Low-level learners don’t fluctuate: The Fluctuation Hypothesis and the L2 acquisition of English articles by Chinese learners

Elaine Lopez
University of Leeds, United Kingdom

The English article system is recognised as problematic for L2 learners with no L1 article system. An influential explanation for these difficulties comes from Ionin et al.'s (2004) Article Choice Parameter (ACP) and associated Fluctuation Hypothesis. This predicts that learners with no L1 article system will systematically overuse 'the' with indefinite specifics and 'a' with definite non-specifics, and evidence of fluctuation comes from numerous studies of intermediate and advanced learners (Ionin et al., 2004; García Mayo, 2009, amongst others). However, Tryzna (2009) questioned the validity of the ACP and proposed that lower-level learners display optionality, not fluctuation. The article knowledge of 50 low-proficiency Chinese learners was measured using an untimed written elicitation task and a timed acceptability judgment task as part of a larger intervention study. Patterns of fluctuation were not evident in the group results, and 60% of individual learners demonstrated miscellaneous patterns of article use and judgment. These results suggest that there is no systematicity in the errors of low-proficiency learners. It is proposed that mapping difficulties due to the complexity of the English article system plus the transfer of semi-grammaticalised Chinese determiners and numerals leads to apparent optionality in the article use of these learners.


Keywords: definiteness, fluctuation, optionality, specificity.