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(Citation)
国際文化学研究 : 神戸大学大学院国際文化学研究科紀要,37:30*-53*

(Issue Date)
2011-12

(Resource Type)
departmental bulletin paper

(Version)
Version of Record

(JaLCDOI)
https://doi.org/10.24546/81003770

(URL)
https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14094/81003770

Accuracy and certainty in the use of L2 English articles by L1 Japanese learners.[1]

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1. Introduction

It is known to be very difficult for learners of English as a second language (L2) whose first language (L1) does not possess articles to use English articles correctly (Young, 1995). Previous research found that the misuse of *the* and *a* by article-less L1 speakers partly stemmed from learners confusing the concepts of specificity and definiteness (Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004). The present study investigates whether those learners whose L1 is Japanese, an article-less language, would show a trend similar to what was reported in Ionin et al. (2004), and whether they can sense if they are overusing an article, such as when it is not necessary or grammatically correct in various semantic contexts. To do so, we examine the relationship between participants' accuracy of article use and their degree of certainty about their answers. Namely, we will explore (1) whether the learners of L2 English whose L1 (Japanese) does not mark neither definiteness nor specificity can differentiate the two semantic concepts, and (2) whether they sense the fact that they have made an error in their article use.

2. L2 English Article Acquisition Research

There has been much research on L2 English article acquisition,

such as Huebner (1983), Parrish (1987), Master (1987), and Thomas (1989), and a number of studies have focused on L2 English article acquisition by L1 article-less language speakers such as those of Japanese (e.g., Yamada & Matsuura, 1982; Goto-Butler, 2002; Snape, 2006; Akamatsu & Tanaka, 2008, and others), Chinese (Lardiere, 2004), Korean and Russian (Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004; Kim & Lakshumanan, 2009), and Serbian (Trenkic, 2007) as well as other L1s. Features examined in these studies included definiteness and specificity, generics, and the contrast between mass and count nouns.

Those studies were based on different frameworks: Some took a parameter setting approach, which postulates that L2 acquisition requires parameter(re)setting for L2 and that failure to do so would result in fluctuation between values for L1 and L2. Others took a more developmental approach in that learners' article errors are not due to such fluctuation but to variation that occurs in the course of L2 development.

Among those previous studies on L2 English article acquisition by article-less L1 speakers, Ionin et al. (2004) proposed a parameter governing article choice called "Article Choice Parameter." They claim that a language that has two articles may distinguish them on the basis of definiteness, which they call the definiteness setting, or on the basis of specificity, which they call the specificity setting. English is an example of the former, while Samoan the latter. In the present study, we will follow Ionin et al.'s framework and partially replicate their study to see if L1 Japanese speakers behave the way Ionin et al.'s L1 Korean and L1 Russian participants did in their article choice.

3. Definiteness and Specificity

Before describing the Article Choice Parameter in more detail, we will first delineate the definitions of definiteness and specificity based on Ionin et al. (2004). Their informal definitions of definiteness and specificity are given below. We will follow their definitions of definiteness and specificity for this study.

3.1. Definiteness and Specificity: Informal definitions

(1) If a Determiner Phrase (DP) of the form [D NP] is...
   a. [+definite], then the speaker and hearer presuppose the existence of a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP.
   b. [+specific], then the speaker intends to refer to a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP and believes this individual to possess some noteworthy property.

(Ionin et al., 2004, p.5)

3.2. Definiteness in English

Definiteness and specificity are realized in the English article system as follows. The feature [+definite] receives morphological expression in the English article system through the article *the*. However, the language does not have morphological realization to mark specificity. The feature [+definite] reflects the state of knowledge of both speaker and hearer. But "previous discourse is not always necessary for establishing uniqueness" (Ionin et al., 2004, p.7). Some L2 English learners, including a few in the present study, do not understand this, and therefore those participants use *a* in contexts that require *the*.

3.3. Specificity and Indefiniteness in English

As for specificity, standard English does not have a marker for

the [+specific] feature in its article system, although colloquial English has the referential *this* to mark [+specific] in the case of indefinites (Ionin et al. 2004).

4. The Article Choice Parameter

Let us turn to Ionin at al. (2004), who take the position that there is a parameter that governs article choice called the Article Choice Parameter, as given below in (2).

(2) The Article Choice Parameter (for two-article languages)

> A language that has two articles distinguishes them as follows:
>
> The Definiteness Setting: Articles are distinguished on the basis of definiteness.
>
> The Specificity Setting: Articles are distinguished on the basis of specificity.
>
> (Ionin et al., 2004, p. 12)

English (not colloquial English) is a two-article language and cross-linguistically there are two possible article choice patterns in such two-article languages: Article grouping by definiteness, like English, or article grouping by specificity, like Samoan (Ionin et al., 2004, p. 12). These two types of article grouping are schematically shown in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1. Article Grouping by Definiteness

	+ definite	- definite
+ specific		
- specific		

Note. Adapted from Ionin et al. 2004, p. 13.

Table 2. Article Grouping by Specificity

	+ definite	- definite
+ specific		
- specific		

Note. Adapted from Ionin et al. 2004, p. 13.

5. Fluctuation Hypothesis Applied to L2 English Article Choice

Ionin et al. (2004) proposed that L2 learners fluctuate between the two Article Choice Parameter settings until sufficient input leads them to set the parameter to its appropriate value (The Fluctuation Hypothesis, hereafter referred to as FH). Their characterization of FH is given below.

(3) FH for L2 English article choice:

a. L2 learners have full UG access to the two Article Choice Parameter settings.
b. L2 learners fluctuate between the two Article Choice Parameter settings until sufficient input leads them to set the parameter to its appropriate value.

The two possible article settings are given schematically in Table 3 and a problematic issue for article-less L1 speakers is explained below.

Table 3. The Two Possible Article Groupings Together

	+ definite	- definite
+ specific	A	C
- specific	D	B

Note. Adapted from Ionin et al. 2004, p. 18.

Whichever setting the L2 learners adopt, specific definites (cell A) will always be assigned *the* and nonspecific indefinites (cell B) will always be assigned *a*. As for cells C and D, however, they will be assigned different articles depending on the setting adopted. For example, cell C would be assigned *a* under the definiteness setting, but *the* under the specificity setting. Conversely, cell D would be assigned *the* under the definiteness setting, but *a* under the specificity setting. Thus, by looking at cells C and D, one can tell whether L2 learners have adopted the definiteness setting or the specificity setting and whether they are currently fluctuating between them.

6. Ionin, Ko, and Wexler's (2004) Study

Ionin et al. (2004) investigated the role definiteness and specificity settings play in the acquisition of L2 English articles by adult speakers of the article-less L1s, Russian and Korean, neither of which has a direct way of encoding definiteness or specificity, along with English L1 speakers as a comparison. They found that both L1 Russian and L1 Korean speakers (N = 40 and N = 30, respectively) overused *the* more with specific than with nonspecific indefinites, and overused *a* more with nonspecific than with specific definites.

7. The Present Study

In this study, using Ionin et al.'s (2004) language material, we partially replicated their study to investigate article choice by L1 Japanese speakers. To do so, we utilized Ionin et al.'s (2004) framework of the English article system based on definiteness and specificity. The following two research questions were addressed:

RQ1: Do Japanese speakers, whose L1 lacks articles, behave the same way as L1 Russian and L1 Korean speakers do? Namely, do L1 Japanese speakers overuse *the* more with specific indefinites (in cell C of Table 3) than with nonspecific indefinites (in cell D of Table 3)?

RQ2: Do L1 Japanese learners feel certain about their answers when they are correct, and do they feel uncertain about their answers when they are incorrect? If they have already adopted a certain setting for English, they should feel certain about their answers. However, if they have not fully adopted a certain setting, they should feel uncertain about their answers.

8. Method

8.1. Participants

The participants were 33 adult speakers of L1 Japanese who studied L2 English in a foreign language environment. They were undergraduate or graduate students of a research university in Japan and were recruited from several classes. They were homogeneous in terms of their attributes (Age M = 20.67, SD = 1.73; Male N = 17, Female N = 16). They had formal instruction of English for 7 to 12 years. Their L2 English proficiency, as measured by TOEFL-ITP scores, was 507 (MIN = 463, MAX = 557). All had less than 2 months experience of traveling abroad, except for one male who spent 24 months abroad when he was small and whose TOEFL-ITP score was 490.

Table 4. Breakdown of L1 Japanese Participants

	High > 500	Low ≦ 500	Subtotal
Participants included in inferential statistics (n)	10	8	18
Participants excluded from inferential statistics (n)	7	8	15
Total (N)	17	16	33

Although the total number of participants was 33, 15 failed to answer some of the test items, and these participants were excluded from all analyses beyond the descriptive analyses. Thus, the responses from the 18 remaining participants were used for inferential statistical analyses (see Table 4).

8.2. Apparatus

The following measures were used in this research.

● Background questionnaire and self-paced web-based test

After completing a background questionnaire, participants took a self-paced- and forced-choice-web-based article test comprising 40 items taken from Ionin et al. (2004) (see Figure 1 for one of the questions). In the forced-choice test, participants had to complete a blank in sentences for each dialogue with one of the following choices provided via a pull-down menu: *the*, *a*, or "－" for "no article."

● Certainty ratings and explanations of answer choices

Soon after choosing a specific answer, participants were asked to rate their certainty about their answer choice.

● Explanations for answer choices

Participants were asked to explain in writing on the computer why they chose a specific answer. Participants were not forced to provide explanations: They could choose not to write anything if they did not know what to write or were uncomfortable doing so. Detailed analyses of their answer choice explanations are not reported in this paper.

8.3. Analyses

To answer RQ1, a repeated-measures ANOVA was performed. To answer RQ2, Pearson's correlation coefficient was performed, but for the purposes of this paper only a visual analysis of the data plot was used to understand the participants' performance tendencies.

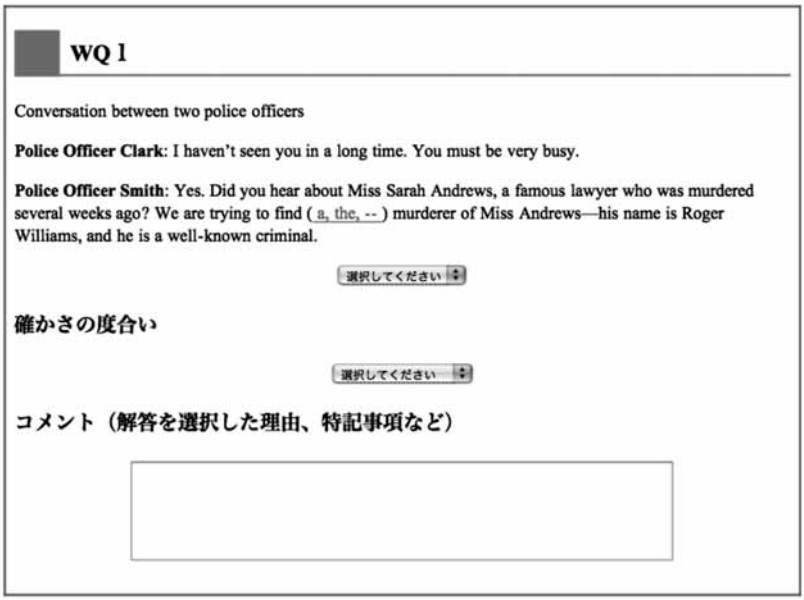

Figure 1. A web test screen shot.

9. Results

9.1. Descriptive statistics results

The descriptive statistics results are shown in Table 5. The table shows the frequency of each article (*the, a,* no article) and the frequency of the questions left unanswered by context category (from IA to VB), and it provides this information as percentages. In the table, the two columns on the right are what Ionin et al. (2004) call "simple

definite" and "simple indefinite." Cells marked (a) are suspected cases of *a* or *the* overuse, those marked (c) are suspected cases of avoidance or L1 transfer, and those marked (b) show correct article use. Table 6 presents the occurrence for each article in percentages in four semantic contexts.

As was found by Ionin et al. (2004) in their study of L1 Russian and L1 Korean speakers, the L1 Japanese speakers in our study showed *a* overuse (21.97%) in [+definite, -specific] contexts, and *the* overuse (12.50%) in [-definite, +specific] contexts. Thus, L1 Japanese speakers exhibited tendencies similar to those exhibited by L1 Korean and L1 Russian speakers in Ionin et al.'s study. Please note the numbers in column IIA of Table 5. Column IIA shows [+definite, +specific] contexts. It is noteworthy that the participants overused *a* in [+definite, +specific] contexts despite the fact that those are supposed to be relatively easier for L2 learners.

Table 5. Frequency of Article Use by Semantic Context

Ionin et al.'s (2004) category	I A	I B	II A	II B	III A
Scope	Wide	Narrow	No interaction		Wide
Semantic context	+def, +spec	+def, -spec	+def, +spec	+def, -spec	-def, +spec
a	6 (4.55)	12 (9.09)[a]	19 (14.39)[a]	46 (34.85)[a]	107 (81.06)[b]
the	125 (94.70)[b]	119 (90.15)[b]	95 (71.97)[b]	73 (55.30)[b]	19 (14.39)[a]
No article	1 (0.76)	1 (0.76)	15 (11.36)[c]	13 (9.85)[c]	5 (3.79)
Missed	0 (0.00)	0 (0.00)	3 (2.27)	0 (0.00)	1 (0.76)
Total per each semantic context	132 (100.00)	132 (100.00)	132 (100.00)	132 (100.00)	132 (100.00)

Note. *N*=33. Total number of questions = 40. Number of questions per each semantic context = 4. suspected *a* or *the* overuse (> 9%). [b] = correct use (also signaled by shades). [c] = avoidance or L1

III B	IV A	IV B	V A	V B	
Narrow	No interaction		Simple definite	N/A	Total per each article choice
-def, -spec	-def, +spec	-def, -spec	+def, +spec	-def, -spec	
125 (94.70)[b]	115 (87.12)[b]	117 (88.64)[b]	11 (8.33)	120 (90.91)[b]	867 (51.36)
1 (0.76)	14 (10.61)[a]	3 (2.27)	118 (89.39)[b]	5 (3.79)	572 (43.33)
5 (3.79)	3 (2.27)	10 (7.58)	2 (1.52)	6 (4.55)	61 (4.47)
1 (0.76)	0 (0.00)	2 (1.52)	1 (0.76)	1 (0.76)	1 (0.68)
132 (100.00)	132 (100.00)	132 (100.00)	132 (100.00)	132 (100.00)	1,320 (100.00)

Values enclosed in parentheses represent percentage. def = definite, spec = specific. [a] = transfer suspected (> 9%).

9.2. Results of repeated-measures ANOVA

A repeated-measures ANOVA was carried out with L2 proficiency (2 levels) as a between-subjects variable, and definiteness (2 levels) and specificity (2 levels) as two within-subject variables on the independent variables of accuracy scores and certainty. Alpha was set at the .05 level. SPSS version 16.0 for Windows was used for statistical analyses. L2 proficiency level was chosen as a variable because Ionin et al. (2004) found that participants reacted differently depending on their proficiency (pp. 31-32).[2]

Because there were missing data in the current dataset owing to unanswered test items, the number of observations that could be used in the repeated measures ANOVA was only 18 (10 for the L2 proficiency high group and 8 for the low group).

Table 6. Percentage of Article Use in Four Semantic Contexts

Participants' Answer	[+definite] *the*	[+definite] *a*	[−definite] *the*	[−definite] *a*
[+specific] (%)	83.33	9.47	12.50	84.09
[−specific] (%)	72.72	21.97	1.52	91.67

To run a repeated-measures ANOVA, the following four semantic contexts based on [±definiteness] and [±specificity] were used:
[-definite, -specific],
[-definite, +specific],
[+definite, -specific],
[+definite, +specific].

The results of a multivariate analysis of a repeated-measures ANOVA showed that the main effect of specificity was found to be significant ($F(2, 15) = 4.14$, $p < .050$, $\eta^2 = .36$) and that a combined

effect of definiteness and specificity was found to be very close to significant (F = 3.67, p = .050, η^2 = .33). Multivariate analysis revealed no significant effect with regard to proficiency level. Univariate tests showed that specificity had a significant effect on accuracy (F (1, 16) = 8.21, p=.011, η^2 = .77), and that definiteness and specificity combined had a close to significant effect on accuracy (F = 4.45, p = .051, η^2 = .22) and a significant effect on certainty (F = 6.56, p = .021, η^2 = .29).

9.3. Interpretation of results

The above analyses lead to the following conclusions. While the specificity feature influenced the accuracy of our participants' answers, definiteness did not. However, when combined with specificity, the definiteness feature influenced accuracy. The presence of the two features therefore probably made it more difficult for the learners to decide which article to use. That is, with the two features present, the learners tended to rate their certainty incorrectly.

9.4. Answer to RQ1

With respect to RQ1, L1 Japanese speakers were found to show the same tendencies as L1 Russian and L1 Korean speakers. Namely, L1 Japanese speakers overused *the* more in [-definite, +specific] contexts than in [-definite, -specific] contexts. L1 Japanese speakers overused *a* more in [+definite, -specific] contexts than in [+definite, +specific] contexts. These results show that specificity seemed to affect the participants' article choice. As for definiteness, on the other hand, participants responded correctly to contexts with or without definiteness features, except for the seemingly easy [+definite, +specific] context.

9.5. Analyses of accuracy and certainty

We initially planned to calculate correlation coefficients between accuracy and certainty when they produced articles correctly and incorrectly at once for every semantic context. Instead of calculating these correlations, we utilized a means plot to examine the effect of accuracy and certainty in [+specific] contexts and [-specific] contexts, respectively. The means plots analyses were expected to provide us with a possible answer to the question (see RQ1) of why the participants overused *a* in the seemingly easy context of [+definite, +specific].

9.5.1. Accuracy and certainty in the [+specificity] context

The repeated-measures ANOVA showed that the effect of learners' proficiency level was not significant. The means plot of the participants' accuracy and certainty also showed that high-proficiency learners did not necessarily outperform their low-proficiency counterparts (see Figures 2-5). Figure 2 shows the accuracy results and Figure 3 the certainty results when the semantic context was [+specific]. In the same manner, Figure 4 shows the accuracy plot and Figure 5 shows the certainty plot when the semantic context was [-specific].

Figures 2 and 3 show that low-proficiency learners performed better in [+definite, +specific] contexts compared with [-definite, +specific] contexts. On the other hand, high-proficiency learners were the opposite; the high-proficiency learners were more accurate in choosing an article when the two semantic settings were in conflict, but they performed worse than the low-proficiency learners in [+definite, +specific] contexts. The certainty plot in Figure 3 and accuracy plot in Figure 2 were almost parallel for low-proficiency learners, meaning such participants

were certain about their answers when their answers were correct and vice versa. On the other hand, the certainty rating of high-proficiency learners remained more or less the same regardless of whether the context was [+definite, +specific] or [-definite, +specific], despite the fact that their accuracy scores were higher in [-definite, +specific] contexts than in [+definite, +specific] contexts.

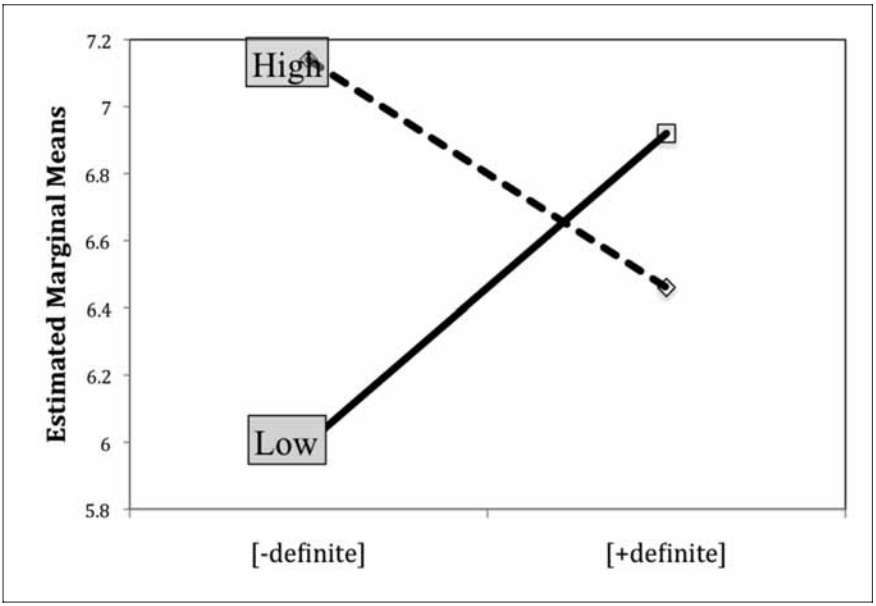

Figure 2. Estimated marginal means of accuracy at [+specificity].

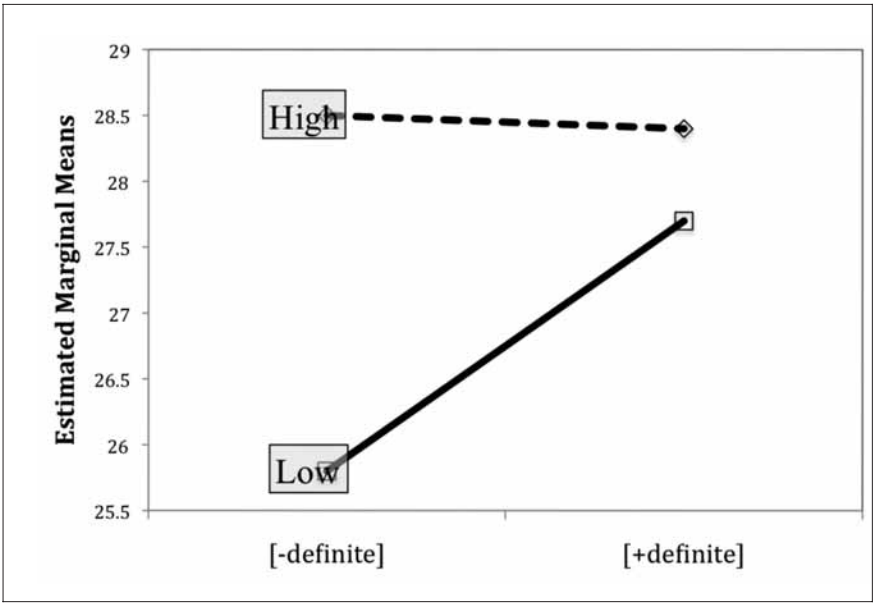

Figure 3. Estimated marginal means of certainty at [+specificity].

Figures 4 and 5 show the participants' accuracy and certainty when the contexts were[-specific]. Figure 4 indicates that the accuracy scores of both the high- and low-proficiency groups were almost equally high for [-definite, -specific] contexts. However, as Figure 5 shows their accuracy scores suffered in [+definite, -specific] contexts, where the polarities of definiteness and that of specificity are in conflict. Accuracy and certainty were almost parallel for each of the two proficiency groups. Generally the low-proficiency group rated their certainty modestly (that is, lower) than their high-proficiency counterpart; that is the low-proficiency learners were more conservative in estimating their accuracy than their high-proficiency counterparts.

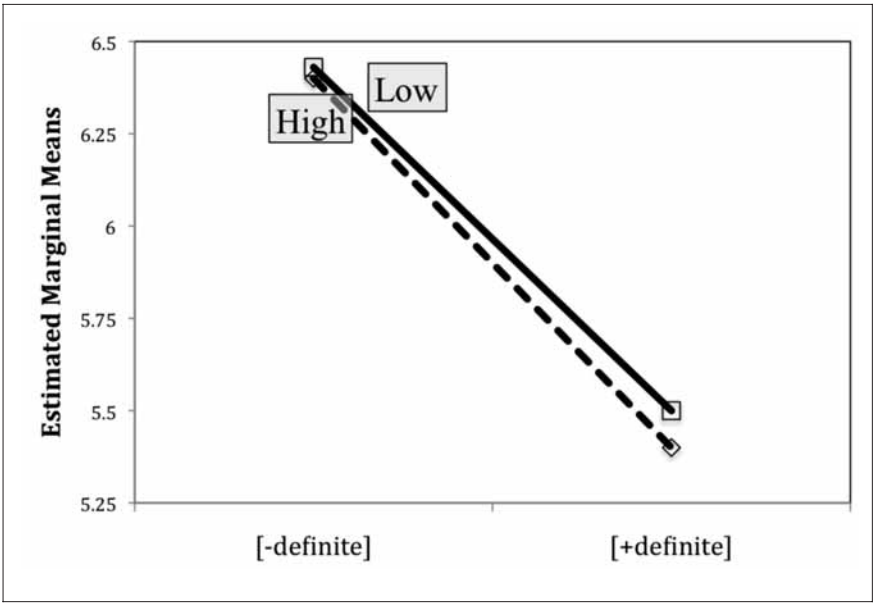

Figure 4. Estimated marginal means of accuracy at [-specificity].

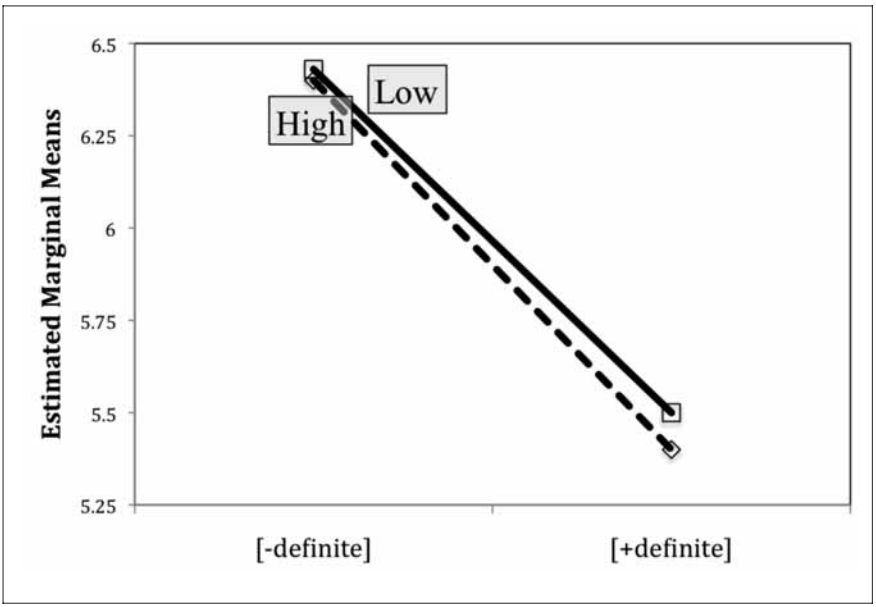

Figure 5. Estimated marginal means of certainty at [-specificity].

9.5.2. Answer to RQ2

We can conclude as follows regarding RQ2: "Do L1 Japanese learners feel certain about their answers when they are correct, and do they feel uncertain about their answers when they are incorrect?"

The answer to RQ2 is that while low-proficiency learners seemed to be certain when they were correct, high-proficiency learners did not seem to know when their answers were correct.

10. Discussion

It is interesting to consider why the answers of high-proficiency learners were so often incorrect in our study. Results of preliminary analyses of the qualitative (explanation) data (not shown in this paper) revealed the following:

- Most low-proficiency learners did not notice a semantic feature other than [±definite].
- Some high-proficiency learners noticed that there were some mechanisms at work other than [±definite].
- High-proficiency learners had more variables to consider in choosing an article than low-proficiency learners.

The above factors may have contributed to the high-proficiency learners' unexpectedly low performance in accuracy and their rather low certainty. In addition, one point should be noted. Some L1 Japanese participants used terms like "specific" and "known" in Japanese in explaining their answer choices. Often it was not clear, however, whether they used the two terms as different expressions signifying two separate concepts or whether they used the terms interchangeably.

To determine whether Japanese participants consider specificity in choosing articles, it will be necessary to ask them to think aloud or reflect immediately what they had been thinking when they chose a specific article.

In sum, our high-proficiency learners had two variables to consider—specificity and definiteness—and seemingly fluctuated or oscillated between the two semantic features[±definite] and [±specific]. Our low-proficiency learners, however, did not show such fluctuation or oscillation. It is believed that learners come to notice specificity value as their proficiency grows; this is somewhat similar to what Kim and Lakshmanan(2009) reported, though there are some differences. Kim and Lakshmanan reported that L1 Korean and Russian learners of L2 English noticed specificity first and came to notice definiteness as their proficiency grew. As noted above, in our study it was our high-proficiency L2 English learners who were able to notice specificity value. Since the levels of the participants' proficiency in Kim and Lakshmanan's study were not given in terms of standardized test scores, it is not possible to determine how our L1 Japanese participants' L2 English proficiency would correspond to the participants in their study. If our high-proficiency learners are comparable to their intermediate students, our high-proficiency students, as their proficiency grows, would become like Kim and Lakshmanan's advanced learners and might start adhering to definiteness setting in the course of their L2 English article learning. This would amount to L2 English learners going through a U-shaped leaning process with articles (see Kellerman, 1985).

11. Conclusion

This study discovered trends similar to those found by Ionin et al.

(2004) with L1 Russian speakers and L1 Korean speakers in that L1 Japanese speakers also tended to mix specificity with definiteness. The present study's high-proficiency learners did not necessarily outperform low-proficiency learners in terms of accuracy, which was similar to the results of Ionin et al.'s study. Also, high-proficiency learners in general were not aware whether they were correct when choosing an article, but they generally rated their certainty as high even when they were wrong. An analysis of the participants' written explanations showed that some high-proficiency learners were able to notice the [±specific] feature, and they therefore experienced a comflict between [±specific] and [±definite] features. On the other hand, the low-proficiency learners in general seemed to notice the [±definite] feature only.

In all, this study revealed an interesting tendency of article-less L1 Japanese learners with high L2 English proficiency with regard to specificity setting. However, there is one caveat in interpreting our results in that this study was based on a smaller number of participants than is normally required to perform a repeated-measures ANOVA. Therefore, future research needs to be conducted with a greater number of participants to evaluate the two examined features in assigning English articles, and the L2 English learner processes that underlie article choice and use.

Notes

[1] We would like to express our gratitude to Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for aGrants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (KAKENHI 175203677, 22520564). We also thank the participants in the present study for their time and the audience at our presentations

at AAAL 2010 (March 9, 2010) and SLRF 2010 (October 17, 2010) for their comments.

[2] One may question the feasibility of running an ANOVA with cell counts as small as eight. We acknowledge that this number is not optimal and that more participants are needed to draw meaningful conclusions about the results of the analysis. However, we possess data from 100 additional participants that are ready to be analyzed. We plan to add these 100 participants to the present dataset and perform a repeated-measures ANOVA to examine whether the results in this study also apply to a greater number of participants.

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日本語をL1とするL2英語学習者が英語冠詞を使用する際の正確さと確かさについて

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冠詞が存在しない言語を第一言語（L1）とする学習者が第二言語（L2）として英語を学ぶ際に、英語の冠詞は非常に習得困難であることが知られている。冠詞を持たない言語をL1とする学習者が冠詞 *a* と冠詞 *the* を混同する原因の一部は、特定性（specificity）と定性（definiteness）を混同することに由来すると言われている（Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004）。本論文では、冠詞がない日本語をL1とする学習者の英語冠詞使用においても、Ionin ら（2004）の研究に見られたのと同様の傾向が認められるのかどうかを33名の参加者（平均年齢20.67歳、TOEFL-ITP平均507）を得て検討した。本研究では、Ionin らの forced choice test を用いて、⑴日本語がL1の学習者がL2英語冠詞を使用する際に、特定性と定性を区別することができるのか、⑵冠詞を誤って使用した場合に、日本語をL1とする参加者が誤りをしたことを感知しているかどうか、を検討した。その結果、Ionin らの結果と同様に、特定性と定性の二つの意味特徴を判断している傾向がみられるもののその判断は明確ではなく、これら二つの間で揺れていることが分かった。また、英語能力の高低によっても異なる傾向が見られ、英語能力が高い参加者の方が、特定性の存在に気づくことができるがために、これら二つの意味特徴の間で混乱している傾向が見られた。英語能力が高い学習者に見られるこの傾向が普遍的に見られるものであるかについては、今後より多くの参加者を得て再検討する必要がある。

Keywords: English articles, specificity, definiteness, L1 article-less languages, certainty