Definiteness and specificity of determiners in L2 English

Sviatlana Karpava
University of Central Lancashire, Cyprus, Cyprus

This study investigates acquisition of determiners in L2 English. It can be expected that L2 learners of English with L1 Cypriot Greek (CG) background would either transfer semantics of Greek article into English (Buschfeld, 2013) or fluctuate between definiteness and specificity semantic universals provided by UG (Ionin et al., 2003; Ionin et al., 2008).

100 CG undergraduate students (ages 17-23, L2 proficiency: beginners, intermediate and advanced) participated in the study. The linguistic (socio-economic) background questionnaires were used. Their written corpus (100 essays) was analysed in terms of determiner production. They were also offered an elicitation task based on Ionin et al. (2003, 2004), which was focused on elicitation of definite determiner the in [+def; +spec] and [+def; 8210;spec] environments and indefinite determiner a in [8210;def; +spec] and [8210;def; 8210;spec] environments.

The results of the study showed that the only problematic condition for CG students was [8210;def; +spec] with target indefinite determiner as they fluctuated in their written production between target (42.55%) and non-target (57.45%) settings. They mainly substituted indefinite article a by the (52.12%) or used null determiner (5.31%). As far as other conditions concerned, for [+def; +spec] condition they had 76.38% target the and 23.62% non-target (12.55% indefinite article or 11.07% omission); for [+def; 8210;spec] condition they used target the (73.40%) and 26.60% non-target (20.21% indefinite article and 6.39% omission); and for [8210;def; 8210;spec] condition they had target a (78.29%) and 21.71% non-target (12.34% definite article and 9.37% null article).

It was found that L2 learners of English transfer from L1 CG, but the rate of transfer is low. Pearson correlation analysis has showed that proficiency level seems to be an important factor for determiner production as at the beginner level fluctuation for [8210;def; +spec] condition overrides L1 transfer and L2 learners of English overused the with specific indefinites.

Keywords: Definiteness, determiners, specificity, L2 English.