



An Overview of the State of Art in Article Acquisition

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Abstract

The process of learning a second or foreign language that is different from one's native language can often be challenging. Among the various difficulties that can arise within this process, one seems to be transversal and occurs very frequently when an adult speaker of an article-less language learns a second language with articles. Articles are among the most commonly used words in many languages, such as English, and the omission or incorrect use of articles can seriously affect communication in many cases. This subject has been approached differently by various scholars, who have proposed different models to explain the phenomenon. The aim of this article, therefore, is therefore to review different perspectives on the acquisition of articles by adult learners speaking L1 article-less languages. After a brief introduction to the key concepts, the twelve main hypotheses on article acquisition by L1 article-less adult learners are presented and discussed in chronological order. Both the most widely accepted hypotheses in the literature at present (e.g., the Fluctuation Hypothesis) and the various hypotheses that have contributed significantly to the development of the different theories, such as Huebner's preliminary studies, are considered. By means of a chronological digression, it will thus be possible to obtain an overview of the state of the art of theories on the acquisition of L2 articles by native speakers of languages without articles.

Keywords: article acquisition, article-less languages, second language acquisition, second language learning

1. Introduction

One of the major concerns in second language learning appears to be related to article acquisition. Learning articles in one's mother tongue (L1) can already be a challenge, and there is evidence for example of the overuse of definite articles by children (Thomas, 1989) and article omission (Guasti et al., 2008). Also learning second language (L2) articles for speakers of languages with articles (+ART) can be complex, since articles vary between languages in terms of form and usage (see amongst others Sarko, 2009; Garcia-Mayo, 2009). These difficulties can increase in the case of an adult speaker of an article-less language learning a second language with articles. The aim of this paper is to review the principal theories that have been proposed during the years to explain these issues.

First, the concept of the article will be defined, along with the basic notion of definiteness and specificity. Thus, different hypotheses will be presented in chronological order, including the pioneering studies of Huebner and Master, continuing with the debate within the generative framework on the possibility for L2 learners to access UG parameters non-existent in their L1. This controversy led to the development of competing hypotheses, such as the Full Access/Full Transfer (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1994), which argues that L2 adult learners can access UG parameters, versus the Failed Function Features Hypothesis (Hawkins & Chan, 1997) and Feature Interpretability Hypothesis (Hawkins & Hattori, 2006) which are less optimistic regarding L2 learner's access to parameters absent in their L1. Many scholars belonging to this framework will then be introduced and their hypothesis will be discussed, such as Robertson (2000) and his work on article omission, Prévost and White (2000) and the Missing Surface Hypothesis, Goad and White (2004) who developed the Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis, Ionin et al. (2004) and Fluctuation Hypothesis, subsequently revised by Tryzna (2009), Sorace and Filiaci (2006) and the Interface Hypothesis by Trenkic (2007), and the Syntactic Misanalysis Account by Lardiere's Reassembly Hypothesis (2007).

2. Article Acquisition and L1 Article-less Languages

2.1 Background

The fact that the acquisition of the article system for L1 article-less (-ART) languages speakers is more challenging than article acquisition for L1 articulated (+ART) languages speakers has been extensively discussed and is widely accepted. In fact, the presence or absence of articles in one's mother tongue seems to have an impact on the acquisition of articles by adult learners; see amongst others Master (1987), Thomas (1989), Chini (1995), Miller (2005), Hawkins et al. (2005), Snape (2006), Ionin, et al., (2008). Many different models and theories have been proposed to explain the challenges found by -ART L1 learning +ART L2, and the issue has been faced in different ways, and various L1 languages have been considered; e.g., Chinese: Zobl (1982), Robertson (2000), Lardiere (2004, 2005), Snape (2008), Cho (2017); Czech and Slovak: Young (1996); Hmong: Huebner (1979); Japanese: Parrish (1987), Wakabayashi (1997), Snape (2006), Snape & Yusa (2013) Hawkins et al. (2005); Korean: Ionin et al. (2003); Persian: Geranpayeh (2000), Rezai and Jabbari (2010), Afzali (2017); Polish: Ekiert (2004); Russian: Ionin & Wexler (2003); Swahili: Kimambo (2016); Turkish: White (2003a), Hedberg et al. (2009). Many scholars have explored the issue, considering the concepts of definiteness and/or specificity, which are tightly related to the article system (amongst others: Huebner, 1983, 1985; Ionin, 2004, 2007, 2007; Tryzna, 2009). Other researchers have involved the primary role of prosody (Goad & White, 2004) or syntactic misanalysis (Trenkic, 2007). Others have focused more on the sequence of acquisition of the nominal morphology or the differences between L1 and L2/LS and the consequent transfers, investigating the issue from a more applied



perspective, dealing with the specificities of each language through means of contrastive or error analysis (for example Jafarpur, 1979, Master, 1987, 2002 and Chini, 1995, among others).

2.2 What is an article?

The article is a part of speech whose function is to determine a noun phrase (NP). This part of speech, usually described as a determiner (Bussmann, 1999 and Crystal, 2008), modifies the noun by adding some extra information (for example definiteness, gender, number) to the noun itself.

There are also other elements which can serve as determiners, for example demonstratives, numerals and some indefinite adjectives and quantifiers. These determiners convey the same features of the articles, but they also give other information, for example quantity, distribution, localization (Himmelman, 1996).

Unlike demonstratives, which can replace the noun, articles cannot stand alone, but their distribution is related and influenced by the noun which follows, and by several syntactic factors, such as the position and function of the nominal syntagma. Sometimes, in certain contexts, they can also be omitted (the so-called “zero article”). Articles can be analysed in many ways, depending on their use, function and the characteristics involved. For example, on a semantic level, articles mark extension, while on a pragmatic level they indicate if the designated entities are known to the speaker and/or to the hearer (Korzen, 1996).

However, according to Lyon (1999, p. 48), only a minority of the world’s languages mark (in)definiteness, while most of them do not explicitly mark it. Therefore, this differentiation amongst languages has some implications on language learning.

2.3 The Concept of Specificity and Definiteness

Definiteness is a semantic-pragmatic notion closely associated with the use of definite articles, concerning the grammatical encoding of identifiability and non-identifiability of referents on the part of a speaker or addressee. It is therefore related to the use of definite articles, which can appear in different conditions, such as deictic, anaphoric, unique and certain indirect uses. Definiteness can also be expressed with other parts of speech. In fact, depending on the language, personal pronouns, proper names, demonstratives, definite noun phrases (NPs) and universally quantified elements can also convey this feature (von Heusinger, 2011).

There are many views about definiteness, which has been a debated topic over the last century. Over time, two main schools of thought have appeared. The first one originated around 1905 with Russell and was later on further developed by other scholars such as Strawson (1950) amongst others and considers uniqueness to be the principal condition for definiteness. According to this line of thought, definite NPs account for a description of a unique entity (Abbott, 2010).

The competing idea originated with Christophersen (1939) who argues that definiteness implies the existence of a referent known by both the speaker and the hearer. Therefore, definiteness entails the concept of familiarity (or at least identifiability). In 1982 Heim enhanced this theory, suggesting that while indefinite NPs introduce new entities into the discourse, definite NPs refer to existing discourse entities (Lucas, 2011).

Many attempts have been suggested to synthesize these views. Hawkins, for example, tracing back from Russell, argues that the key concept in definiteness is inclusiveness, only indirectly linking it to familiarity. Lyons (1999) reviewed the previous theories in a cross-linguistics study, concluding that none of them is synchronically correct; and instead, he argues that definiteness is a grammaticalized category. According to his view, definiteness is not a semantic-pragmatic category as suggested before by other scholars, but instead a grammatical category (Lyons, 1999, p. 275).

Another original approach was developed by Gundel, Hedberg and Zacharski (1993) who suggested an implicational hierarchy based on cognitive status, called the Givenness Hierarchy. According to this scale, each status is associated with a particular referring form, which starting from the right (type identifiable) requires more and more condition of use.

In focus >	Activated >	Familiar >	Uniquely > identifiable	Referential >	Type identifiable
It	this N	that N	the N	indefinite/this N	a N

Figure 1. Givenness Hierarchy (Gundel, Hedberg & Zacharski,1993)

For example, in the weakest status (type identifiable) the listener needs to recur to a type representation, in order to associate a meaning to the NP. Referentiality requires that the NP is identifiable, while the uniquely identifiable also involves uniqueness et cetera (Hedberg et al., 2009).

3. Hypotheses on the Article Acquisition by Article-less Adult Learners

3.1 Huebner’s Pioneering Works

Proceeding in chronological order, one of the first scholars exploring this topic in some depth is Huebner (1983, 1985). His investigation traces back to Bickerton's (1981) semantic classification of noun phrases (NPs). By using this classification, Huebner suggests four contexts for the acquisition of the article system, based on the presence/absence of a Specific Referent [\pm SR] and Hearer’s Knowledge [\pm HK].

1. Non-specific referent with hearer’s knowledge, generic (the, a, \emptyset)
2. Specific referent with hearer’s knowledge, previously mentioned, known, present during the action, unique (the)
3. Specific referent without hearer’s knowledge, first mention or after existential have or there is/are (a, \emptyset)
4. Non-specific referent, without hearer’s knowledge, equative NPs or those in negation, question or irrealis mode (a, \emptyset)

Figure 2. Bickerton's (1981) semantic classification

Huebner (1983) aimed to understand the development of the article system in the interlanguage¹ of a L1 Hmong student learning English, untutored and as a beginner, and to analyse the different methodologies used in the field. His longitudinal study lasted 54 weeks, and he videotaped his informant every three weeks. This research allowed him to observe six acquisitional stages:

1. Use of “the” in +SR, +HK context
2. Overuse of “the”
3. Exclusion of “the” in -SR, -HK-
4. Use of “the” with definite referents
5. Use of “the” in +SR, -HK contexts (learner’s hypothesis testing)
6. Rejection of the previous hypothesis, use of “the” with +HK

Huebner did not claim this path to be universal, but instead suggested that these results reflected the systematic nature of language acquisition. Moreover, in 1985 he tested Givon’s (1982) Quantity Universal, stating that “most continuous, predictable, nondisruptive topics will be marked by less marking material, while less continuous, unpredictable/ surprising or disruptive topics will be marked by more marking material”, assuming that the degree of marking is a function of phonological length and morphological complexity.

0 / pronoun (unstressed) / pronoun (stressed) / noun / repeated NP	
most continuous topic	less continuous topic

His findings partially confirmed Givon’s theory². In fact, he noticed the use of “the” in +SR, +HK context with the exception of when it occurred as topic, in which case it was marked with 0, assuming that the reason behind this was to avoid redundancy - since they were “unambiguously marked by means of word order, a topic-comment boundary marker” (Huebner, 1985 p. 148).

3.2 Master’s Contributions

Later on, in 1987, also Master, for his dissertation thesis, built on both Bickerton’s (1981) semantic classification of noun phrases and Huebner’s results. He focused on the influence of L1 towards article acquisition, and he pointed out the influences this may have on L2. He stated that there is not a unique learning pattern since learners’ experiences are different, but he pointed out how L1 could affect them.

In his work, he investigated how speakers of L1 article-less languages acquire the English article system. Therefore, he interviewed 20 learners of English as Foreign Language. Some of the participants’ L1 were -ART languages, namely Russian, Polish, Chinese (both Cantonese and Mandarin) and Japanese, while others were speakers of +ART languages (German, Spanish). He observed how the learning patterns of -ART languages students differ from the ones of those speaking German and Spanish. In fact, he noticed that the acquisition of indefinite articles is delayed for those with L1 -ART.

The pattern appeared to be the following:

1. Prominency of Ø article
2. (Over)use of article “the”
3. Acquisition of “a/an” (delayed, for those ones with L1 -ART.)

Therefore, Master (2002) concludes that, at the elementary levels of English proficiency, the L1 has a remarkable influence on how learners use articles in L2 English.

In more recent works, Master (2002) took into account the importance of Information Structure on the acquisition of articles. Information structure describes the way in which the information is provided to the listener. He claims that givenness, that is the distinction between old/known information and new information, plays an important role in the acquisition of articles. Referring to Yule (1998), he claimed that information structure marks given/old/known information with “the” and new information with “a” or “Ø”. Moreover, citing Chafe (1976, 1979, 1987, 1994) he stated that given information can also be provided using “attenuated forms” such as pronouns, whereas new information is arranged with full NPs. These general structures are often violated (one third of the total nouns analysed), nevertheless Master argues that information structure can be an interesting pedagogical tool. He proved this with a pilot study in which the results of three groups were compared. 48 participants of various languages were selected (16 L1 Chinese, 14 L1 Korean, 6 L1 Japanese, 4 L1 Spanish, 2 L1 Arabic, 2 L1 Thai, 2 L1 Vietnamese, one L1 German and one L1 French) and divided into three groups. The first group were instructed with information structure as a main principle in article choice; the second group was taught with the same material but with traditional teaching methods and the control group was given no instructions. Findings supported Master’s hypothesis, according to which Information Structure plays a relevant role in article acquisition (Master, 2002).

3.3 The Full Transfer Full Access (FT/FA) Hypothesis

This hypothesis was initially proposed by Schwartz and Sprouse in 1994, within the Generative framework. The possibility to achieve native-like attainment in adult age has been of primary interest for generative linguists, who have investigated the problem considering learners’ access to UG and parameter resetting. Within this perspective, two different schools of thought have arisen. The first, which includes for example the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis and the Full Functional Representation Hypothesis (Slabakova, 2002), claims that learners have the possibility to acquire L2 functional categories, their features and properties to a native-like level with sufficient exposure to the target language. The second approach argues that L2 features absent in L1, cannot be acquired to a native-like level, and it encompasses for example the contributions by Hawkins (1997, 2000, 2003).

¹ The term “interlanguage” refers to the linguistic system used by an adult learner, in the process of acquiring a L2/FL. According to Selinker (1972) interlanguage’s grammar is systematic at every level.

² In fact, he noticed the use of “the” in SR+, HK+ context with the exception of when it occurred as topic, in which case they were marked with 0, assuming that the reason behind this was to avoid redundancy - since they were “unambiguously marked by means of word order, a topic-comment boundary marker.” (Huebner, 1985, p. 148) However, pronouns copy did not behave as expected. (ibidem, p. 153)

In the FT/FA hypothesis, Schwartz and Sprouse in 1994 argued that the initial state of L2 acquisition is the last stage of L1 acquisition, meaning that all features of L1 are automatically transferred to L2 interlanguage at the initial stage. While learners slowly improve in L2, these parameters are gradually reset.

Schwartz and Sprouse (1994) examined the acquisition of German by an adult native speaker of Turkish, whose spontaneous data was collected over 26 months. The focus of the research was related to verb position, since German and Turkish behave similarly on an overt level but present some differences on a covert one. Results supported the FT/FA hypothesis since the speaker accessed L2 parameters, such as verb position.

Sarko (2009) work's results were consistent with this hypothesis (along with the Fluctuation Hypothesis and the MSIH). Her research included 84 participants, namely 57 L1 Syrian Arabic-speaking (SA) learners of English, 18 L1 French learners of English and 9 English native controls. Sarko focused on the acquisition of English articles by native speakers of French and Syrian Arabic, and she speculated that, according to FT/FA hypothesis, Both L1 Syrian Arabic and L1 French speakers will produce "the" in English in definite contexts, since both languages have overt article forms that encode definiteness (with some variability in count plural and mass NPs).

3.4 Hawkins' Failed Function Features Hypothesis and Feature Interpretability Hypothesis

Hawkins' contributions to the fields are wide and particularly relevant. He explained the misuse of the English articles by L1 ART-language learners and the apparent impossibility of reaching a level comparable to that of a native speaker as a problem in accessing the right parameters in the Universal Grammar (UG). During the years, he proposed different theories.

Hawkins and Chan's (1997) first theory, the Failed Function Features Hypothesis, can be seen as a response to previous positions such as Full Transfer Full Access Hypothesis. Against this hypothesis, Hawkins and Chan argued that the characteristics of L2 which do not exist in L1, are no longer learnable after childhood. To test this hypothesis, in 1997 they conducted a study on the proficiency of L1 Chinese learners of English on wh-operator movement, considering that this is a functional category not represented in Chinese overt syntax but present in English. The study included 147 L1 Chinese-speaking learners of English, 113 L1 French speakers learning English and 33 English-speakers as a control group. Results showed that, even though Chinese speakers became more accurate in their use of English, their mental representation did not seem to involve the wh-operator movement, in contrast to the French speakers' control group results.

In 2005, Hawkins conducted a similar study with Hattori, investigating the acquisition of the feature that forces wh-movement in the interrogative in English, by 19 L1 speakers of Japanese highly proficient in English. In this study however, Hawkins and Hattori supported Tsimpli and Dimitrakopoulou's hypothesis, according to which only certain characteristics remain impossible to decode for L2 learners to achieve a native-speaker-like level, namely the ones which are non-interpretable due to their lack in L1, in the so-called "Feature Interpretability Hypothesis".

3.5 Robertson and the Three Principles for Article's Omission

Another interesting perspective is the one suggested by Robertson (2000). In his study he investigated the variability in the use of English L2 articles by Chinese speakers. In this study 18 Chinese learners of English were asked to perform referential communication tasks so that they could produce samples of speech which were rich in referring NPs (Robertson, 2000). Results indicated that the indefinite article was rarely used. Moreover, Robertson noticed that in echo contexts (contexts where two similar NPs marked a tonal boundary)³, articles were omitted.

He explained article omission with three principles:

1. Determiner Drop Syntactic Principle, whereby an NP with definite or indefinite reference, need not be overtly marked for [\pm definiteness] if it is included in the scope of the determiner of a preceding NP.
2. Recoverability Principle, whereby an NP need not be marked for [\pm definiteness] if the information encoded in this feature is recoverable from the context.
3. Lexical Transfer Principle, whereby some of these learners were using demonstratives (particularly "this") and the numeral one as markers of definiteness and indefiniteness respectively.

Robertson summed up these principles in a re-mapping principle, where he sees these as attempts to move from a discourse-oriented grammar (Chinese) to a syntax-oriented one (English).

3.6 Prévost and White and the Missing Surface Hypothesis

Prévost and White (2000) proposed the Missing Surface Hypothesis (MSIH) to explain errors in the use of inflectional morphology in L2 production, within generative framework. According to their hypothesis, even though L2 learners may have acquired correctly the abstract features related to the properties expressed by inflectional morphology, they may have problems in mapping them on an overt level. The MSIH was suggested as competitor to the Impaired Representation Hypothesis (Eubank, 1993/4 & Meisel, 1997). Impaired Representation Hypothesis assumes that L2 inflection is essentially impaired, due to lack of functional categories, features or feature strength. Prévost and White (2000) therefore tested the two hypotheses analysing the spontaneous production data from two adult learners of French and two adult learners of German. The results seem to support the MSIH, since the data show that learners were to some extent aware of finiteness and agreement at an abstract level but lacking the operative knowledge.

The MSIH was also tested later, in relation to the fossilization of the interlanguage grammars, and specifically with regards to article production. White (2003a) wanted to better understand the development of the interlanguage over time. She therefore analysed the oral and written production of a female adult L1 Turkish, who learned English first at school and subsequently in Canada. The data collection included spontaneous data, written tests and morphological data elicitation. The research consisted of 4 interviews delivered over 2 months and an additional interview which took place around 18 months later. In line with previous studies, the learner performed better in definite

³ He defined an echo context as "a context where two coreferential NPs with the same head noun occur separated by a turn-boundary, and where the second occurrence of the NP functions as a comprehension check; typically, the second occurrence occurs as an isolated NP, not as part of a predication" (Robertson, 2000, p. 157).

contexts than in indefinite ones; the definite article was in fact supplied in about 72% of obligatory contexts, while the indefinite article only 60% of the time, and there were many cases of article omission. Differently from previous studies, there was no usage of definite articles in indefinite contexts and vice versa, and the data from the written elicitation task indicated a good understanding of definite and indefinite contexts, suggesting that the learner was aware of \pm definiteness distinction even though this was not present in her L1, Turkish, which in fact realizes a morphological distinction between \pm specific. The fact that the learner was aware of the abstract features of English, namely the articles, but not able to fully perform them, supported the MSIH, according to which the issue is located on the realization of surface morphology. The main limit of this hypothesis is that even though it works well in explaining the errors, it cannot predict them. Furthermore, errors appearing especially on a spoken level contribute to supporting the prosodic account (further deepened in Goad & White, 2004).

Meanwhile, Lardiere (2004, 2005) investigated the surface realization of definiteness in the acquisition of English. Lardiere was interested in understanding the problems that L2 learners face and the extension of the influence of L1 transfers. Therefore, she analysed audio records and written samples of a L1 Mandarin Chinese learner of English. What Lardiere noticed was that:

1. There were more omission and less substitution errors in the oral errors.
2. She performed better in +DEF NPs than in -DEF NPs in both written and oral tasks.

Whence, Lardiere concluded that her informant acquired definiteness but had some issues with mapping elements. Therefore, her results seem to support the MSIH.

3.7 Goad and White and the Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis

Still in the generative framework, starting in 2004, Goad and White integrated MSIH with the Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis (PTH), according to which L2 performance is also influenced by the gap of prosodic representations between L1 and L2. The authors therefore argue that L1 prosodic phonology constrains production of L2 functional morphology. Therefore, they re-examined the data collected by White (2003a) to test this hypothesis, predicting a pattern for the article production in line with Turkish prosody. However, this hypothesis is restricted to oral production (Goad & White, 2004).

3.8 Ionin, the Article Choice Parameter and the Fluctuation Hypothesis

Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004) also worked within a generative framework, however they suggested a different approach. Considering cross-linguistic differences and assuming that each language marks either definiteness or specificity but cannot have two distinct marks for them, they consider articles as a parameter having one of these two possible settings. They follow Lyons' theorisation on definiteness, arguing that a DP is definite if the entity is known to both speaker and hearer, while it is specific if it is known only to the speaker.

1. Have you found a watch? – I'm sure I left it lying here. (-DEF +SPEC)
2. Have you found a watch? – or can't you decide what kind you want to buy? (-DEF -SPEC)
3. Did Fred meet the woman of his dreams during his trip to Poland last year? – or am I mistaken in thinking that accent is Polish? (+DEF +SPEC)
4. Did Fred meet the woman of his dreams during his trip to Poland last year? – or is he still looking? (+DEF -SPEC) (Lyons, 1999, p. 167)

Therefore, they stated that every language that has two articles, distinguishes them on the basis of definiteness (definiteness setting) or specificity (specificity setting) (Ionin et al., 2004, p. 12).

For instance, English articles are arranged around definiteness (\pm definite) while in Samoan they are distinguished on the basis of specificity (\pm specificity).

Table 1. Definiteness and Specificity in the Article Choice Parameter (Ionin et al., 2004)

	By definiteness (e.g., English)		By specificity (e.g., Samoan)	
	+definite	-definite	+definite	-definite
+specific	The	a/an	le	
-specific			se	

Therefore, assuming that L2 learners' access both settings of the Article Choice Parameter (ACP), they are expected to fluctuate between the definiteness and specificity settings during their learning process, until when the input leads them to set the parameter to its appropriate value (Ionin et al., 2004, p. 16). Thus, the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH) was proposed to account for these facts.

This hypothesis was tested on 70 adult L2 English learners, 30 L1 Russian speakers and 40 L1 Korean speakers (both -ART languages), plus 14 L1 English speakers as a control group. Their aim was to demonstrate that there is a parametric variation in the lexical specification of the articles (Ionin, 2004, p. 3), meaning that articles can realize either definiteness or specificity parameter, depending on the language. The participants were given a forced-choice elicitation task, a written production task, and a 30 multiple-choice items test. The context considered included four definite and four indefinite context types and different scope of interaction: +DEF +SPEC wide scope, +DEF +SPEC no scope interaction, +DEF -SPEC narrow scope, +DEF -SPEC no scope interaction, -DEF -SPEC narrow scope, DEF -SPEC no scope interaction, -DEF+SPEC wide scope, -DEF+SPEC no scope interaction. FH hypothesis was supported by the findings. Moreover, the results from the elicitation task showed that the main errors were the overuse of "the" with indefinites and overuse of "a" with definites, leading the authors to claim that both errors are related to the association between "the" and the feature +SPEC showing that the misuse of article is not random but related to learners' semantic distinction of definiteness and specificity.

In a subsequent study, Ionin Zubizarreta and Maldonado (2008) focused on three sources of linguistic knowledge in the acquisition of articles by L2 learners of English: L1 transfer, L2 input and UG. In particular, her aim was to investigate the differences in the patterns of article usage amongst speakers of +ART and -ART languages. The participants were 23 L1 Russian speakers (-ART language), 24 Spanish speakers (+ART language) and 6 English native speakers as a control group. In this study, two competing hypotheses were tested, in order to understand the role of L1-transfer on the article semantics acquisition. The first hypothesis was that fluctuation overrides L1 transfer; implying that the errors of Spanish and Russian learners should be similar, since they both fluctuate between the parameters of

specificity/definiteness. The second and opposite hypothesis suggests that L1 transfer overrides fluctuation, implying that only –ART LANG speakers would fluctuate between the two settings, while +ART LANG speakers would rely on their L1 and avoid the fluctuation. The experiment was conducted using cloze tests and elicitation tasks and the results validated the second hypothesis. In fact, two different patterns emerged. Russian-speakers' pattern overused “the” in specific indefinite contexts and “a” with non-specific definites. Spanish speakers instead were quite accurate on both definite and indefinite contexts, except for some cases of article omission in sentences which required article omission in their L1.

These findings were also supported by the study of Garcia-Mayo (2009), who tested the Fluctuation Hypothesis on 40 +ART LANG learners L1 Spanish, half of them were low intermediate and the other half were advanced. Plus, a control group of 15 English native speakers was included. She found out that the low intermediate group used “the” in the indefinite context considerably more when a given NP was specific than when it was non-specific, while advanced L2 English learners did not fluctuate between the and a/an. Therefore, she concluded that there is no fluctuation between specificity/definiteness for L1 +ART learners.

Ionin's Fluctuation hypothesis has been the basis for many other researches. Among others, Rezai and Jabbari (2010) who investigated acquisition of definiteness features by Persian L2 learners of English, Runić (2012) who worked on the topic of the acquisition of Italian articles by Serbo-Croatian L1 speakers, and Kimambo (2016) who explored the acquisition of definiteness by L1 Swahili speakers.

3.9 The Interface Hypothesis

The Interface Hypothesis, first suggested by Sorace and Filiaci (2006), claims that the difficulties in L2 learning are mainly located at a pragmatic level, especially amongst advanced learners, since the acquisition of grammatical categories is not problematic itself nor is it the interface between syntax and semantic. The real issue lies on the interface between internal components of the grammar and external components. The Interface Hypothesis was first suggested to explain a pattern that Sorace and Filiaci noticed amongst proficient L2 learners of Italian, in relation to overt pronouns. In fact, they observed a conspicuous over-extension of the scope of overt subject pronouns in the presence of a topical antecedent. On the contrary, errors related to the subject omission were not detected.

However, when this hypothesis was tested in relation to the acquisition of English articles (Park, 2013) it did not hold. Park conducted an acceptability judgment task to test the use of articles in definite, indefinite and generic contexts. Park distinguished the generic use of English articles as internal interface, and the (in)definite use of them as external interface. Therefore, according to her hypothesis, to support the Interface Hypothesis, learners should perform better on the generic use of articles. 77 L1 Korean L2 English speaking participants were selected, plus 21 L1 English speakers as a control group. Results showed that participants performed correctly correlating “the” in +DEF contexts and “a” in -DEF contexts. However, compared to the control group, they over-accepted “the” in indefinite contexts and “a” in definite contexts. Moreover, they did perform better in (in)definite contexts than in generic ones. Park attributed this difference to the semantic constraints related to the generic article use, arguing however that external interfaces are not totally problematic.

3.10 Trenkic and the Syntactic Misanalysis Hypothesis

The Syntactic Misanalysis Hypothesis presents a different perspective on the topic. Trenkic (2007) accounted for a possible explanation of the non-target-like use of the article by suggesting that L2 English articles are mis-analysed as nominal modifiers. She argues that the category of definiteness is present in Serbian (as in *ev*, yet it is not grammaticalized, meaning that there are no specialized linguistic elements which give information about this category).

Trenkic (2007) conducted research on a group of 12 students L1 Serbian learning English L2. The focus of the study was the production of articles in article + adjective + noun contexts versus article + noun contexts. The experiments consisted in an oral communicative task (map description) and a written task. The first task consisted in a map description, in which the learners exchanged information that was both new and already known. The second task was a translation.

Results showed that:

1. In the map-description task, more articles were omitted in adjectivally modified NPs than in non-modified NPs
2. In the translation task there was a higher ratio of omission for lower proficiency learners, and the use of +DEF was more accurate than –DEF.

Trenkic compared this data to the data obtained by Goad and White (2004) from a Turkish speaker. Both sets of data were similar, however Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis failed to explain the results for many reasons. In fact, such errors were not only present in the oral task but also in the written test. Moreover, even in the spoken production, the PTH did not predict the established pattern in Serbian speakers' L2 English. In addition, the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis could not account for the results. In fact, even though it would be possible to retrospectively claim that adjectivally modified contexts could be more challenging, there would be no reason to state so.

Instead, Trenkic suggested that learners misanalysed English articles as nominal modifiers, to which they associated lexical meanings. Broadening the perspective, Trenkic claims that L2 learners whose L1 does not grammaticalize definiteness analyse English articles as adjectives, implying therefore that their article production is “lexically based and pragmatically motivated” (Trenkic, 2007, p. 315). Trenkic conducted another study (2008), where she tested the Fluctuation Hypothesis versus the Syntactic Misanalysis Hypothesis. A forced-choice elicitation task based on Ionin's (2004) was given to a group of 43 L1 Mandarin L2 English postgraduates students. To test the two hypotheses, Trenkic, beside definiteness and specificity, also included explicitly stated knowledge (ESK). Therefore, six contexts were provided: +DEF +SPEC + ESK, +DEF - SPEC - ESK, +DEF +SPEC - ESK, -DEF -SPEC -ESK, -DEF +SPEC +ESK, -DEF +SPEC - ESK.

Results showed that participants overused “the” in -DEF +SPEC +ESK contexts more than in -SPEC -ESK and +SPEC -ESK contexts. Moreover, they overused “a” in +DEF -SPEC -ESK and +DEF -SPEC +ESK more than in +DEF +SPEC +ESK contexts. Therefore, Trenkic concluded that specificity was not involved, and findings supported the Missing Surface Inflection. Data was explained through the concept of familiarity instead of definiteness/specificity, and she suggested that articles were misrepresented as \pm DEF adjectives, conveying the meaning of \pm familiarity.

3.11 Lardiere and the Reassembly Hypothesis

Lardiere also developed Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (FRH) in 2008. Belonging to a generative perspective, she stated that language acquisition involves processes more complex than simple parameter resetting or feature selection. Therefore, she moved the focus from the presence/absence of a determinate feature in the L1 and target language to how these features are bundled into lexical items in the two languages. Examining the production of a L1 Chinese adult speaker learning English as L2 over a period of eight and a half years, Lardiere noticed that she performed quite accurately almost all the properties analysed, but with a high degree of variability. Lardiere concludes that the problem may be located in the specific realization of linguistic features. Therefore, Lardiere suggests the FRH, arguing that during the L2 acquisition, it is necessary to re-assemble the L1 lexical features into appropriate feature bundles in the target language. This task is not easy, since it encompasses many challenges, such as knowing the association of various functional categories in the syntax, in which lexical items these features are expressed, how the combinations are assembled, the optionality of certain forms and so on. Her hypothesis was later on tested also on L2 acquisition of Russian expressions of definiteness (Cho & Slabakova, 2014). In this research, the authors aimed to study how the reassembled works in relation to overt and covert realization of features, focusing on how definiteness was conveyed in L1 and L2. The research was conducted on 158 participants, 52 native speakers of Korean, 49 English learning Russian L2 and a control group of 56 L1 Russian native speakers, who were required to evaluate the acceptability of test sentences in context. Korean does not have articles like Russian, while English uses articles to mark definiteness and indefiniteness. The focus of the research was on the expression of indefiniteness in Russian, through the use of adjectival possessors and word order. Results showed that it is more difficult to acquire a feature which is overt in L1 but covert (marked) in L2 than when it is marked with some functional morphology in both languages.

3.12 Tryzna's Reduced Article Choice Parameter

Tryzna (2009) gave a different analysis of the differences between English and Samoan articles, considered by Ionin (2003, 2004) to explain the Article Choice Parameter, arguing that the Samoan article "le" is used also in +SPEC –DEF.

She re-analysed the role of Samoan articles through a translation made by a Samoan-English bilingual informant who was asked to translate 34 mini-dialogues from English to Samoan. The data collection lasted six months and was later validated by two L1 Samoan informants. Data showed that actually le was not used only in specific contexts but also in non-specific definite ones. Therefore Tryzna (2009) adjusted ACP theory as follows:

Table 2. Definiteness and Specificity in the Reduced Article Choice Parameter (Tryzna, 2009)

	Specificity setting (e.g., Samoan)	Definiteness setting (e.g., English)
Non-specific indefinite (-DEF, -SPEC)	se	a/an
Specific indefinite (-DEF, +SPEC)	le	
Definite (+DEF, +SPEC)		the

The Reduced Article Choice Parameter also affects the new Fluctuation hypothesis; therefore, Tryzna adapted it as follows:

Table 3. the Reduced Article Choice Parameter (Tryzna, 2009)

	Specificity setting (e.g., Samoan)	Definiteness setting (e.g., English)	L2 English FH
Non-specific indefinite (-DEF, -SPEC)	se	a/an	a
Specific indefinite (-DEF, +SPEC)	le		a/the
Definite (+DEF, +SPEC)		the	the

4. Conclusion

In this paper, several hypotheses have been presented to explain the reasons for the difficulties that L1 speakers without articles have in learning an L2 language with articles. In the introduction, the basic concepts involved in this research area were presented, such as the definition of what an article is, the main approaches and frameworks, and the key concepts of definiteness and specificity. Thus, the main hypotheses currently involved in the discussion on article acquisition have been presented in chronological order.

The section begins with Huebner's initial studies, which form the starting point for all subsequent research, and Masters' extensive contribution to both article acquisition and article pedagogy. Thus, the debate within the generative framework about the possibility for L2 learners to access UG parameters not present in their L1 leads to the development of competing hypotheses, such as the Full Access/Full Transfer versus the Failed Function Features Hypothesis and Feature Interpretability Hypothesis. Among those generativists who advocated the possibility of L2 learners accessing these parameters, the discussion focused on where the issue is therefore located. Prévost and White (2000) suggested that the challenge was to map the abstract features already acquired on an overt level. Goad and White (2004) integrated this hypothesis with the Prosodic Transfer hypothesis, which involves phonology in the misuse of articles. Mapping problems were also the core concept of Robertson's (2000) and Lardiere's (2005, 2008) studies. Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004) followed a different path by pointing out suggesting a difficulty in setting the definiteness/specificity parameter (Article Choice Parameter), which can differ from -ART L1 and +ART L2, and expected fluctuation between specificity and definiteness. Tryzna (2009) adjusted the hypothesis, reviewed new data, and proposed a new Fluctuation Hypothesis. Trenkic (2007) claimed instead that the misuse of articles in many cases was related to syntactic misinterpretation, with -ART L1 speakers interpreting articles as adjectives. In 2013, the Interface Hypothesis was also tested to explain article misuse, but did not seem to be supported by the data.

All the hypotheses presented contributed to providing a broader and more complete vision of the subject, analysing it from different angles and highlighting different aspects of the problem. Over time, several scholars hypothesized how the problem might lie at different grammatical levels (e.g., phonological, syntactic, pragmatic, semantic). In this way, it was possible for subsequent hypotheses to address the problem more comprehensively by considering other perspectives. Currently, within the SLA literature, the most influential hypothesis seems to be Ionin's fluctuation hypothesis, which refers to the Article Choice Parameter. Indeed, this hypothesis can explain a large number of cases and has been tested with several language combinations.

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