

1.9 Acquisition of the English article system by Sri Lankan second language learners of English

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ABSTRACT

Many second language learners of English have trouble using the English article system properly. The primary causes for this phenomenon remain unclear. My research attempted to address this problem by examining the metalinguistic knowledge the learners employ when selecting articles in a given situation. This study attempted to understand better the process of making sense of the English article system by learners who are at different stages in their interlanguage development. Ninety Sri Lankan students with varying levels of proficiency following the Extension Courses in English at the University of Colombo participated. On the basis of an existing classification of English articles [a(n), the, 0], data on article usage were obtained. The qualitative and quantitative analyses reveal a number of conceptual differences with regard to their considerations of the hearer's knowledge, specific reference, cultural use etc., the influence of which causes errors in article use across different proficiency groups. The study revealed that the subjects, in spite of there being differences in the accuracy rates due to the proficiency levels, used the articles with confidence and accuracy when making specific reference. The cultural as well as generic reference of them remained problematic to the majority of the participants. In terms of the articles, **a(n)**, seems to have been acquired more easily than **the** contradicting the view that **the** emerges early and **a(n)** later, preventing **the** "flooding" phenomenon usually experienced by L2 learners. Low-ability level participants' interlanguage teems with the **zero** article.