

A Study of Chinese Learners' Interlanguage Knowledge of the English Articles

ZHOU Baoguo

中国学生英语冠词 过渡语知识研究

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内 容 提 要

本书对中国学生英语冠词过渡语知识的发展状况进行了考察。针对中国学生英语冠词知识方面存在的缺陷,作者围绕三个问题展开了讨论:①英汉语言类型之间的差别如何影响中国学生英语冠词习得;②冠词语义如何影响不同用法的习得难易度;③学习者因素如何限制英语冠词习得中的输入处理。研究结果显示,英语和汉语名词词组内部结构存在差异,这种差异是导致中国学生零冠词误用现象的重要原因,而复杂的冠词语义则是造成中国学生过度使用定冠词的深层原因。此外,成人所特有的认知学习风格在输入处理中发挥作用会导致习得过程中出现语际和语内两类干扰,影响中国学生英语冠词过渡语知识的发展。这些研究结果有助于加深对中国英语学习条件下成人习得英语冠词系统的了解。

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前 言 (Forword)

英语冠词系统是二语习得中的一个难点,不少专家都认为这一系统是二语习得中最后才能被完全掌握的项目。正因为如此,英语冠词习得一直是研究人员所关注和感兴趣的课题。本人攻读博士学位期间在导师王初明教授的指导下,对中国学生英语冠词过渡语知识的发展状况作了一些探讨,并在第二语言习得认知研究的理论框架中着重考察了造成中国学生英语冠词知识缺陷的主要因素,包括语言类型差别、英语冠词语义以及成人二语习得输入处理特征等。这项研究工作以及所获得的成果有助于加深对第二语言英语冠词系统习得过程的了解,并在一定程度上揭示了中国学生英语冠词习得中所面临的困难和问题,对深化这一课题的研究和英语教学实践有一定的参考价值。

本书所报告的研究得到了众多教师及学生的帮助。没有他们的支持、鼓励与参与,这项研究是无法完成的。本人在此向他们表示衷心的感谢。本人还要感谢科学出版社为本书的出版所提供的支持与帮助。郝建华女士在编辑过程中做了大量的工作,使本书得以顺利出版,本人在此也一并致谢。希望本书的出版能引起更多研究者对这一领域的关注和兴趣,并对相关的课题开展进一步研究以取得更多的研究成果。

周保国
2006年5月
于武昌珞珈山

Abstract

The major concern of second language acquisition research is with how interlanguage develops. This thesis focuses on one area of study along this line by investigating Chinese learners' interlanguage knowledge of the English articles. An exploratory study shows that Chinese learners of English have a good command of some article usages but exhibit incomplete knowledge of other usages in spite of their high level of English proficiency. Learners' incomplete article knowledge is brought to a close scrutiny in this thesis, centering on three research questions: (i) how do typological differences between English and Chinese influence English article acquisition by Chinese learners? (ii) how does article semantics affect ease or difficulty in the acquisition of different English article usages? and (iii) how does the learner factor constrain input processing in English article acquisition? A review of literature shows that the three factors specified in the research questions bear on L2 learners' development of interlanguage knowledge of the English articles. Based on this review, a unified framework in conformity with the cognitive approach to SLA is proposed, guiding subsequent research.

Within the framework three studies were carried out with each focusing on one factor. Study 1 examines the learner factor and its influence on article acquisition. The results show that adult learners' preferred cognitive learning style has a role to play in input processing, which manifests itself in either interlingual or intralingual interference in the acquisition process. Study 2 probes the phenomenon of overgeneralization of *the* in L2 article acquisition. Previous studies have

shown that L2 learners tend to overgeneralize *the* in non-obligatory contexts. Although various explanations for such overgeneralization errors have been given, the present study approaches the issue from a different perspective and affords evidence that complex article semantics might be an underlying cause. Study 3 focuses on the erroneous nonuse of surface articles (otherwise known as the zero phenomenon) in L2 article acquisition. An analysis of the noun phrase typology reveals that English and Chinese differ in the internal structure of noun phrases and due to this difference, the distribution of bare singular count nouns are much restricted in English. However, the study shows that Chinese learners of different English proficiency exhibit a strong tendency to accept bare singular count nouns both in comprehension and in production, although this form is deviant from the native speaking norm. A conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the NP typology is related to the zero phenomenon.

The three studies have gone some way towards answering the three research questions. All the three factors (i.e. typological differences between English and Chinese, article semantics and the adult cognitive learning style) influence English article acquisition by Chinese learners and contribute in various ways to their incomplete article knowledge. The studies have done much to deepen our understanding of how adult L2 learners acquire the English article system in the Chinese context.

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Finally and most importantly, I thank my wife, Fei Wu, and my daughter, Xiang Zhou, for giving me the strength and support I needed

to complete this thesis. My wife was my unwavering supporter and she encouraged me throughout the course of my doctoral studies to never give up and to always strive for excellence. Needless to say, without the support of my family, it would have been very difficult for me to get to this point of academic accomplishment.

CONTENTS

Forword	i
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
List of Tables	vii
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 Chinese learners' interlanguage knowledge of the English articles: A preliminary study	7
2.1 Linguistic background	7
2.1.1 Noun semantics	8
2.1.2 Classifications of referential meanings of noun phrases	9
2.2 A preliminary study	13
2.2.1 Participants	14
2.2.2 Materials	15
2.2.3 Procedure	18
2.2.4 Results	18
2.3 The research questions of this thesis	22
Chapter 3 Literature review	25
3.1 Typological differences and L2 article acquisition	25
3.1.1 Zero contrast and L2 article acquisition	25
3.1.2 The typological difference of sentence structures and L2 article acquisition	29
3.1.3 The noun phrase typology and L2 article acquisition	33
3.2 Article semantics and L2 article acquisition	40
3.2.1 Early research	40
3.2.2 Article semantics and the Article Choice Parameter	44
3.3 The learner factor and L2 article acquisition	49

3.3.1	Models of adult second language learning.....	50
3.3.2	The adult cognitive learning style.....	52
3.4	Summary.....	54
Chapter 4	Study 1.....	55
4.1	Predicted interlingual and intralingual interference.....	55
4.2	Methods.....	58
4.2.1	Participants.....	59
4.2.2	Tasks and procedure.....	60
4.2.3	Results and discussion.....	64
4.3	Summary.....	71
Chapter 5	Study 2.....	72
5.1	Article semantics revisited.....	72
5.2	Methods.....	79
5.2.1	Task and procedure.....	79
5.2.2	Results and discussion.....	83
5.3	Summary.....	88
Chapter 6	Study 3.....	90
6.1	Asymmetry in L2 parameter resetting.....	91
6.2	The markedness status of the configurationality and the mass-count parameters.....	92
6.3	Negative evidence and frequency of occurrence.....	96
6.4	Methods.....	101
6.4.1	Materials.....	101
6.4.2	Results.....	103
6.4.3	Discussion.....	107
6.5	Summary.....	112
Chapter 7	General discussion and conclusion.....	114
7.1	Major findings.....	114
7.2	General discussion.....	116
7.2.1	Input processing in L2 English article acquisition	

across the three studies.....	116
7.2.2 The effect of typological differences.....	118
7.2.3 The effect of article semantics.....	121
7.2.4 The effect of the learner factor.....	123
7.3 Pedagogical implications.....	126
7.4 Suggestions for future research.....	127
Appendix A	129
Appendix B	131
Appendix C	132
Appendix D	139
Appendix E	144
Appendix F	148
Appendix G	149
Appendix H	175
Appendix I	177
References	185

List of Tables

Table 1.1	Number of errors in four categories·····	2
Table 2.1	Types of message marked on nouns ·····	9
Table 2.2	Means and standard deviations of correct judgments··	19
Table 3.1	The noun phrase typology·····	34
Table 3.2	A four-stage hypothesis for the acquisition of English articles·	41
Table 3.3	Article grouping cross-linguistically: two-article languages	45
Table 3.4	Predictions for article choice in L2 English·····	47
Table 4.1	Characteristics of the participants ·····	59
Table 4.2	Summary of means and standard deviations·····	64
Table 4.3	Translation task results: summary of frequencies and percentages of Combinations 4 and 5·····	66
Table 4.4	Summary of means and standard deviations of four item types·····	68
Table 5.1	English article semantics as distinguished by definiteness and specificity·····	76
Table 5.2	Summary of means and standard deviations of the first two choices·····	83
Table 5.3	Article use of the first two choices for the three categories··	86
Table 5.4	<i>the</i> overuse in three specific indefinite contexts·····	87
Table 5.5	<i>the</i> overuse in three nonspecific indefinite contexts ····	88
Table 6.1	Summary of means and standard deviations·····	103
Table 6.2	Translation task results: summary of frequencies and percentages of Combination 3·····	105
Table 6.3	Results of Types 1, 2 and 4: summary of means and standard deviations·····	109

Chapter 1

Introduction

There is observational evidence that Chinese learners of English experience immense difficulty in acquiring the English articles. This coincides with what we can find in the pedagogical literature. Many ESL teachers report that the articles are often their number one difficulty in teaching (e.g. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999). Master (1990: 461) points out that “[t]he English article system is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for nonnative speakers and one of the latest to be fully acquired”. Even advanced ESL learners find it difficult to use the English articles accurately (Kharma, 1981; Yamada & Matsuura, 1982; Agnihotri, Khanna, & Mukherjee, 1984). Advanced Chinese learners of English are no exception. In an exploratory study that we have conducted to look into article acquisition, graduate students who were enrolled from English majors were found to commit abundant errors in their use of English articles. A random sample was taken of seven Ph.D dissertations and seven MA theses written during the years from 1998 to 2000 at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. Some article errors were randomly screened out from the fourteen theses. The errors can be roughly classified into four types: (i) erroneous omission of the indefinite article before singular count nouns; (ii) erroneous omission of the definite article before nouns of various kinds; (iii) erroneous uses of the definite article before plural count nouns; and (iv) various other errors (not specified). The statistics of the data are displayed in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Number of errors in four categories (with percentage in brackets)

Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Other	Total
9 (12.1)	32 (43.2)	19 (25.6)	14 (18.9)	74(100)

Typical examples of the first three types of error are as follows (the relevant noun phrases are given in *italics*):

- (1) The instrument used in this study is *open-ended questionnaire*, which is also called DCT (Discourse Completion Test). [Type 1]
- (2) Unfortunately, there is currently an absence of *explanatory theory* that is capable of explaining the mechanisms underlying the acquisition of an L2 word. [Type 1]
- (3) A CLD will be modeled on the mental lexicon in *arrangement of words* while retaining the stereotyped alphabetical order, if such an order is necessary or convenient to the user. [Type 2]
- (4) In other words, our focus of interest here is not in the meaning itself, or *form-meaning correlation*, but the process and dynamics of meaning generation. [Type 2]
- (5) In the Chinese culture, for example, there are some times when the cultural feature and flavor can hardly be transmitted. This is especially true of *the Chinese puns and couplets*. [Type 3]
- (6) In fact, if it is not possible to fully render it, it is certainly possible to satisfactorily translate it, that is, to reproduce most of its elements and make it understandable to *the target language readers*. [Type 3]

As shown in the above examples, Type 1 errors occur where singular count nouns without the indefinite article are used to denote non-specific reference; Type 2 errors occur where nouns are used to denote specific reference without the definite article; and Type 3 errors are committed where nouns preceded by the definite article are used to denote ge-

neric reference. Both Type 1 and Type 2 errors are in fact errors of omission (no articles in obligatory contexts) and Type 3 errors are errors of commission (use of articles in non-obligatory contexts) (cf. Hakuta 1976).

As the theses under investigation were carefully written and revised, use of articles in them should be taken as manifestations of the advanced Chinese learners' English competence regarding article usage. This small investigation demonstrates that the English article system is indeed difficult for Chinese learners of English and poses a challenge for SLA researchers to find out why it is so. The present thesis sets out to examine this learning difficulty by examining those factors that contribute to Chinese learners' incomplete knowledge of the English articles.

As a point of departure for the present study, we need to be aware of a few basic facts. One simple fact is that, for Chinese learners, the English articles are a category of zero contrast (Zobl 1982), that is, the article system is present in L2 English but absent in L1 Chinese. This typological difference may contribute to the learning difficulty Chinese learners experience in acquiring article usage. Another fact is that difficulty may occur to Chinese learners because of semantic complexity of the English articles. English is different from many other languages which also contain an article system in that very few article forms are employed. Still another fact has to do with adult learner features. Learners bring to the learning task their cognitive learning style in input processing, which may exert influence on how they develop interlanguage knowledge of the English article system. All these facts will be given due attention in this thesis.

The structure of the dissertation is as follows. After the Introduction (this chapter), Chapter 2 reports on a preliminary study that was conducted to find out Chinese learners' general command of knowledge of the English articles. The study is based on a linguistic analysis of English article usage, especially with reference to properties of noun phrases. A review of literature concerning mappings between article

forms and referential meanings of NPs is made and a framework is identified within which Chinese learners' article knowledge can be described. Cross-sectional data have been collected from four groups of participants in this study and findings of the study reveal that the Chinese learners show a partial command of different article usages and that even advanced Chinese learners' article knowledge is incomplete. In light of these findings, three phenomena of article acquisition are identified, giving rise to three research questions guiding the subsequent studies. They are: (i) How do typological differences between English and Chinese influence Chinese learners' English article acquisition? (ii) How does article semantics affect ease or difficulty in the acquisition of different English article usages? (iii) How does the adult learner factor constrain input processing in article acquisition?

Chapter 3 reviews relevant literature centering on the three research questions raised in Chapter 2. The review are revolved around three factors, namely, typological differences, article semantics and adult learner features. Studies of three types of typological difference in connection with Chinese learners' article acquisition are first examined and these studies show that typological differences affect L2 article acquisition in various ways. The issue of article semantics and its influence on acquisition is then considered and it is shown that a reanalysis of article semantics is needed to substantiate studies related to it. Finally, the learner factor is examined in terms of its role in L2 article acquisition. Three theoretical models of L2 acquisition are delineated, followed by a consideration of the adult cognitive learning style. The thesis concludes with a suggestion that subsequent research be carried out within a unified framework, that is, Chinese learners' English article acquisition should be viewed as a process of input processing and approached from a cognitive perspective.

Chapter 4 reports on a study which focuses on the adult cognitive learning style and input processing in the acquisition of the English

articles. The earlier review of literature has shown that a distinction can be drawn between two types of learning style for processing input in language acquisition. One is creation and the other is extension. Child learners prefer the former while adult learners prefer the latter. The stylistic differences in learning may help explain the difference in ultimate attainment between child and adult learners in L2 acquisition. It is noted that so far, evidence to support this argument comes from L2 phonological acquisition only. It is then argued that if adult learners tend to adopt the cognitive learning style of extension rather than creation, this should also be evidenced in L2 acquisition of other features and structures, say grammar, and that the adult cognitive learning style should bring about both interlingual and intralingual interference in L2 acquisition. With this frame of reference, two hypotheses are advanced and empirically tested. Data collected from the empirical study provide evidence that the preferred cognitive learning style of adult L2 learners does exert a major influence on Chinese learners' article acquisition and that the tendency of adult learners to inappropriately extend the existing knowledge system incurs not only interlingual interference but also intralingual interference in input processing of L2 article acquisition.

Chapter 5 depicts another study which deals with article semantics and overgeneralization of *the* in the acquisition of the English articles. Previous research has shown that L2 learners of English tend to overgeneralize *the* in non-obligatory contexts. However, explanations provided are not always compatible with each other. A reanalysis of the two key concepts of article semantics reveals that different contexts in terms of definiteness and specificity involve different degrees of complexity of semantic interrelation and that ease or difficulty of article acquisition in these contexts is supposedly tied to different degrees of such complexity. In light of this analysis three hypotheses about Chinese learners' English article acquisition are advanced and tested. Findings of the study have produced supporting evidence for the hypotheses. Possible reasons are given for the overgeneralization phenomenon, es-

pecially with regard to where and why the overuse is likely to occur. A conclusion which can be drawn from this study is that complex article semantics bears on Chinese learners' incomplete knowledge of the English articles.

Chapter 6 delineates still another study which focuses on the noun phrase typology and the zero phenomenon in English article acquisition. A cross-linguistic analysis reveals that English and Chinese differ a great deal in the internal structure of noun phrases and these typological differences are largely determined by two co-varying parameters of configurationality and count-mass distinction. Because of these differences, Chinese learners need to change the values of the two parameters and this process may bear on how Chinese learners develop interlanguage knowledge of the English article system. A review of studies on L2 parameter resetting shows that markedness plays a role in this process. The markedness status in relation to the two parameters suggests that Chinese learners may encounter difficulty in resetting the configurationality parameter. A possible trigger for the parameter resetting might be attributable to two factors, negative evidence and frequency of occurrence. It is argued that the combined effects of these two factors constrain the availability of the negative evidence that is needed to trigger the parameter resetting. Based on these analyses a conceptual framework for an empirical study is established. Three hypotheses with specific predictions are advanced and tested empirically. Data collected from three groups of Chinese learners provided converging evidence that these learners behaved as predicted. The study comes to the conclusion that the NP typology contributes considerably to the zero phenomenon relating to Chinese learners' English article knowledge.

Finally, Chapter 7 summarizes the major findings of this thesis and, in light of these findings, discusses relevant issues regarding L2 article acquisition. Pedagogic implications are then offered, followed by suggestions for further research.