

Korean ESL Students' Use of English Definite Articles

Hannah Morrett

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for graduation  
in the Honors Program  
Liberty University  
Fall 2011

Acceptance of Senior Honor Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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Jaeshil Kim, Ph.D.  
Thesis Chair

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Paul Müller, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Bruce K. Bell, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

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James H. Nutter, D.A.  
Honors Director

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Date

### Abstract

Misuse of English articles is a very common error among ESL students. If a student's first language does not contain an article, learning a second language that has an article system will prove to be very difficult. Korean is an example of a language that does not contain articles, but instead relies heavily on the context of the sentence, as well as determiners to indicate definiteness and specificity. In order to understand how students learn and acquire English articles, a basic understanding is needed of Language Acquisition and theories of Second Language Acquisition. These explanations are continued through various literature reviews and studies. To further emphasize the common mistakes of the definite article by Korean students, research is carried out based on six high school ESL students and their personal journal entries for their ESL class. It is predicted that omission of the definite article is very common among Korean ESL students based on other studies, and this hypothesis is borne out. Suggestions for further research are discussed, as well as pedagogical implications of this topic for ESL teachers.

### Korean ESL Students' Use of English Definite Articles

ESL teachers cannot effectively teach until they fully understand the background knowledge, first languages, and cultural differences of their students. One topic that has been of particular interest in recent years is the English article system. While some languages have articles, many languages do not determine object definiteness or indefiniteness based on an article system. Rather, definiteness or the lack of it is based solely on the context of the conversation or writing. Korean is an example of such a language. Due to the lack of an article system in Korean, definiteness and specificity of an object are determined by word order, context, and demonstratives.

Because of this linguistic diversity, Korean ESL students face great obstacles when learning and acquiring the English article system. Furthermore, due to the differences between Korean and English when discussing definiteness, Korean ESL students have been found to transfer certain characteristics of their first language to the target language.

To better understand such difficulties, a focus needs to first be made on second language acquisition (SLA), as well as the differences between SLA and first language acquisition. In the context of second language acquisition, the topic of linguistic transfer will be the focus for the remainder of the studies and discussion. Certain characteristics of Korean will be compared to English articles to better understand the linguistic differences and the possibility of first language transfer. The English definite article will then be considered in great detail according to its various subcategories and uses, and the way in which Korean ESL students acquire and sometimes misuse the definite article will be examined through past research. Informal research will then be discussed to further the

results that have been found in various studies and literature reviews. Specifically, it has been found that when acquiring English as a second language, omission of the English definite article is one of the most common article mistakes among Korean ESL students due to the influence of Korean and its lack of an article system.

### **The Korean Language**

For Korean students, it is very difficult to learn the usage of articles in English, because such a system has no equivalent in their native language. Korean students are accustomed to understanding definiteness according to context, word order, and demonstratives, not according to articles. English article acquisition studies have shown that the omission of appropriate articles is one of the most common mistakes for Korean ESL learners (Myers, 1992). Korean sentences can be interpreted several different ways, and the only way to fully understand the meaning is to understand the context in which the sentence is being used, for example:

Na-nun ecey tosekwan-eyse chayk-ul pilli-ess-ta.

I-TOP yesterday library-from book-OCC check out-PAST-DEC

“I checked out a/the book (or books) from a/the library (or libraries)” (Kim & Lakshmanan, 2008)

In this sentence, *chayk*, meaning ‘book,’ can be interpreted four different ways. It could refer to ‘a book,’ ‘the book,’ ‘books,’ or ‘the books’ (Kim & Lakshmanan, 2008). The noun, *tosekwan*, meaning ‘library,’ can also be interpreted as an indefinite singular, definite singular, indefinite plural, or a definite plural noun. The interpretation is often entirely based on the context of the conversation.

In the following sentence, this can be seen as well:

taum-nal oriŋ-nun ta□i hakjo-ro tora-wa-t-ta  
 next-day we-TOP again school-to back-come-PST-DECL

“The next day, we came back to school.” (Morrett, 2010)

“Next day” is not used with ‘the’, as is grammatically correct in English, but instead the zero article was used (in other words, ‘the’ was omitted).

There is a Korean case marker that can be dropped in certain situations (Kim & Lakshmanan, 2008). However, in contrast with other languages such as Turkish, the Korean “accusative case marker does not appear to be associated with specificity” (p. 90). For example:

Myenghuy-ka chayk-(ul) sa-ko siphe ha-n-ta  
 Myenghuy-NOM book-ACC buy-COMP want do-PRES-  
 DECL “Myenghuy wants to buy the book/the books/a (specific) book/ a (non-  
 specific) book/books” (Kim & Lakshmanan, 2008, p. 90)

In this previous sentence, although the accusative case marker *-ul* is attached to the noun *chayk* (meaning ‘book’), it does not indicate specificity. Kim and Lakshmanan (2008) go on to state that two different interpretations can be made, one of zero case form and the other of “overt accusative case form” for the nominal object (p. 90). Therefore, in contrast with other English L2 learners who may be able to rely on a similar article system from their first language, Korean ESL learners do not have a similar system in their first language. Korean ESL students have the difficulty of not only understanding that there are many situations in English in which articles are required, but also in

determining “how the meanings associated with the article system are mapped into morphological forms” (p. 91).

### **The English Article System**

Most Slavic, Asian, and numerous African languages do not have articles, and languages that have articles or morphemes similar to articles do not often use them in a similar way to the English articles (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), there are more specific categories of definite article use. There is a generic use of ‘the,’ to show a more formal and abstract idea; for example, “The lion is the king of the beasts.” When the definite article is used with plural or collective nouns, it conveys “a sense of generic collectivity” (p. 279). However, most instances of ‘the’ in speaking and in writing are nongeneric uses. When a speaker or writer is using ‘the,’ he or she is directing the listener or reader to understand the reference of ‘the’ under the “mental set of objects” (p. 279) that the speaker is considering. This may be a situational-cultural, textual, or structural basis.

Situational-cultural subcategories include general cultural use, immediate situational use, perceptual situational use, local use (general knowledge) and local use (specific knowledge). General cultural use is when the object that is being referred to is an exclusive object to everyone. For example, ‘the earth,’ ‘the sky,’ or “the sun,” are always referred to using ‘the’ because these are nouns that have only one in existence. Perceptual situational use is employed when the referent is visible or audible by both the speaker and listener. For example, “Pass the salt, please.” The salt is visible to both parties, so ‘the’ is used. Immediate situational use is when the speaker refers to an object that is in the same vicinity as the speaker and the listener, but may not be currently

visible. If a person said, “Be careful when you go into that room. The cat may scratch you.” ‘The’ is used with the referent ‘cat’ as an example of immediate situational use.

Local use (general knowledge) is used when an object is understood uniquely by members of a family or village. ‘The car,’ ‘the house,’ and ‘the pub,’ are examples of such, because such examples are found in many families or villages. Local use (specific knowledge), however, is used when a referent is “unique for members of a specific community” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 279).

As for textual subcategories, there are three: anaphoric use, deductive anaphoric use, and cataphoric use, which are used as instructions to the listener or reader to “locate the co-referent in the text” (p. 279). Anaphoric use, also known as prior mention, is used when an object has been previously referred to in the conversation or writing. For example, if a speaker was describing a person, the speaker could say, “I see a woman over there. The woman is wearing a white shirt.” ‘The’ is employed in the second sentence because the speaker is mentioning the same object, ‘a woman,’ that appeared in the first sentence. Deductive anaphoric use is when an object is stated that is similar or related to a previously-stated referent. The speaker and the listener understand the association between spoken objects, especially when objects are components or attributes of one another. For example, ‘the’ would be used before ‘singer’ and ‘drummer’ in the following sentences: “I went to a concert two nights ago. The singer was very good, but the drummer was not.” Since ‘singer’ and ‘drummer’ are components of the noun ‘concert,’ deductive anaphoric article use is employed based on this shared knowledge between the speaker and listener.

Finally, there are two structural-based uses of the definite article. Usage with post-modifier is the first category. When an object is followed by a relative clause or a prepositional phrase that describe the object, a definite article is used. For example, in the sentence, “The dog that I walked last week is now at the vet for a leg injury.” While the object, ‘dog’ has not been previously mentioned or associated with another object, it is modified by the relative clause, “that I walked last week,” and thus is paired with a definite article.

An object can also be used with ranking determiners and adjectives, which would qualify as the final sub-category under structurally-based instructions. For example, it is known that *the* first men to climb to the top of Mount Everest were Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay (Morris, 1999). ‘The’ is used before ‘men,’ because the men are ranked according to a skill or event. There may also be idiomatic expressions in which ‘the’ is always used (Celce-Murcia & Larson-Freeman, 1999). For example, in the expression, “He’s right on the mark” (p. 280), ‘the’ is always used before ‘mark.’

Understanding proper and common nouns is also necessary in order to use definite articles correctly. Proper nouns are always definite, yet they do not usually use the definite article unless a speaker is showing emphasis or unless they are specific borrowings from other languages; for example “The Matterhorn” (Celce-Murcia & Larson-Freeman, 1999, p. 275). Plural proper nouns, however, always use the definite article (e.g., The Smiths).

The sheer number and usages of the definite article emphasize the difficulty for ESL students to not only understand, but also correctly use articles. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) also point out that “some uses are truly culture bound, which

makes them particularly difficult for learners who do not share the culture behind the language” (p. 280). Furthermore, it is stated that an understanding of article use goes beyond an understanding of their structure and meaning. Rather, article use is “a reflection of shared knowledge between the interactants in any act of ongoing communication” (p. 280). When a speaker uses an article in reference to an object, he or she is basing the use on the assumption that the listener shares the same information about the object or context.

The “zero” article is also a major area of misunderstandings and misuse by ESL students. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), there are two different zero articles. One that is generally referred to as the zero article is the least definite and is used with “nonspecific or generic Noncount and plural nouns” (p. 280). For example, in the sentence “The boy ate (a) chicken,” using ‘a’ would make ‘chicken’ a count noun, meaning he ate an entire chicken, while using the zero article signals a noncount noun, meaning that he ate some chicken (p. 281).

The other type of zero article is also referred to as the null article, and is a more definite version of the zero article. The null article occurs in situations where a singular count or proper noun is being used. For example, in the sentence “Mr. Phillips was appointed (the) treasurer” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 281), if the null article is used, treasurer becomes a name, while if ‘the’ is used, ‘the treasurer’ becomes a description of Mr. Phillips.

According to Liu and Gleason (2002), article omission, or overuse of the zero article, has been found in several studies to be more common than a misuse of definite articles. Master (1987) found that subjects whose native language did not have an article

system had a problem with overusing the zero article that “continued even at the advanced level” (p. 5) of proficiency.

According to Kim and Lakshmanan (2009), there are semantic distinctions of specificity and definiteness in many languages that contain article systems (Kim & Lakshmanan, 2009). Definiteness often refers to knowledge that is shared between the speaker and the listener. Specificity, however, is the knowledge that only the speaker possesses. Most article choices in English depend on definiteness, not specificity. Thus, when a speaker and listener share knowledge of a definite context, the definite article ‘the’ is used. Kim and Lakshmanan (2009) note that there have been numerous studies which have shown that Korean L2 speakers of English base their understanding and use of English articles on both definiteness and specificity even though there are differences between the two attributes. This reliance on specificity can cause misuse and misunderstanding of the definite article.

### **Language Acquisition**

Understanding how a person acquires a language, whether a first or second language, is needed in order to comprehend the ways in which a Korean student acquires English; specifically, the way in which articles are learned and understood by a Korean student.

Second language acquisition is when another language is introduced after a first language is already established. There is, however, a difference between acquiring a second language and learning a second language. Acquiring a language includes a subconscious effort in a more natural environment than what is taught in a classroom. In contrast, language learning is a much more conscious effort than acquisition. While

acquisition is developed with interaction in the target language, language learning is often helped through emphasis of error correction and the formation of language rules. Second Language Acquisition is a theory that is often based on the idea that a second language can be successfully obtained in a way that is similar to the acquisition of a person's first language.

Acquisition of a first language is first shown in the beginning months of an infant's life. During these months, 'babbling' (uttering sounds without any meaning) will begin (Crain & Martin, 1999). A child's first words will occur around one year old, while two-word utterances begin around a year and a half. At two years of age, a child has a vocabulary of around 400 words and can create many one-word utterances, as well as two- and three-word statements. A child will go through several other stages of language development by the time he or she reaches the age of five. After five years of age, a child has the ability to engage in "more social conversations" (Crain & Martin, 1999, p. 31) with his or her peers, while also developing the ability to define words and correct one's own errors.

According to Krashen (1981), when a second language is considered to be fully acquired, a speaker can successfully participate in "meaningful conversation" (p. 1), in which speakers are focused on the message being conveyed, not the forms or possible errors of their speech. While language learning and language acquisition are both important in order to be successful, language acquisition often focuses more on communicative efficacy.

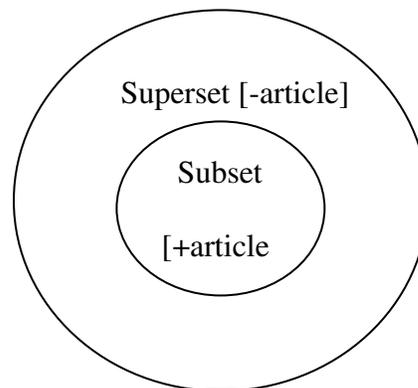
Second language acquisition differs for learners due to many factors, including the first language of the learner, the access to the second language, and the internal

motivation of the learner. How long the acquisition of a second language takes depends on the environment the speaker is in, how old the speaker is when exposed to the language, and the differences between his or her first language and the target language.

While some aspects of a language may be unique to that language, there are universal characteristics as well. Expressing definiteness and specificity are universal to all languages, yet the way in which they are expressed differs. In English, definiteness and specificity are shown through definite and indefinite articles, 'a,' 'an,' and 'the.' Articles, however, are often not found in other languages, so other syntactical or grammatical means take place to express these universal characteristics. Korean does not contain articles, but instead relies on word order and demonstratives to indicate specificity and definiteness.

The issue then emerges of whether it is more difficult for a native English speaker to learn Korean, or for a native Korean speaker to learn English. When learning Korean, a native English speaker has background knowledge of using English articles to show specificity. He or she has a language foundation of a concrete language characteristic (as opposed to a more abstract use of word order or context). Thus, when learning Korean's more general expressions of specificity (based on context, word order, or various demonstratives), the learning process will be easier than when a native Korean speaker learns the English articles. A native English speaker has a higher awareness of specificity systems based on the English article system. In contrast, for Korean speakers, they may find it to be much more difficult to go from a general specificity language background, to a second language in which specificity is expressed with a language feature that is new to them.

This phenomenon can be explained more thoroughly in context of the Subset Principle. According to this principle, a language that allows for more grammatical utterances (as compared to another language’s grammatical functions) is a ‘superset’ to the language being compared to (O’Grady, 2005). More specifically, this can be seen through the Null Subject Parameter, shown below:



*Figure 1.* Subset/superset relation for the Null Subject Parameter

Since an article-less language has a wider range of “grammatical utterances” (O’Grady, 2005, p. 414) than a language that is limited by an article system, the article-less language would be considered the superset around the subset, which would be a language with articles.

In this situation, the superset would be languages that do not have an article system (such as Korean), while the subset would be languages that do contain an article system (such as English). O’Grady (2005) explains that it is more difficult for a person whose first language is a superset to learn a second language that is a subset, than vice versa. If a native English (subset) speaker was learning Korean (superset) as a second language, the learner would have assumptions about Korean based on the parameters of English; in this case, the parameters of articles. This would lead to the belief that the

Korean language would contain articles. However, when the learner begins learning Korean, there will be an exposure to sentences that do not contain articles. This will cause the native English learner to reset the parameters created by the first language (English). When a learner is exposed to specific “grammatical utterances” that cause a resetting of a parameter, this is known as positive evidence.

In comparison, if a native Korean speaker is learning English as a second language, the learner will have the assumption that English is [-article] because of the parameters set by the learner’s first language. The learner may come across grammatically correct English sentences in which an article is not used (e.g.: a proper noun). The learner will see many examples of nouns with articles, but will not have direct evidence that it is ungrammatical to omit an article. The learner will need to make observations about what is “missing or ungrammatical in the data” (p. 415), which is known as negative evidence.

When an English speaker is learning Korean, there is positive evidence that is available, but when a Korean speaker is learning English, negative evidence (or the lack of evidence) is needs to be observed by the learner. Therefore, the Null Subject Parameter stipulates that it is more difficult for Korean speakers to learn the article system of English than for English speakers to learn the article-less aspects of Korean.

## **Literature Review**

### **First Language Acquisition**

The acquisition of English articles by native English speakers is important to understand, because the rules that are naturally acquired are the same rules that make it extremely difficult for nonnative English speakers to learn the article system. The

acquisition of articles is explained thoroughly by Maratsos (1976) in a way that emphasizes the complexity of various article usages. He states that when using the definite article ‘the’ to refer to an object (referred to here as *X*), the speaker “requires not only that he intend a uniquely specified member of *X*, but also that the reference to *the X* be specific for his listener” (p. 2). In other words, a speaker can only use ‘the’ successfully when he or she is certain that the listener shares the same knowledge of the object’s specificity or definiteness. Errors in article use occur when the speaker and listener do not share the same specificity or non-specificity of the referent. Maratsos (1976) uses a chart for further explanation:

Table 1 <i>The relation between definite and non-definite forms and specific and non-specific reference in speaker and listener</i>		
	Speaker specific	Speaker non-specific
Listener specific	Definite: <i>the</i> Where should we put <i>the table</i> ? <i>The engine</i> began to make a funny noise.	Null (?)
Listener non-specific	<i>A dog</i> bit me. There’s <i>a table</i> over here	Draw <i>a horse</i> . I haven’t got <i>a car</i> .

This previous chart is a clear way to represent the various contexts for using definite and indefinite articles, as well as the ways in which confusion can arise when the speaker and listener do not have the same specificity assumptions. The upper left quadrant of the table shows examples of situations in which the speaker has “a particular member of the class” (Maratsos, 1976, p. 3) in mind and is also sure that the listener shares the same definite understanding of the referent. The bottom left quadrant is when

the speaker may have a definite understanding of an object (he or she may be thinking of a particular member of the class), but recognizes that the listener may not have the same specificity understanding. In this case, the speaker defers to the listener's lack of knowledge and use the indefinite article. For example, a speaker may speak of a specific dog, but realizes that the listener will not share that same knowledge if the listener has not seen or heard of this dog yet. The bottom right quadrant indicates situations in which neither the speaker nor the listener has a particular member of the class in mind (any 'horse' or 'car' is acceptable); therefore, no specificity is needed.

The studies that Maratsos (1976) focuses on are based on naturalistic data, which means that data was collected from children based on recordings of their every day speech with those around them. One study by Brown (1973) took recordings of three children and discovered that "stable usage of the articles" (p. 15) became present in the three children between 32 and 41 months of age.

The occurrences of article misuse were noted and analyzed as well. It was found that children were most successful in situations where a referent was non-specific for both them and their listener. While some mistakes were made in such situations, the correct use of indefinite articles was much more common than the misuse (Maratsos, 1976). In contrast, the children had a higher occurrence of misuse in situations where the referent was specific to the child but not to his or her listener. In other words, there were many instances in which the child incorrectly assumed that his or her listener held the same specific understanding of the referent. For example, one child told her mother, "*The cat's* dead," to which her mother replied, "What cat?" showing in the confused reply that

the mother did not have the same knowledge of the specific cat that the child was referring to.

This study postulated that a child first acquires a basic understanding of the differences between specificity and non-specificity, while not yet acquiring an understanding of another person's point of view. These results match developmental understandings of children, which emphasize the egocentrism of young children, and their inability to adapt their actions or conversations to another person's viewpoint.

### **English Article Acquisition**

Various studies have been done on the acquisition of English articles by ESL students, especially those students whose native language does not contain a similar article system. A study was published by Ionin, Zubizarreta, and Maldonado (2008) that focused on the sources of knowledge that a person uses when learning English as a second or foreign language. These sources of knowledge were grouped into three categories: the input of the target language (the L2-input), the structures of their first language (L1), and "innate linguistic knowledge" (p. 555) that is not traceable to either L1 or L2. This third category is also known as Universal Grammar (UG). Ionin et al. (2008) focused on the importance and role of these categories in the acquisition of the English articles.

English learners whose first language does not contain articles (such as Russian and Korean) have been found to omit articles in necessary contexts more often than students whose native language contains articles, such as Spanish (Ionin et al., 2008).

The subjects of this study were adult speakers of Russian and adult speakers of Spanish, as well as a few native English speakers to be used for comparison. Subjects

were given an elicitation test and a cloze test in which subjects had to fill in the appropriate missing article. It was found in the results that the L1 Russian speakers had two main common errors- the “overuse of *the* with specific indefinites and overuse of *a* with non- specific definites” (Ionin et al., 2008, p. 565).

This study also predicted that with increased proficiency, fluctuation of article use would decrease, because “fluctuation occurs until learners receive sufficient input to recognize that English has the definiteness rather than the specificity setting” (Ionin et al., 2008, p. 565-566). This study concluded with the findings that L1 transfer, L2 input, as well as innate linguistic knowledge are all influences of English article system acquisition (Ionin et al., 2008). However, it was also noted that other influences, such as the ESL learning atmosphere, the method of teaching, and proficiency may change research results.

### **Research of Korean ESL Students’ Article Use**

Lee (1997) carried out research on 49 freshmen compositions in a South Korean University to discover the occurrences of English article deletion and the reasoning behind such omissions. This study focused not only on the linguistic factors, but also the social backgrounds of the students. Lee’s results suggest that deletion of articles is “systematic and sensitive to both linguistic and social variables” (abstract).

Lee (1997) hypothesized that a deletion of articles would be more prominent than an incorrect usage of them, based on the fact that the Korean students may be “influenced by their native language” (p. 44), and its lack of articles, and therefore would omit rather than keep the definite article. He also hypothesized that a higher occurrence of deletion would occur if the article was to precede a modifier and noun, rather than just a noun.

This was hypothesized based on the knowledge that some Korean modifiers such as ‘i, ceo, keu’ function in a way that is similar to the English definite article (p. 44).

Lee (1997) documented all cases, referred to as “tokens,” in which the English article was omitted and when it was retained. Lee’s results proved to be different from his beginning hypotheses. He found that of the 638 tokens noted, only 129 tokens were of article deletion. His results may be affected by the proficiency level of the students, because they were enrolled at the university level, and therefore have a higher English proficiency level and a stronger understanding of the English article system. Furthermore, he theorized that the emphasis on written English education in Korea may have affected the results, and a similar study based on speaking skills might present varied results. One hypothesis that was supported by the results was that there was a higher rate of article omission when the article was to precede an adjective or adverb than if it directly preceded a noun.

Other factors not mentioned in this study could greatly affect the results as compared to other studies. The proficiency level of the students may result in a major change in research results. Thus, a student at a beginner or low intermediate level of English may be more likely to be influenced by his or her native language, especially if the language does not contain articles, and omit articles in English. Additionally, studies have shown that an ESL learner’s ability to use articles correctly greatly depends on the contexts in which the articles are found (Park, 2008).

The contrasting results in these studies show that other factors may be important contributors. The proficiency level of the students is important, as well as the tests carried out in the study. Studies based on cloze tests allow the students to focus more specifically

on using definite articles, which may account for fewer mistakes and a less accurate portrayal of a student's use of articles. If a study were carried out in a way that students were not aware of what was being studied, more accurate results may occur.

### **The Present Study**

#### **Experimental Predictions**

Previous research of second language acquisition predicted that omission of English definite articles would be the most common mistakes found in research (Liu & Gleason, 2002). An omission of English articles by Korean ESL students could also indicate the influence of their native language. When using a second language, characteristics of a first language may replace certain aspects of a second language when the second language has not been fully acquired (Krashen, 1981). Therefore, the lack of Korean articles would cause a Korean ESL student to omit English articles (in a way, the student would substitute the lack of an article from his or her first language in place of a definite English article), especially when the student is at a lower level of proficiency. Since the students being used for the following experiment were at beginner and low intermediate levels of proficiency, this 'transfer' from their native language was expected to occur.

Although studies have shown differing results based on the omission of definite articles (as mentioned later), the naturalistic data that was taken may prove different results. In other studies, data were based on cloze tests, where subjects were asked to fill in the appropriate article. When an ESL student has been told of a specific aspect of the English language to focus on (in this case, articles), the student is more likely to use the

articles correctly. However, if data are taken from naturalistic sources, a more accurate representation of a student's use of articles will occur.

### **Research**

An informal experiment was conducted to test the theory that omission of the definite article occurs more often than other misusages of 'the'. Journals of six high school Korean ESL students were used as the naturalistic data. These journals were used as a semester-long assignment for an ESL class in 2009, where students were simply asked to write daily journal entries throughout the five-month semester. The proficiency levels of the selected students ranged from beginner to low intermediate. Two of the students had lived in the United States for one year prior to the ESL class, while the others had moved to the United States more recently. All the students had taken English in Korea, and their age in 2009 ranged from 14-15 years old.

Documentation was taken of all definite article misusages, and then the mistakes were categorized under insertion mistakes or omission of articles based on the table (shown below). An example of an insertion mistake is, "I don't know about *the* basketball," [italics added] when speaking of the general sport. An example of an omission of the definite article is, "We opened  $\emptyset$  windows of  $\emptyset$  room."

### **Results**

Out of the six students, four students made more omissions of the definite articles than insertion mistakes. For these four students, omission mistakes ranged from 57% to 87.5% of the definite article mistakes overall. On average over these four students, 71.5% of all definite article mistakes were article omissions.

Out of the six students, there were a total of 25 definite article omissions, and 21 definite article insertion mistakes. This means that omission of the definite article was made 54% of the time out of all documented article mistakes.

Many of the omissions occurred in sentences where the referents should have been given definiteness because of their reference to a unique object. For example, in the sentence, “We have no plan for  $\emptyset$  weekend,” the writer is referring to the upcoming weekend, so the definite article should have been inserted to indicate the definiteness.

The other common omission category occurred among nouns that had been stated previously (anaphoric use). “I want to throw  $\emptyset$  ball like a real star” was another sentence in which the student was referring to a specific ball, but omitted the definite article nonetheless. One student spoke of a computer game that he and his friend played, but when referring to the same game a second time, he simply omitted the necessary definite article, and stated, “So we decided to play  $\emptyset$  computer game together.” Another student spoke of a church retreat, but when mentioning the retreat again, wrote, “It was not a big injury, but  $\emptyset$  retreat was delayed.”

A similar category of deductive anaphoric use (using the definite article to speak of a referent that is related to a previously-mentioned one) was found several times in the documentation as well. A student wrote about his classes and stated, “I must raise my grade by  $\emptyset$  final exam.” He also wrote, “Some of  $\emptyset$  math problems is [*sic*] very complex.”

Another common omission occurred with objects that should be paired with definite articles because they are under the category of general cultural use. For example, one student spoke of “ $\emptyset$  exchange rate” in Korea. Another student wrote, “I saw  $\emptyset$  news on  $\emptyset$  internet and saw that South Korea and North Korea are facing in soccer.” “The

exchange rate,' as well as 'the news' and 'the Internet,' are all nouns that are preceded by a definite article because they are nouns that are known to be specific and definite by the general community.

Many omission mistakes were also made for nouns that should be categorized under local use (general knowledge). Several journal entries from all the students spoke of objects that were known among their household and family. For example, one student spoke of the car in his household that had broken down recently. However, he wrote, "I hope  $\emptyset$  car will be fixed very soon." In two other sentences, he spoke about the computer that was in his house, but simply referred to it as "computer." For example, he wrote, "We can only use  $\emptyset$  computer on Wednesday."

Another student made the same omission mistakes several times as well. He referred to the computer in his household as simply "computer," when he stated, "We were really happy to use  $\emptyset$  computer for that long...I wish my guardian let us use  $\emptyset$  computer...all day."

As for insertion mistakes, many of the mistakes occurred in situations where the referent should have been indefinite and nonspecific. For example, one of the students wrote about what would happen if she were a tree. However, she wrote, "If I were the tree..." The student showed confusion on the specificity of the noun 'tree'; though it should refer to all trees in general, she used the definite article to make the noun specific.

Other insertion mistakes occurred when a proper noun was being used. For example, one student referred to "*The Sam's Club*," while another wrote, "When I go back to *the* Korea in summer break..." A third student wrote about "*the* Europe."

**Discussion**

Despite the informality of the study, it matched the results of previously mentioned studies on Korean ESL students and their use of the English definite article. The results that indicated a higher amount of definite article omission than incorrect definite article use reemphasized the studies which mentioned the higher occurrence of article omission among Korean ESL speakers (Liu & Gleason, 2002).

Furthermore, when looking at the incorrect usages of the definite article, many occurred in areas that showed confusion about the specificity of an object. This reiterates the findings of Kim and Lakshmanan (2009) that discussed the possibility that Korean ESL students confuse the differences of specificity and definiteness, and often use specificity to understand English definite articles, when definiteness is the characteristic that should be relied on.

One omission occurred when a student wrote about a teacher, stating “someone did the trick to ø teacher.” While this omission appears to be a mistake based on anaphoric use (a previously-stated object), it may also indicate cultural confusion. In Korea, students do not often refer to their teachers by their name, as is found in English. Instead, teachers are simply called “Teacher.” In this way, the mistake could have been based on the fact that the Korean equivalent is seen as a proper noun, not as a common noun.

However, while the results did show a higher amount of omission errors, the results did not have many more omission mistakes than insertion mistakes (25 omissions compared to 21 insertion mistakes). This may be due to the situations in which ‘the’ was needed. In journal writing, certain situations that require definite articles may occur more

than others. For example, many of the omission errors occurred in situations where a referent had been previously stated (anaphoric use). This is found under the textual subcategories of definite article use. Such a category may be more common in informal journal writings than situational-cultural subcategories, such as a cultural use. If more definite article situations occurred in journal writing based on cultural use, more definite article mistakes may occur, due to the confusion of a different culture than the student's native culture.

Furthermore, the students were graded for completion of journal entries, not the content and grammar of their writing. This eliminates the need for students to proofread their entries before submitting them. Oftentimes, shortly before or after an article use error, the student used the same noun with the correct article. Had the journal entries been graded on grammar, the students may have fixed more article mistakes through proofreading.

At the 2006 KOTESOL International Conference, Bauman (2006) presented similar findings from his two years as a professor in Seoul, South Korea. He found occurrences among his university students of coupling the definite article with a location, such as "I went to the Seoul last Saturday" (Section IIC). He also found a common mistake to occur when a student spoke of a location that had been stated many times, such as 'church' and 'school.' A sentence example is, "I go to the school on Fridays" (Section IIC). Mistakes regarding locations, especially when speaking of 'church' and 'school', were found to be numerous in the research completed in the present research.

This reflects previous discussions that acquisition of articles may exceed beyond the first levels of proficiency. Since the subjects of the study were at beginner to low

intermediate levels of proficiency, it is logical to see that misuse of articles in various contexts is still very common. This study also connects with the findings of Ionin et al. (2008), which suggest that the more practice a student has with English, which leads to higher proficiency, the less fluctuation or misuse of articles will occur. This reflects the importance of both language learning and language acquisition. While ESL students need to explicitly learn the various ways to use the definite article, they also need to be placed in situations that encourage language acquisition. More English communication in low-stress situations can simulate a similar acquisition experience that native English speakers have with their first language.

### **Further Research**

In order to further understand the English definite article mistakes that occur among Korean ESL students, further research is needed. Since the data collected are written data, it would be beneficial to also collect spoken data of Korean ESL students and compare the results of spoken and written English. In Korea, there is generally a higher emphasis on reading and writing than speaking, so if a similar study were carried out but based on spoken English, the results may vary greatly.

It would also be beneficial to give Korean ESL students various written tasks, especially fill in the blanks exercises, where the students would be asked to either put in a necessary definite article or omit if appropriate. It may be expected that fewer mistakes would be made when students perform such a task, because they would be focusing specifically on definite articles and when to use them properly.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Such research is most directly related to teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language, because understanding the difficulty that comes with acquiring the English article system is necessary in order to help ES/FL students succeed. Furthermore, teachers need to recognize that articles cannot be taught just once. As stated previously, research has shown that mistakes are still common among ES/FL students even at an advanced level of proficiency (Park, 2008) depending on the context that an article is being used. Based on the findings that the acquisition of articles may span over the various levels of proficiency, teachers need to continually review and emphasize correct article use. In addition, teachers need to keep in mind that students will make article mistakes even at higher levels of proficiency, so patience will be needed.

ES/FL teachers may find it beneficial to assess their students specifically on articles. As discussed previously, various methods of assessment may prove differing results. Therefore, to assess students as accurately as possible, teachers should have the students complete several different assessments, such as free writing, cloze assessments, and oral assessments. While cloze assessments that focus directly on article use provide a basic assessment of students' article comprehension, informal assessments, such as free writing and conversations, may provide a more accurate picture of a student's use of articles on a daily basis.

### **Conclusion**

This information is important for ESL teachers to understand in order to effectively teach their students. Students whose native language does not have such a

system, including Korean, may have more difficulties in acquiring definite and indefinite articles than students who have a similar article system in their first language.

Since studies have shown various results, teachers need to consider the proficiency level of their students, their background, and their native language in order to understand the common errors that students make. Students of beginning proficiency levels may be expected to have more definite article omissions than students who have become more proficient in English. ES/FL teachers need to be aware of this ongoing research on the English article system and its acquisition by Korean ESL students in order to effectively teach and prepare their students for linguistic success.

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