namely, L2 English language learners from L1 Malay and L1 Tamil groups. Apart from these limitations, another unavoidable limitation of this study was the lack of available research and data on English article acquisition among Tamil learners. Previous researchers among L1 Tamil L2 English learners were more on error analysis rather than on the aspect of language acquisition. This limitation inhibited comparisons to be made to better understand the language acquisition among similar L1 Tamil learners. As such, this limitation emphasizes the need for future research among L1 Tamil L2 English learners. The researcher also encountered limitations in terms of lack of access to L1 Tamil subjects as an increasing number of the Malaysian Tamil population are not Tamil speakers. This is especially evident among the educated and urban Tamilians. The research among the L1 Tamil speakers had to be conducted among older subjects and from the rural segment of the population. Despite this limitation, the researcher ensured that all the subjects selected for this study met all the criteria that was set.

1.10 Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework of the study which focuses on L2 English article acquisition and interpretation.

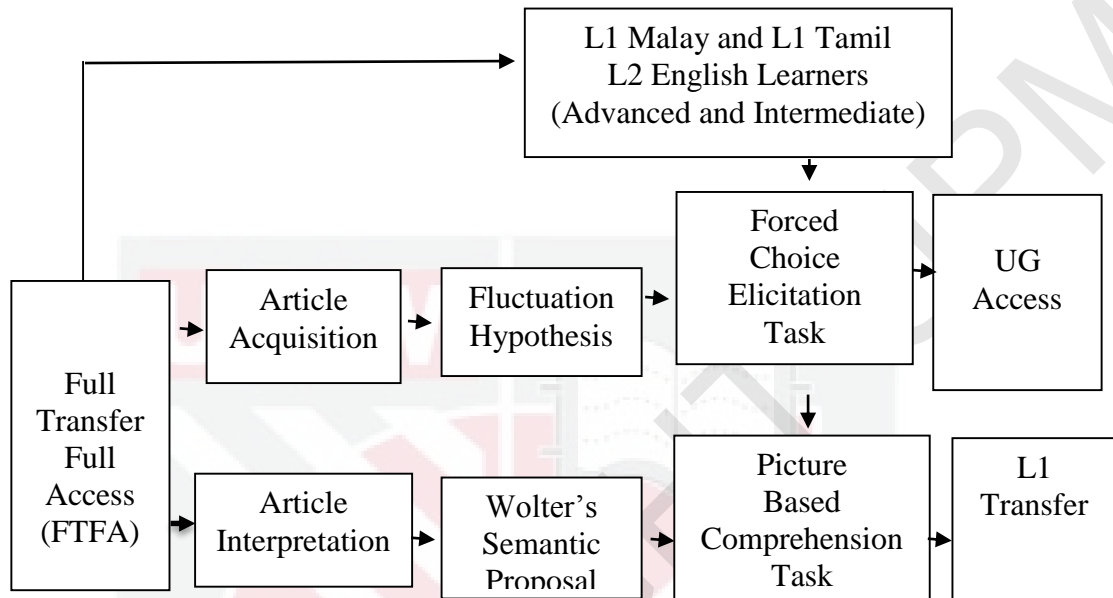


Figure 1 : Conceptual Framework

The overarching theory that governs this study is the Full Transfer Full Access theory which posits that L2 learners draw on both the L1 and UG for the learning task at hand. The learner is presumed to initially utilize the L1 grammar as a foundation in L2 acquisition but has full access to UG when the L1 is considered inadequate for the learning state in L2 acquisition (White, 1989). In this study, a group of advanced and intermediate article-less L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners were investigated for their ability to acquire and interpret L2 English articles. For article acquisition, the Fluctuation Hypothesis was used as the analytical framework while for article interpretation Wolter's Semantic Proposal was used to examine the semantics of definites and demonstratives.

To examine UG access in the acquisition of the definiteness parameter in the English article acquisition among L1 Malay and L1 Tamil L2 English learners, a Forced Choice Elicitation Task was administered, and a Picture Based Task was administered to examine English article interpretation by these learners. These instruments were carried out to confirm the hypotheses in SLA that for article acquisition and interpretation, the L2 English learners will have the L1 grammar as the foundation and full UG access to principles and various parameter settings in L2 acquisition (Ionin et al., 2004).

1.11 Definition of Terms

The following definition of terms are related to the study. They are as follows:

1.11.1 Second Language Acquisition

The field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) investigates the human capacity to learn additional languages after the first language-in the case of monolinguals or languages- in the case of bilinguals-have already been acquired (Ortega,2013).The term L2 acquisition is normally used for SLA. L2 refers to the learning that takes place in both the everyday communication or which typically takes place in a classroom through instruction. In the Malaysian context L2 acquisition of the English language may be more biased towards instructed learning.

1.11.2 First Language

The first language is also known as the native language, the mother tongue or the primary language. The field that investigates monolingual language acquisition is known as first language acquisition. For children who grow up monolingually the bulk of the language is learnt between 18 months and 2 to 3 years, within the Critical Period of language acquisition (Ortega, 2013). In this study the L1 Malay and L1 Tamil respondents selected have claimed that they were monolingual first language speakers of their respective languages within the critical period of language acquisition.

1.11.3 Semantics

Semantics is a linguistic category that studies the meaning in language.The semantic structure of a language is the language's special system of conveying meaning through the principles and knowledge which underlie the linguistic structure (Ladusaw, 2010). The focus of this study is the parameter that underlie article semantics as well as the semantics or the principles that differentiate definites and demonstratives in the English language.

1.11.4 Definiteness

Definiteness is a semantic parameter made available via UG. Definiteness is a shared state of knowledge between speaker and hearer of a referent in a NP (Snape &Kupisch, 2017). English marks definiteness with the use of the definite article and indefiniteness with the indefinite article.

1.11.5 Specificity

Specificity is a semantic parameter made available via UG. A DP is specific when knowledge of a referent in a NP is only held by the speaker (Snape & Kupisch, 2017). Languages such as Samoan mark specificity.

1.12 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is organised as follows:

Chapter 1 gives a brief introduction of this research and a brief description of the background to the study, the statement of problem, the theoretical perspectives of the study, the objectives, the research questions and the scope of the study. This chapter ends with the significance and limitations of the study. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical details and the lexical description of the features [+definite] and [+specific], the semantic proposal of uniqueness relevant to the default and non-default situations and also provides a critical review of related relevant literature. Chapter 3 lays out a description of the linguistic assumptions of the English article system, as well as strategies used in the Malay and Tamil languages to mark definiteness and specificity, the native languages of the participants in this study. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology used in this thesis. Chapter 5 reports the results and discussion of the forced-choice elicitation production task as well as the picture-based comprehension task. Chapter 6 explains the results of the findings and discusses implications for future research and concludes this work.

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