

Article Use in L3 English with German as L2 by Native Speakers of Russian and in L2 English of Russian Speakers

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1. Introduction

Recently L3 acquisition has drawn the attention of acquisition researchers because it allows new questions about the interaction of UG and pre-existing final state grammars. Unlike in L2A, in L3A there are three potential sources of influence: UG, L1, and L2. Previous studies have investigated the possibility of transfer from L2 and have shown that L2 indeed seems to influence L3 (Leung 2002, Bohnacker 2006).

In our study, we investigate article use in L3 English by native speakers of Russian who live in Germany and have acquired German as L2. We compare these results with L3 English learners with L2 German who live in Russia as well as with L2 English learners in Russia. By comparing these three groups, we hope to be able to determine the influence of L2 German and of the different ambient languages. Since German has an article system similar to English – at least regarding the aspects we are focusing on – knowledge of German should facilitate the acquisition of article use in English and the L3 learners should perform better than the L2 learners. We also hypothesize that L3 learners living in Germany should outperform those in Russia since the ambient language is expected to improve L2 German proficiency and therefore L3 performance as well.

We follow Ionin et al. (2004) in assuming that article use in languages with two articles is determined by the setting of the Article Choice Parameter (ACP). This parameter is set to distinguish determiner choice either by the features *definiteness* or *specificity*. In English, article use is determined by definiteness (Table 1) while other languages like Samoan distinguish between specific and non-specific NPs (Mosel and Hovdhaugen 1992) (Table 2).

Table 1: Article Choice Parameter English setting

| | [+definite] | [-definite] |
|-------------|-------------|---------------|
| [+specific] | <i>The</i> | <i>a/this</i> |
| [-specific] | <i>The</i> | <i>a</i> |

Table 2: Article Choice Parameter Samoan Setting

| | [+definite] | [-definite] |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| [+specific] | <i>Le</i> | <i>le</i> |
| [-specific] | <i>Se</i> | <i>se</i> |

For L2 Acquisition of English by native speakers of an articleless L1, Ionin et al. found that these learners show article misuse in [-definite/+specific] and [+definite/-specific] contexts (Tables 3, 4) because they fluctuate between the two settings of the ACP, i.e. either according to definiteness or specificity.

Table 3: Predictions for L2 English article misuse

| | [+definite] | [-definite] |
|-------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| [+specific] | correct use of <i>the</i> | overuse of <i>the</i> |
| [-specific] | overuse of <i>a</i> | correct use of <i>a</i> |

Table 4: Results by Ionin et al. on article misuse (n=27)

| | the | a | Omission |
|---------|-----|-----|----------|
| [+d/+s] | 79% | 8% | 13% |
| [-d/-s] | 7% | 84% | 9% |
| [+d/-s] | 57% | 33% | 10% |
| [-d/+s] | 36% | 54% | 10% |

2. Studies on L2 English by native speakers of Russian and German

In a replication study, Peters (2007) tested 24 L1 Russian speakers in the Ukraine using the same method (forced-choice task) with 40 test sentences taken from Ionin et al. (2004) (Table 5).

Table 5: Results by Peters (2007) on article misuse (n=24)

| | the | a | Omission |
|---------|-----|-----|----------|
| [+d/+s] | 57% | 35% | 7% |
| [-d/-s] | 31% | 59% | 10% |
| [+d/-s] | 53% | 35% | 12% |
| [-d/+s] | 44% | 48% | 8% |

By looking only at the results for the [+definite/-specific] and [-definite/+specific] contexts for which fluctuation is predicted, 35% misuse of *a* in the former and 44% misuse of *the* in the latter could be regarded as fluctuation. However, if we look at the contexts for which no article misuse is expected, we see that there is also 35% misuse of *a* in the [+definite/+specific] and 31% misuse of *the* in the [-definite/-specific] context. Target-like article use, on the other hand, ranges between 48-59% for all four contexts and therefore is at chance level. On the basis of these data, we suggest that L2 learners with an articleless L1 might need to reach, in a sense, a certain level of overall proficiency in order to “attain” fluctuation. Peters’ participants are likely to be less proficient than Ionin et al.’s participants simply because the latter live in the US while the former live in the Ukraine, suggesting that the ambient language needs to be taken into account. Peters’ results indicate mere guessing rather than fluctuating.

Since we assume that knowledge of L2 German positively influences L3 English article use, we first show that speakers of an L1 with articles do not have difficulties with an L2 that has a similar article system. Schönerberger (to appear) used 16 test sentences (4 per context) taken from Ionin et al. (2004) in a forced-choice task with 106 native speakers of German (Table 6). All participants were university students of English and thus presumably – after 9 years of learning English – highly proficient L2 speakers of English.

Table 6: Article use in L2 English by L1 German speakers (n=106) (Schönerberger (to appear))

| | the | a | Omission |
|---------|-----|-----|----------|
| [+d/+s] | 98% | 2% | 0 |
| [-d/-s] | 1% | 99% | 0 |
| [+d/-s] | 92% | 8% | 0 |
| [-d/+s] | 10% | 90% | 0 |

The L1 German participants performed very well in the [+definite/+specific] and [-definite/-specific] contexts but seemed to have some problems in the [+definite/-specific] and [-definite/+specific] contexts that are predicted to cause difficulties and show fluctuation. However, the small percentages of article misuse occurred in two particular test sentences (1,2) and can be explained pragmatically.

- (1) Rose: Let's go out to dinner with your brother Samuel tonight.
 Alex: No, he is busy. He is having dinner with __ manager of his office. I don't know who that is, but I'm sure that Samuel can't cancel that dinner.
- (2) Sue: I heard that Mary was sick. Has she found medical help?
 Claire: Yes. She has. She is going to see __ doctor who went to medical school at Harvard and now lives in Brooklyn.

In example (1) the target article is *the*, the context being [+definite/-specific]. However, nowadays there is a tendency in German companies to label every office employee as a *manager* and so (1) could have a [-definite/-specific] reading for a native speaker of German unless s/he is aware of the uniqueness condition for *manager* in American English. In example (2), on the other hand, the target article is *a*, the context being [-definite/+specific] but nevertheless this example seems to have caused some misunderstanding. Some of the participants probably interpreted it as shared knowledge about a certain *doctor*.

These results support our hypothesis and corroborate Ionin et al.'s (2008) findings for L2 English article use by L1 Spanish speakers. We are thus in a position to state that an L2 article system is easily acquired on the basis of a similar L1 article system.

3. Spontaneous production data on L2 and L3 English of native speakers of Russian

In our L3 study in Germany, we tested 24 students and young adults with L1 Russian and L2 German. All participants had lived in Germany for several years and had learned English at school for at least 2 years. 4 participants were excluded from the study because they had either learned English as L2 and German as L3 or grew up bilingually from birth.

The remaining 20 participants were grouped as follows:

- G1 (n=7): 2-3 years of learning English, 12-14 years of age, 3-10 years in Germany
- G2 (n=7): 4-6 years of learning English, 14-16 years of age, 6-12 years in Germany
- G3 (n=6): 6 years of learning English, 16-18 years of age, 10-14 years in Germany

We tested the spontaneous speech production of these participants. The first part of data collection consisted of free talk and the second task was narration of a picture story taken from a school book. Three different stories were used according to age and experimental group, the well known tale of “The three little pigs”, a story about building a snowman and a story about a boy going shopping. For the study in Germany, we only used the story about the boy and the “three little pigs”-story.

Since there was no distinction in article use between the three German groups, we collapsed their results. In our data (Table 7), we do not find any [+definite/-specific] contexts since these rarely occur in spontaneous speech unless certain discourse situations are created on purpose. As expected and predicted by the Fluctuation Hypothesis, there is no misuse of *the* in [-definite/-specific] contexts and there are only a few omissions. For [+definite/+specific], we found 2% (5/217) misuse of *a* that can be discarded as noise. On the other hand, the rate of article omission was quite high, 11% (23/217).

Table 7: Article use in L3 English by learners living in Germany (n=20)

| | the | A | Omission |
|----------------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| [+d/+s] | 189 | 5 | 23 |
| [-d/-s] | 0 | 36 | 6 |
| [-d/+s] | 9 | 56 | 13 |

In the crucial [-definite/+specific] context, our participants misused *the* only in 12% (9/78) and showed 17% (13/78) omission. The low ratio of misuse of the definite article in this context does not indicate fluctuation, but rather suggests that the correct article was usually chosen due to L2 transfer from German, given that the participants' proficiency in English seemed to us to be low.

Some examples for article errors are given below. Misuse of the definite article is shown in (3) since 'the boy' is mentioned for the first time:

- (3) a. *The* boy have a list (TAN)
 b. *The* boy buy some things (INA)

Misuse of the indefinite article since the house and the wolf have been mentioned before (4):

- (4) a. Wilf come and destroy *a* papel house (TIN)
 b. *A* wolf cannot plews stone house (TIN)

Article omisson is shown in (5):

- (5) a. and when you have not __ house [-d/-s] (LIL)
 b. three little pigs make __ straw house [-d/+s] (TIN)
 c. Then on __ other picture he is making a walk [+d/+s] (GAL)

Our assumption of L2 transfer is further corroborated by several occurrences of German word order in L3 English. In our data we found 15 V2 errors, shown in (6), 11 OV errors, shown in (7), and 24 errors involving verb movement, shown in (8).

- (6) a. and later come the wolf and destroy the house (GIN)
 b. in Wilhelmshaven have I lot of friends (MON)

- (7) a. My hobbies are swimming and football playing (ISA)
 b. when you house have find (LIL)

- (8) a. I don't look, watch so often TV (ANN)
 b. you must do that and read sometimes English book (SIN)

In order to determine the possible influence of the ambient language on L3 acquisition, we conducted a similar study with L3 English learners in Russia. Our participants were 19 students with L1 Russian and an age range from 12;10-15;4 years. They had learned German in school as L2 for 5;7-7;8 years and thus were roughly matched to our Russian participants living in Germany by their exposure to German (≥ 6 years). Participants who were matched as to exposure to German as well as English could not be found.

The participants were grouped according to their length of learning English as L3:

- G1 (n=6): 1-3 months of learning English
- G2 (n=9): 7-8 months of learning English
- G3 (n=6): 1;2-1;8 years of learning English

We examined these participants' spontaneous speech production (Table 8). The first part of data collection consisted of free talk and the second task was narration of the picture story about the snowman.

Table 8: Article use in L3 English by learners living in Russia

| | Group 1 (n=6) | | | Group 2 (n=9) | | | Group 3 (n=6) | | |
|----------------|---------------|----------|------------|---------------|----------|------------|---------------|----------|------------|
| | the | a | Om. | the | a | Om. | the | a | Om. |
| [+d/+s] | 22 | 4 | 9 | 47 | 5 | 15 | 43 | 5 | 6 |
| [-d/-s] | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| [-d/+s] | 1 | 19 | 16 | 8 | 28 | 11 | 3 | 26 | 8 |

As in the L3 study in Germany, there is no [+definite/-specific] context. In addition, [-definite/-specific] contexts are very rare. In the crucial context [-definite/+specific], we found a small ratio of misuse of *the*: only once in Group 1, 17% (8/47) in Group 2, and 8% (3/37) in Group 3. Although 17% in Group 2 is a higher rate than what we found in the L3 learner group in Germany, this percentage is too low to be regarded as fluctuation. Like the L3 data in Germany, the L3 data in Russia thus shows no indication of fluctuation.

However, compared to the L3 learners in Germany, the L3 learners from Russia omitted articles more frequently. In total, our participants in Germany omitted articles in 12% (42/337) of the DPs requiring an article. Our participants in Russia, on the other hand, showed article omission in 24% (67/279) of such contexts. Since the distinguishing factors between the two groups are the ambient language and length of exposure, we conclude that the amount and quality of input is responsible for the higher rate of article omission for the participants living in Russia. The frequent input of articles in L2 German, as the ambient language, seems to positively influence article use in L3 English.

As for the L3 learners in Germany, our assumption of L2 German transfer receives support from German word orders used by the L3 learners in Russia. In the data we found 17 V2 errors and 4 OV word orders.

Summarizing our L3 data, we do not have data that would allow us to study [+definite/-specific] and [-definite/-specific] contexts. For the remaining contexts, however, we found frequent article omissions in both [+definite/+specific] and [-definite/+specific] contexts. These omissions are more frequent in the data collected in Russia, indicating that the ambient language is a factor that influences L3 article use. With respect to input of articles from L2, our L3 groups differ to a considerably large extent: The Russian participants living in Germany had immigrated to Germany several years ago. Some of them had even lived in Germany since early childhood and could thus be regarded as very proficient in German. The participants living in Russia, on the other hand, learned both L2 German and L3 English in a classroom setting. Their input of both L2 and L3 articles is thus limited to only a few lessons per week. Moreover, the group in Germany had more years of English instruction than the group in Russia.

For the [-definite/+specific] context, which is the crucial context with regard to the Fluctuation Hypothesis since it predicts overuse of the definite article, we did not find evidence for fluctuation in neither of the two L3 data sets. Taking also into account the occurrences of German word order in both L3 groups, this leads us to the preliminary conclusion that L2 transfer influences L3 acquisition and that the amount and quality of input/the ambient language also plays a decisive role.

In order to delimitate the possible influence of L2 German, we conducted an L2 English study with native speakers of Russian living in Russia. Our participants were 14 adolescents with an age range from 12;11-17;6 years.

The participants were grouped according to their length of learning English as L2. (Note that these groups allow a better match with our L3-participants living in Germany as to exposure to English):

- G1 (n=3): 3-4 years of learning English
- G2 (n=11): 6-7 years of learning English

Like the two L2 groups, we tested our L2 participants in spontaneous speech (Table 9). Their tasks were the same as for the L3 learners: The first part of data collection consisted of free talk and the second task was narration of a picture story taken from a school book.

Table 9: Article use in L2 English by L1 Russian speakers

| | Group 1 (n=3) | | | Group 2 (n=11) | | |
|----------------|---------------|----------|-----------------|----------------|----------|-----------------|
| | the | a | Omission | the | a | Omission |
| [+d/+s] | 18 | 0 | 16 | 53 | 3 | 49 |
| [-d/-s] | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| [-d/+s] | 1 | 3 | 9 | 10 | 16 | 37 |

Again, there is no [+definite/-specific] context and only one [-definite/-specific] context. In the crucial context [-definite/+specific], there is only one occurrence of misuse of *the* in Group 1 and 16% (10/63) in Group 2. These ratios are almost the same as in the L3 group in Russia. We do not regard this misuse as an indication for fluctuation either. In Group 2, misuse of the indefinite article occurs in 3% (3/105) of all [+definite/+specific] contexts. No such misuse is predicted by the Fluctuation Hypothesis, but this low percentage can very well be regarded as noise.

In fact, what is striking about the L2 data is the large number of article omissions. The participants in Group 1 omitted articles at a rate of 53% (25/47) of DPs and the participants in Group 2 at 51% (87/169) of DPs. In the [-definite/+specific] context for which fluctuation is predicted, omission frequencies are even higher: 69% (9/13) NPs in [-definite/+specific] context of Group 1 and 58% (37/63) NPs in Group 2.

One factor that probably influences L2 English acquisition and might lead to the high frequency of article omission is that the English teachers in Russia who interviewed the participants also had difficulties in choosing the correct article, and occasionally even omitted an article in a context where it is required. In the transcripts we found several examples of the type in (10):

- (10) a. TEA: * Ok, please tell a few words about a flat.
 b. TEA: * To make, make snowman
 c. TEA: * So what is name of your friend, of your best friend?

4. Forced-choice task results on L2 and L3 English by native speakers of Russian

Since we are aware of the methodological problems of using free speech data to test article use and in order to support our findings, we conducted two further studies with both L2 and L3 learners in Russia and Germany. First, Schönenberger (2009) tested 2 groups of L2 English learners with L1 Russian, using the forced-choice task from Ionin et al. with 32 test sentences:

- 9 [+definite/+specific] contexts
- 8 [-definite/-specific] contexts
- 7 [+definite/-specific] contexts
- 8 [-definite/+specific] contexts

One of the groups consisted of 113 students of economics and the other of 41 students of English. The latter were assumed to be more proficient in English.

The results (Table 10, 11) clearly indicate a difference in article use in these groups. The students of economics performed at chance level in all 4 contexts: 52% correct article use in [+definite/+specific], 58% in [-definite/-specific], 47% in [+definite/-specific], and 50% in [-definite/+specific] contexts. Although article misuse is slightly higher in the contexts for which fluctuation is predicted (30% for [+definite/-specific] and 36% for [-definite/+specific] vs. 23% for [+definite/+specific] and 26% for [-definite/-specific]), this difference is too low to be regarded as an indication for fluctuation. The frequency of article omission, ranging between 14-24%, in combination with chance level of correctly used articles rather indicates L1 transfer.

*Table 10: Article use in L2 English by L1 Russian students of economics (n=113)
(Schönenberger 2009)*

| | the | a | Omission |
|----------------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| [+d/+s] | 52% | 23% | 24% |
| [-d/-s] | 26% | 58% | 14% |
| [+d/-s] | 47% | 30% | 22% |
| [-d/+s] | 36% | 50% | 14% |

*Table 11: Article use in L2 English by L1 Russian students of English (n=41)
(Schönenberger 2009)*

| | the | a | Omission |
|----------------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| [+d/+s] | 88% | 5% | 7% |
| [-d/-s] | 8% | 90% | 2% |
| [+d/-s] | 77% | 13% | 10% |
| [-d/+s] | 26% | 72% | 2% |

The students of English, on the other hand, performed much better in all 4 contexts. They used the correct article in 88% of all [+definite/+specific], 90% of all [-definite/-specific], 77% of all [+definite/-specific], and 72% of all [-definite/+specific] contexts. The frequency of article omission was much lower, ranging between 2-10%. Crucially, article misuse occurred in 5% of [+definite/+specific] and in 8% of [-definite/-specific] contexts but in 13% of [+definite/-specific] and 26% of [-definite/+specific] contexts. These students thus showed a higher use of the wrong article where it is predicted by the Fluctuation Hypothesis. We therefore conclude that the more proficient L2 learners indeed fluctuated.

Finally, we conducted an additional study (Table 12) with two L3 learners of English with L2 German and L1 Russian, using a forced-choice task with 28 test sentences (7 per context) taken from Ionin et al. (2004). Our participants had been learning German for more than 15 years, and had been living in Germany for more than 10 years. Moreover, they had been learning English for more than 10 years.

Table 12: Article use in L3 English by 2 L1 Russian speakers with L2 German living in Germany

| | the | a | Omission |
|----------------|------------|----------|-----------------|
| [+d/+s] | 11 | 1 | 2 |
| [-d/-s] | 0 | 14 | 0 |
| [+d/-s] | 8 | 4 | 2 |
| [-d/+s] | 2 | 12 | 0 |

The two participants performed well, although there are 4 occurrences of article omission indicating L1 transfer. On the other hand, of the 4 misuses of *a* in [+definite/-specific] contexts, 2 were in the test sentence (1) so we find the same peculiarity as with native speakers of German. It is difficult to decide whether the good performance in L3 English article use is due to their high proficiency in German (L2 transfer) or simply to the long duration of learning English. But given the circumstance that these two participants have been living in Germany for such a long time and learned English as adults in a classroom setting, we conclude that L2 German knowledge positively influences their L3 English article use.

5. Concluding remarks

In a variety of studies on article use in both, L3 and L2, English, we obtained results that corroborate our assumption of L2 transfer in L3 acquisition. This transfer can facilitate L3 acquisition as we demonstrated on the better performance in L3 English article use compared to L2 English

learners. The existence of such transfer strategies could also be demonstrated by the “negative” transfer of German V2 and OV word orders to English.

Besides L2 transfer, we showed that the quantity and quality of the L2 input, especially if reinforced by the ambient language, strongly influences L3 acquisition: the L3 learners living in Germany performed better than the L3 learners in Russia. We attribute this difference to the massive input of L2 German articles that the former group receives while the latter group does not.

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