

FOSSILIZED ARTICLE ERRORS IN AN ADULT L2 ENGLISH LEARNER FROM AN ARTICLE-LESS L1 BACKGROUND: A CASE STUDY AND PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTION

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Abstract

This paper presents a classroom-based case study of persistent, fossilized errors in the use of the English article system (a/an, the, and the zero article) by an adult learner whose first languages, Uzbek and Russian, do not have a grammaticalized article category. Although the learner had received several years of formal English instruction, including test preparation and university-level study, a diagnostic interview and a writing sample revealed a stable pattern of article omission and substitution that had resisted correction over time. This pattern is consistent with predictions made by second language acquisition (SLA) research on transfer from article-less native languages. Drawing on this research together with established approaches to article pedagogy, a four-stage lesson sequence was designed and piloted with the learner, combining noticing tasks, explicit instruction, guided practice, and communicative consolidation. The paper situates the case within the wider SLA literature on article acquisition and fossilization, describes the intervention and its rationale, and discusses its limitations and implications for teaching advanced adult learners with fossilized article errors.

Keywords: *English articles; second language acquisition; fossilization; L1 transfer; adult learners; case study; TESOL pedagogy*

1. Introduction

Grammar occupies a central place in language teaching, and among its components, the English article system is one of the most persistently difficult for adult second language (L2) learners to master. Its difficulty does not lie in formal complexity: English has only three articles, a/an, the, and an unmarked zero form. Rather, the difficulty lies in the fact that correct use depends on abstract, context-sensitive notions such as countability, specificity, and definiteness, which are rarely made explicit to learners and which many first languages do not grammaticalize at all (Master, 2002).

This paper examines one such case: an adult learner whose article errors had persisted despite considerable prior exposure to English, and asks what a theoretically grounded, classroom-feasible intervention for this kind of error might look like. The learner's first languages, Uzbek and Russian, are both article-less, which situates the case within a well-documented strand of SLA research on L1 transfer effects in article acquisition. The paper first reviews this research, then presents the case, the diagnostic

evidence, the intervention that was designed in response to it, and a discussion of what the case does and does not show.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The English article system as an acquisition problem

Frequency counts based on the COBUILD corpus place the as the single most common word in English, with a among the most common as well (Sinclair, 1991), yet high input frequency does not translate into ease of acquisition. Thornbury (2006) frames grammar generally as a resource for making meaning precise when context alone is insufficient, and articles are a clear case in point: they encode fine-grained distinctions of definiteness and countability that speakers of article-less languages have no direct equivalent for. Even learners who reach an advanced level of general proficiency, including those with strong vocabulary and complex syntax, commonly continue to make article errors (Master, 1997).

2.2 L1 transfer from article-less languages

A substantial body of SLA research has examined how the absence of an article system in a learner's L1 shapes the acquisition of English articles. Master's (1987) cross-linguistic dissertation study compared learners from article-less L1s (including Russian) with learners from L1s that have articles, and found systematically different acquisition patterns between the two groups. This line of work was later formalized by Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004) in the Fluctuation Hypothesis, which predicts that learners from article-less L1s will, at intermediate stages, fluctuate between definiteness-based and specificity-based interpretations of the/a before converging on the target system; more recent work has extended this account to ask specifically what does and does not transfer from demonstratives and numerals in article-less native languages (Ionin, Choi, & Liu, 2022). Consistent with this research, learners from Slavic and other article-less backgrounds are frequently found to favor article omission over substitution errors (Robertson, 2000).

2.3 Fossilization in adult SLA

Selinker (1972) introduced the concept of fossilization to describe linguistic forms that persist in a learner's interlanguage despite continued exposure to the target language and despite instruction, and that resist correction even at otherwise advanced levels of proficiency. Article errors are frequently cited as a textbook example of a fossilization-prone area precisely because their long-term persistence, even after years of otherwise successful language development, cannot easily be explained by lack of input or lack of general proficiency.

2.4 Approaches to article pedagogy

Because article errors tend to be low in communicative cost, relative to their high frequency and social salience in writing, they are sometimes deprioritized in the classroom (Master, 1997). Where article instruction is undertaken, however, Master (1990) argues for teaching the system as a binary opposition rather than as a single rule

set: the and zero article are introduced first and contrasted with each other, since these are acquired earlier and rely primarily on definiteness, while a/an is introduced afterward and tied explicitly to the concept of countability. This sequencing is intended to reduce the cognitive load of the presentation and to build on the distinction learners already partially control. A more recent review by Lopez and Sabir (2019) argues that, two decades after Master's framework, theoretical SLA findings on article acquisition still rarely make their way into classroom pedagogy, and calls for closer integration of the two. The distinction between implicit, communicatively-driven knowledge and explicit, rule-based knowledge (Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 2005) is also relevant here: an intervention aimed at a fossilized, largely implicit error pattern arguably needs to combine noticing of the target form in meaningful input with explicit rule statement, rather than relying on either alone.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a single-case, practitioner-research design, an approach well established in applied linguistics for documenting individual learners' language development and for grounding classroom decisions in a rich description of a single case rather than in an assumed average learner (Duff, 2008). As with all single-case designs, the aim is not statistical generalization but analytic insight into a recurring, well-documented type of learner error, illustrated here through one representative case.

Data were drawn from two sources: a semi-structured interview covering the learner's language-learning history and current use of English, and a short writing sample elicited independently of the interview. Both were used to identify recurring error patterns in article use. The learner's name has been replaced with a pseudonym, and identifying institutional details have been generalized, in keeping with standard practice for reporting individual cases in published research.

4. Learner Profile

The learner, referred to here as A., is a 27-year-old native speaker of Uzbek and Russian who works at an international bank handling foreign financial transactions. A.'s exposure to English has been extensive: two years of formal grammar study, five months of IELTS preparation (with an achieved band score of 5.5), and subsequent study at an international university with an English-medium component. Despite this history, A. reported that much of his grammatical knowledge had weakened over roughly six years of reduced contact with English, and identified article use as his most persistent and, in his own view, unresolved problem.

5. Error Analysis

In interview, A. communicated fluently and showed good control of sentence structure and a fairly advanced vocabulary, which he used readily. Against this otherwise strong performance, his use of articles stood out: he both omitted articles where the target system requires one and inserted an article where none was required, and this appeared to be a source of noticeable hesitation in his speech. The independent

writing sample showed the same asymmetry: rich vocabulary and complex sentence structures alongside recurring article misuse.

Taken together, the interview and writing data point to a fossilized pattern rather than a gap attributable simply to insufficient instruction or exposure: A. had already received formal grammar instruction and had been exposed to English in an academic setting, yet the error pattern had not resolved on its own. This profile is also consistent with the L1-transfer research reviewed above, since Uzbek and Russian are both article-less languages.

6. Pedagogical Intervention

Building on Master's (1990) binary approach and on the case for combining noticing with explicit instruction (Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 2005), a single lesson was designed around four stages, summarized in Table 1.

Stage	Focus	Activity
1. Noticing	Raising awareness of article frequency in natural speech	A warm-up question circle followed by a short video-discussion task, in which the learner is asked to notice a/an/the as they occur in authentic speech, before any rule is presented.
2. Explicit instruction	Definite vs. indefinite article vs. zero	Formal presentation of the the / a-an / zero distinction, checked through concept-checking questions (CCQs), following Master's (1990) recommendation to present the and zero as a first pair before introducing a/an.
3. Guided practice	Controlled production	A gap-fill text requiring the learner to supply a, the, or zero in context, reviewed immediately with the instructor.
4. Communicative consolidation	Categorization and generalization	A sorting task in which the learner groups nouns according to the article they typically take, encouraging generalization beyond the specific items already practiced.

This sequencing reflects the binary approach directly: stages 1 and 2 foreground the definite/zero distinction before the indefinite article is treated as a separate, countability-based case, and the balance of noticing, explicit rule statement, and communicative practice is intended to address both the implicit and explicit dimensions of the error (Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 2005). The full lesson materials are available on request.

7. Discussion

The intervention targets specifically the distinctions predicted to be most difficult for learners from article-less L1 backgrounds under the Fluctuation Hypothesis (Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004): the definite/indefinite opposition and the zero article. This focus follows directly from treating A.'s errors as a case of L1-driven fossilization rather than as a general grammar deficit, and it suggests that similar interventions could be relevant for other adult Uzbek- or Russian-speaking learners whose errors follow the same pattern, since the underlying transfer effect is not specific to one individual.

At the same time, the case also illustrates why article fossilization is difficult to reverse in a single lesson. A. had already received explicit grammar instruction in the past without lasting effect, which is consistent with the view that fossilized forms are resistant precisely because they are not sensitive to a single round of correction (Selinker, 1972). This suggests that an intervention of this kind is more realistically framed as one recurring component of ongoing instruction, repeated and varied across several lessons, rather than as a one-time remedy.

8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a single-case design, this study does not permit generalization beyond the case described, and no independent pre- and post-intervention test was administered, so the lesson's actual effect on A.'s accuracy cannot be measured here. The data also rely partly on the learner's self-report of his own language history. A natural next step would be to repeat the intervention with several learners from article-less L1 backgrounds, incorporate a delayed post-test to assess retention, and compare outcomes against a baseline group receiving only communicative practice without the explicit binary-sequencing component.

9. Conclusion

This case study connects a common, real classroom problem, an adult learner's persistent article errors, to the SLA literature on L1 transfer from article-less languages and on fossilization, and uses that literature to motivate a specific, principled lesson design rather than a generic grammar review. While the single-case design limits what can be concluded about effectiveness, the case illustrates both why article errors are so resistant to correction in adult learners from article-less L1 backgrounds and how existing pedagogical frameworks, in particular Master's binary approach, can be adapted to address them directly.

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