Variability in the L2 Acquisition of English Articles

Taegoo Chung
(Korea University)


This study investigates variation in article use by Korean secondary school students of English. The study shows how two different tasks affect variation with respect to article types (a, the, and zero), proficiency level and the semantic feature, specificity. One task, a wide domain task, focused on grammar in general and the narrow domain task focused on articles. The statistical results showed that the subjects performed significantly better on the narrow domain task than on the wide domain task. The subjects showed significant differences among the three articles in the wide domain task, while they did not in the narrow domain task. The subjects performed significantly better with non-specific DPs (Determiner Phrases) than with specific DPs in the wide domain task, but reversed results were revealed in the narrow domain task. The present study presents some finding that grammatical domain plays a role as a variable for variability and shows that different tasks on the same research topic may produce different findings.

I. INTRODUCTION

Learner language displays not only systematicity but also variation. Language learners may not make use of a single form or pattern but do show a preference for the use of one form among others (Labov, 1970). It is reported that second language learners as well as first language learners show variation depending on linguistic or psychological factors such as grammar modules, speech style, task, or focus of attention (Crookes, 1989; Ellis, 2008; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Hulstijn & Hulstijn, 1984; Robertson, 2000; Tarone, 1983, 1985; Tarone & Parrish, 1988; Trenkic, 2007).

It is known that the English article system is one of the most difficult items for L2 learners, especially for those whose L1 lacks articles (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman,
Studies on the L2 English article system have used different types of tasks such as forced elicitation (Ionin, et al., 2004; Ionin, Zubizarreta & Maldonado, 2008), grammaticality judgment (Tarone, 1985), and oral narration or interview tasks (Tarone, 1985). Tarone and Parrish (1988) found that different tasks elicited different types of noun phrases to different degrees and concluded that task variation is caused by a complex of factors, not a single variable, “attention to language form.”

The present study investigates the role of grammatical domain and sees whether differences in it can be a cause for variation. The study conducted two tasks which differ in their target form domain. The first task has a wider domain, grammar in general, and the other task has a narrow domain, a single grammar item, articles. The present study shows that tasks with different grammatical domains on the same research topic can produce different results as well as systematic variations.

II. L2 ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH ARTICLES AND VARIATION

1. L2 Acquisition of English Articles

It has been observed that L2 learners of English have great difficulty learning articles. One of the reasons for the difficulty can be that the learners’ L1 lacks articles or the article system of their L1 is different from that of English (Ionin, et al., 2008; Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008). Another reason is the complex semantics and pragmatics of English articles (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Hawkins, 2001; Robertson 2000). Korean learners of English have both difficulties in learning English articles.

One of the research questions in the literature was which type of article is acquired more easily or earlier. Some may say that *the* will be acquired more easily than *a* since *the* appears in less limited conditions, with either a countable or non-countable noun or a singular or plural noun, than *a*, which is used only with a countable singular noun (Hawkins 2001). However, it is known that the definite article has several uses and that they are not equally difficult for ESL learners (Liu & Gleason, 2002). The indefinite article is also not simple; it has several uses or functions: specific, non-specific, generic, and classificatory (Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 1999; Huebner, 1985; Master, 1990). Because of

---

1 The acquisition orders of the articles are different depending on research: (i) bare NPs > *the* > *a*/*∅* (Hawkins, 2001), ii) *∅* > *the* > *a* (Parrish, 1987). Master (1987) showed different acquisition orders depending on proficiency levels: i) *∅* > *the* > *a* (mid, high), ii) *∅* > *a* > *the* (basic), iii) *the* > *∅* > *a* (low).
articles' complexity, it may not be tenable to claim that a certain type of article is acquired earlier or easier than the other types without first considering their complex semantics and pragmatics.

Ionin, et al. (2004) proposed that the semantic feature specificity, a universal feature, played a significant role. They showed that L2 learners of English overused *the* more in specific contexts than in non-specific contexts. Chung (2009) showed that the feature also played a significant role in the L2 acquisition of English articles by Korean secondary school students, supporting the claim of Ionin, et al. (2004).

2. Factors Affecting Variation

It has been observed that L2 learners as well as L1 learners vary in the accuracy of their production due to several reasons such as style or task (Ellis, 2008; Labov, 1970; Larsen-Freeman, 1976; Romaine, 2003). There are two major types of factors affecting variation in SLA: psychological and linguistic. The seminal works of Tarone (1983, 1985) in the research on variation focused on a psychological factor, attention to linguistic form. Differing amounts of attention are revealed by different styles such as careful or casual style. Other psychological variables have been investigated in the literature: planning (Crookes, 1989; Foster & Skehan, 1996), time pressure (Maad, 2008), and attention to information and grammar (Hulstijn & Hulstijn, 1984).

Tarone (1985) found some variation in the use of articles by L2 learners of English depending on three different tasks: grammaticality judgment, oral interview and oral narration. The hypothesis was that learners would supply articles most accurately on the grammatical judgment and least accurately on the narrative since learners would achieve higher grammatical accuracy on measures requiring the most “attention to language form.” The results were not as hypothesized, though the third-person singular verb marker –s did follow the pattern expected by the hypothesis. Tarone (1985) concluded that the variable of “attention to language form” was unable to account for the pattern of style-shifting, suggesting that other factors might be more helpful in explaining the patterns. Tarone and Parrish (1988) reanalyzed the data of Tarone (1985) by using the more fine-grained system of articles (Huebner, 1985): the semantic features [±HK] “known to the hearer” and [±SR] “specific referent.” They suggested that task-related variation in interlanguage must be due not to a single variable called “attention to language form,” but to a complex of factors.

Robertson (2000) explored linguistic factors on variation. He showed that the variability of English article use is constrained by three principles: a syntactic principle of determiner drop, a pragmatic “recoverability” principle and a “lexical transfer principle.” On the other
hand, Ionin, et al. (2004) maintained that UG constrains the acquisition of L2 English articles; L2 learners overused the definite article for specific DPs. They argued that if the feature specificity is not taught at school, its acquisition must be guided by UG. Avery and Radiši (2007) also suggested that variability in the L2 acquisition of English articles is constrained by UG and L1.

Acquisition researchers as well as language teachers make and use test items whose domains are sometimes wide or sometimes narrow. A test has a narrow domain when it focuses on one specific item such as an article or tense system, and it has a wide domain when the domain it looks at is more general in nature, like grammar as a whole, or discourse. A multiple-choice test that has choices of articles (a, the, zero) has a narrow domain, which looks at articles only, and a test that finds an ungrammatical one among various types of items such as noun phrases, verbs, adjectives, coordination in a sentence or discourse has a wide domain, which looks at grammar in general. There has been no research on the domain of linguistic form as a variable of variation, and researchers or teachers do not seem to know how different domains affect test results. It is expected that different domains will affect L2 learners with unstable grammar knowledge. The present study investigates the role of domain as a variable of variability in interlanguage. The subjects took part in two tasks with different grammatical domains. One task was a wide domain test on grammar in general, and the other task was a narrow domain test on English articles only. The present study has the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1:
The subjects perform better on a narrow domain test than on a wide domain test.

Hypothesis 2:
The different domains and proficiency levels affect the subjects’ responses regarding English articles with respect to article type and specificity.

It is expected that if the domain is narrow, learners may focus on a single item's usage and thus utilize more L2 knowledge. The effect of the domain is expected to be reflected in

\[1\] The two features, definiteness and specificity, are based on the definitions below.

If a Determiner Phrase (DP) of the form \([D \ NP]\) is...

a. \([+\text{definite}]\), then the speaker and hearer presuppose the existence of a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP.

b. \([+\text{specific}]\), then the speaker intends to refer to a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP and considers this individual to possess some noteworthy property. (Ionin, et al. 2004, p. 5)

Unlike definiteness, specificity is not encoded in English. For examples of specificity, see Ionin et al. (2004) and Chung (2009).
the specific parts of English articles, article type and the feature specificity.

III. METHOD

1. Participants

The subjects of the experiment were 172 Korean secondary school students, from 7th to 11th grade. The students were from the Seoul and Gyeonggi areas who study English as a foreign language. There were 99 males and 73 females whose ages were in the range of 13-17; the mean age was 14.9. The participants were grouped into four proficiency levels based on the results of the proficiency test, as shown in TABLE 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Test scores</td>
<td>0-8</td>
<td>9-13</td>
<td>14-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note: total test scores: 28)

The proficiency test, a written multiple choice test, contained 28 questions: 19 reading comprehension questions and 9 grammar questions. The test items were selected from TOEIC and TOEIC Bridge questions. The students were given about 40-50 minutes to take the test.

2. Materials and Procedure

Two tasks were performed, both of which were written forced elicitation tasks but with different grammatical domains. Task A is a wide domain task whose question items cover grammar in general, while Task B is a narrow domain task, focusing on articles. An item in Task A has four underlined phrases in the given sentences as in (1), and the subjects were asked to choose and correct the ungrammatical one. In Task B, the subjects were asked to find the most appropriate DP for the blank, as shown in (2).

3 The present research is based on the results of the two experiments, which were conducted on the same subjects in the fall of 2008, and one of the two experiments, the narrow domain task, was reported in Chung (2009).

4 TOEIC Bridge questions are for low-level participants such as middle school students.
Task A (wide domain)
(1) Mr. and Mrs. Kim have twins. Twins are the two children who are born together.

A B C D
( ) : ______ => ______

Task B (narrow domain)
(2) When I woke up this morning, I saw _____ on a tree near my window and it soon flew away.

① the pretty birds ② a pretty bird ③ pretty bird ④ pretty birds ⑤ the pretty bird

In Task A, the participants needed to examine various grammar items such as coordination, verb tense form, subject-verb agreement, DP forms with articles, passive form, etc., while in Task B, they needed to examine DP forms with one of the three articles and singular/plural noun forms and were able to look closely at article usages.

The two tasks are both structured in the same way, as shown in TABLE 2. There were four items for each type of article (a, zero, and the), and each type of article appears in either a specific or non-specific context equally. The total number of target items in each test was 12.5

But the two tasks have some differences. Task A, a wide domain task, was expected to be more difficult than Task B, a narrow domain task, and thus item length in Task B was made longer than that in Task A; the mean number of words per item is 20.1 in Task A and 29.6 in Task B. Additionally, Task A items have four choices while Task B’s have five choices.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Indefinite</th>
<th>Definite</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Article type</td>
<td>[+specific]</td>
<td>[-specific]</td>
<td>+the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of items</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The items of the two tasks were examined by three native speakers of English, professors at a university in Seoul, Korea; all agreed on the intended correct answers. One point was assigned to a correct answer in both tasks; however, in Task A, no point was given to a correct choice without correction. The subjects first completed Task A and then Task B; about 25 minutes were given for Task A and about 15 minutes for Task B. The

5 Task A contained three more items which were not analyzed in the present study, including a distractor. Task B contained two additional items which were not analyzed.
proficiency test was conducted on a different day, and took about 50 minutes.

### IV. RESULTS

1. Task Type

The results of the two tasks are shown in TABLE 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>5.76</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Note. total scores: 12)

A paired *t*-test indicated that the mean score of Task A is significantly lower than that of Task B (*t*(171)=14.063, *p*<.001) and the two tasks are significantly correlated (*r*=.509, *p*<.001). The difference between the two tasks supports the Hypothesis 1; the subjects were less accurate in the wide domain task than in the narrow domain.

2. Article Type

TABLE 4 shows the mean scores of the three articles in the two tasks. In the two tasks, the subjects supplied correct responses most accurately with the indefinite article and least accurately with the definite article, but this difficulty order was not significant in the narrow domain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article Type</th>
<th>Task A</th>
<th>Task B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>φ</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Notes. total scores: 4)

The data of the two tasks were submitted to one-way repeated-measures ANOVAs, which revealed the existence of a main effect on article type in the results of Task A (*F*(2)=80.9, *p*<.001). The correct responses to the three articles differ significantly; the mean of correct responses to the indefinite article is higher than those to the zero article,
and those to the zero article are higher than those to the definite article. On the other hand, in Task B there is no significant effect on article type ($F(2)=0.8, p>.05$).

3. Proficiency Level

The two figures in FIGURE 1 show the mean percentages of correct responses to the three articles by proficiency level.

![FIGURE 1 Correct Responses (%) of Articles by Article Type and Proficiency Level](image)

In the statistical results of mixed factorial ANOVAs, Task A shows a main effect on proficiency level ($F(3,168)=43.932, p<.05$) and a significant interaction effect between article type and proficiency level ($F(5.657, 316.771)=3.028, p<.05$). In Task B, there is a
significant interaction effect between article type and proficiency level \( (F(5.794, 324.485)=2.405, p<.05) \). We can see that the increasing rates of the correct responses to the indefinite article in the two tasks are more obvious than those of the other articles.

4. Specificity

TABLE 5 and TABLE 6 show the correct response percentages in the two tasks by specificity and proficiency level.\(^6\)

| TABLE 5 | Correct Response (%) by Specificity and Proficiency (Task A) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Lv1            | 10.6            | 9.1             | 19.7            | 6.1             | 11.4            |
| Lv2            | 15.6            | 7.4             | 42.6            | 23.0            | 22.2            |
| Lv3            | 47.9            | 25.0            | 57.3            | 29.2            | 39.9            |
| Lv4            | 61.7            | 26.7            | 76.7            | 36.7            | 50.5            |
| Mean           | 34.0            | 17.1            | 49.1            | 23.8            | 31.0            |

| TABLE 6 | Correct Response (%) by Specificity and Proficiency (Task B) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Lv1            | 24.2            | 42.4            | 31.8            | 39.4            | 34.5            |
| Lv2            | 51.6            | 46.7            | 40.2            | 45.9            | 46.1            |
| Lv3            | 65.6            | 54.2            | 52.1            | 47.9            | 55.0            |
| Lv4            | 76.7            | 63.3            | 55.0            | 46.7            | 60.4            |
| Mean           | 54.5            | 51.7            | 44.77           | 45.0            | 49.0            |

The data for the two articles, a and zero, from the two tasks were submitted to mixed factorial ANOVAs. The results of Task A demonstrate significant effects on article type \( (F(1,171)=27.680, p<.05) \) and on specificity \( (F(1,171)=35.255, p<.05) \). Specifically, the mean percentage of correct responses to the indefinite article is significantly higher than that for the zero article, and the mean percentage of articles in the [-specific] context is significantly higher than that of articles in the [+specific] context.

On the other hand, the results of Task B show no significant effect on article type

---

\(^6\) Unlike Ionin, et al. (2004), the tests for the present study were not designed to investigate the feature specificity with the definite article because the Korean secondary school students were not expected to identify specificity with the definite article.
but do exhibit a significant effect on specificity ($F(1,171)=8.653$, $p<.05$). However, the significant effect on specificity in Task B differs from that in Task A; in Task B, the mean percentage of the article is higher with the [+specific] context than with the [-specific] context. Note that in Task A the correct response rate is higher with the [-specific] context than with the [+specific] context. The difference in specificity between the two tasks is revealed with the two articles both, the indefinite and zero articles.

V. DISCUSSION

1. Task Variation and Grammatical Domain

The two tasks in the present study showed several differences in the results. First, the subjects performed significantly better on the narrow domain task than on the wide domain task, supporting the Hypothesis 1. The two tasks are different in terms of grammatical domain and production (or correction). Task A is a wide domain task and the subjects were required to correct an error after identifying it, while Task B is a narrow domain task where the subjects were just to choose a correct DP for the blank in a given context. It is expected that Task A is more difficult for the subjects than Task B, although Task B was made more difficult in term of the item length and the number of choices.

We suggest that the difference between the two tasks is very likely to be due to the different domains. This finding has two important implications. First, we need to take into consideration grammatical domain as a factor for variation, which has not been examined in variation studies or SLA research. The domain is over the linguistic form such as DP or various categories and constructions, not on attention such as speech styles. We suggest that in the narrow domain task the subjects could focus better on the target item, which resulted in better performance than in the wide domain.

The second implication is that two different tasks on the same research topic may produce different results. SLA researchers will assume that different tasks on the same topic will show similar patterns or systematic variations, and thus the two different tasks in the present study were expected to produce the similar patterns, but the results were different; the findings on the specificity feature were in contrast. The difference in the two tasks, grammatical domain, was not a factor examined in the literature. This study suggests that SLA researchers should take grammatical domain into consideration in designing an experiment and interpreting its results. Note that the wide domain task used in the present study is a test type used for a while in the paper-based test (PBT) of the TOEFL and in Tarone (1985), and that the narrow domain task is similar to the type used by many SLA researchers, including Ionin, et al. (2004). Since tasks with different grammatical domains
may produce different results, the findings from the tasks may be different and the researchers’ claims would be different. This indicates that grammatical domain is a factor that SLA researchers and L2 teachers need to pay attention to.

2. Article Type

Another difference between the two tasks is concerned with the difficulty hierarchy of articles. The subjects revealed significant differences among the three article types in the wide domain, but did not in the narrow domain (See FIGURE 1). We found a difficulty hierarchy of L2 English articles for Korean secondary school students in the wide domain, but not in the narrow domain, as shown in (3).

(3) Difficulty hierarchy of L2 English articles
   a) Task A (wide domain task): $a < \emptyset < the$ (from the easiest to the most difficult)
   b) Task B (narrow domain task): no hierarchy

The difficulty hierarchy in the wide domain may be explained by the Uniqueness Principle (Pinker, 1984); following the principle, learners prefer one-to-one mapping between form and meaning. The indefinite article $a$ is considered the easiest one among the three articles since it is singular (and countable), while the definite article can be used for either countable or noncountable, either singular or plural, DPs. The rate of correct responses for the indefinite article is clearly distinguished from those for the other articles in the wide domain task, and even in the narrow domain task the indefinite article $a$ seems to be the easiest one, though the correct responses to the article are not significantly higher than those for other articles (See FIGURE 1). The zero article has no form and thus it is known to be the most difficult for Korean learners of English (Park, 2005). The difficulty order of the zero article and the definite article may be changed, depending on which usages of the articles are used in tasks. Both articles have some idiomatic or conventional usages, which will cause great difficulty for L2 learners. The tasks in the current research included a conventional usage of the definite article but not that of the zero article; Note that the present research did not focus on the definite article. The difference in the task design is very likely to cause the definite article to be the most difficult one among the three articles. The different results in the two tasks support the Hypothesis 2 and suggest that the grammatical domain affects the difficulty hierarchy of L2 English articles.

The difficulty order or acquisition order in (3) is different from those of previous studies: (i) bare NPs $>$ the $>$ a/\emptyset (Hawkins, 2001). $\emptyset$ $>$ the $>$ a (Parrish, 1987; Master 1987 (mid, high level)), $\emptyset$ $>$ a $>$ the (Master, 1987; basic), the $>$ $\emptyset$ $>$ a (Master, 1987; low). The findings in the present study show that the indefinite article is the easiest one for the L2
learners to acquire. The zero article is shown to be more difficult than the indefinite article. Some studies (Master, 1987; Parrish, 1987) suggested that the zero article is acquired earlier than the other articles. The present study showed that the correct response rate of the zero article by the low level learners was higher than other article(s), probably indicating that the article is acquired earlier than other articles. But note that the correct response rate of the zero article by the highest level learners was lowest (See FIGURE 1). It implies that the correct response rate of the zero article by the low level learners is not based on their correct knowledge of English articles, but on the influence of their L1 which lacks articles; it is possible that they selected a DP without an article by chance.

Concerning the difficulty hierarchy or acquisition order of the articles, it is not easy to determine which article type is easier or acquired earlier than other types since each article has a complex of features; for example, the definite article itself has several uses and each use has different difficulty level from other uses (Liu & Gleason, 2002). Furthermore, the two tasks in the present study showed different results for the difficulty hierarchy, as shown in (3). A desirable way of presenting the acquisition or difficulty order of articles is to use semantic features, rather than article types. Thus, one may suggest that an article with a certain value of a feature is easier than the article with the different value of the feature; for instance, [-specific] \( a \) is easier than [+specific] \( a \), which was the case in the wide domain.

3. Proficiency Level

We saw that the increases of the correct responses with Task A is greater than those with Task B, especially that of the indefinite article. However, it seems that only the students at the highest level, Level 4, seem to have acquired the indefinite article, whose correct response rates in the two tasks are over 60%. If we consider the results of Task B only, the correct response rates of the three articles by the students at Level 4 are around 60%. However, the results of Task A are in contrast with those of Task B where the rates of the zero and definite articles are below 40% (See FIGURE 1), which may indicate that even the high school students have not acquired the articles yet. The finding here revealed that the acquisition of English articles by Korean students is affected by proficiency level as well as task type. The finding also supports the Hypothesis 2 and suggests that the proficiency affects the difficulty hierarchy of article type.

4. Specificity

The last difference between the two tasks is related to the semantic feature, specificity, with the two article types, the indefinite and zero articles; the feature was not examined
with respect to the definite article in this study. In the wide domain task the subjects supplied more correct answers in non-specific contexts (36.4%) than in specific contexts (25.5%), while in the narrow domain task the effects were reversed (44.9% vs. 53.1%). These results support the Hypothesis 2. The reversed effects, however, require some explanation. To account for the reversed effects, we will focus on the indefinite article, ignoring the zero article, since the differences in the two different contexts, specific and non-specific, are large with the indefinite article (34.0% vs. 49.1% in the wide domain and 54.5% vs. 44.7% in the narrow domain), but small with the zero article (17.1% vs. 23.8% in the wide domain and 51.7% vs. 45.0% in the narrow domain) (See TABLE 5 and TABLE 6). Then we can make the question more specific: why the subjects' correct response rate with the specific contexts was so low in the wide domain (34%), while the one with the non-specific contexts was not so low in the wide domain (49.1%)?

According to Fodor and Sag (1982), the indefinite article has two interpretations, referential and quantificational. Consider the ambiguity of the sentence below.

(4) A student in the syntax class cheated on the final exam. (Fodor & Sag, 1982, p. 355)

The indefinite DP *a student* can be interpreted as either a quantified expression (a non-specific singular person) or a referring one (a particular person who the speaker intended to refer to). Note that the referentiality by Fodor and Sag (1982) corresponds to the specificity by Ionin et al. (2004). Now our questions are which interpretation, quantity or referentiality, is easier for L2 learners than the other and in which domain it is easier.

First, we may assume that the quantity interpretation, a non-specific interpretation, is easier for L2 learners to understand than the specific interpretation of a DP. The quantity interpretation is a singular non-specific interpretation of a DP, and it will be a simple concept for L2 learners who are secondary school students. On the other hand, specificity will be difficult for the L2 learners since it requires pragmatic information on the speaker's intention to refer to a noteworthy entity in a given discourse. So, the assumption predicts that the subjects perform better with the quantity or non-specific use of the article than with a specific use of the article. The prediction is born out in the wide domain task of the present research; they performed better in non-specific contexts than in specific contexts.

However, the prediction of the assumption is not born out in the narrow domain task of the present study. The subjects performed better in the specific context than in the non-specific context or the quantity use of DPs. Here we suggest that task domain plays a role. In the narrow domain task the subjects were given five choices of DPs (eg. *a bird, bird, the bird, birds, the birds*) and asked to choose one of them. So, they tended to pay more attention to DP forms and their interpretations, definiteness and specificity as well as
quantity, and they were likely to use their knowledge of English articles. If they use grammar knowledge of English articles in the task, we expect that their performance with specific DPs will be better in the narrow domain task than in the wide domain task, which is the case in the present study (54.5% and 34% in the narrow and wide domains, respectively). On the other hand, their performance with non-specific DPs will be not much different between the two domain tasks since the use of the non-specific or quantity use of DPs is comparatively simple and the domain difference will not make much difference, which is the case in the results of the present study (44.77% and 49.1% in the two tasks, respectively).

The account above implies that the different effects of the specificity feature resulted from an interplay of the feature and grammatical domain. It is possible that in the wide domain task many of the Korean subjects could not focus on articles only, especially the complex semantics of English articles because there were various grammar items and thus their performance with the specific DPs was so low, while in the narrow domain they could focus on articles and use their knowledge of articles and their performance with specific DPs was higher than in the wide domain. On the other hand, with the non-specific DPs the domain difference did not play a role. This account based on an assumption, however, requires further research.

VI. CONCLUSION

The English article system is known to involve several grammatical components—phonology, syntax (DP), semantics, and pragmatics and its acquisition by L2 learners adds more factors like L1 influence. The L2 acquisition of English articles shows variation and their causes seem to be various or complex. The present study suggests that there are multiple factors or variables causing variation in interlanguage. Tarone and Parrish (1988, p. 36-37) supported Littlewood's (1981) proposal that "three factors influence variation in interlanguage: the communicative function of a feature, the linguistic environment of that feature, and social/situational factors." Young (1988) also suggested that several factors such as contexts of the situation (ethnicity, sex, education, and occupation), proficiency in English, linguistic contexts (definite and animate) and others played roles in variation. The present study shows that grammatical domain can also cause variation in the use of English articles by Korean students and that tasks with different grammatical domains on the same research topic may produce different results. It is also found that grammatical domain is affected by "attention" since it is assumed that more attention is paid in a narrow
Variability in the L2 Acquisition of English Articles 183
domain task than in a wide domain task.7

REFERENCES


Larsen-Freeman, D. (1976). An explanation for the morpheme acquisition order of second

7 This study, however, has some limitations: the number of items for each variable such as article type or the feature specificity is small: there were only four items of each article type and two items for specificity of each article type. And it did not examine the specificity effects of the definite article.


APPENDIX

Test A

Items #3 #6 and #13 in Task A were excluded from the analysis.
10. Yesterday was special day. I proposed to my girlfriend and she accepted it.

(A) proposed (B) special (C) she (D) to

11. Joe: Will you come to today's party with your wife?

A Max: I am afraid we can't. We have guest visiting us tonight. They are from France.

(B) Max: I am afraid we can't. We have guest visiting us tonight. They are from France.

12. Last night a thief stole lots of money from the mayor's house. The police said they found an evidence in the house. It was a glove that he used.

(A) lots of money (B) in the house. (C) an evidence (D) that he used

13. Joe's family started their trip on an Independence Day, the Fourth of July holiday.

(A) They visited big cities and small towns in the country. (July 4: 미국독립기념일)

14. Jim introduced Sue to a young man last year. Sue liked young man and wanted to marry him.

(A) to marry (B) young man (C) him

15. One day a dirty man came into a hotel. Chief manager of the hotel told him that they didn't have a room.

(A) didn't have (B) they (C) a room.

Test B

d 다음 주어진 문맥과 문장 속에서 빈 칸에 가장 알맞은 표현을 고르시오. 해당 번호를 빈 칸에 적으십시오.

1. Mary: I am sleepy again, but I have a lot of work to do. Can I have more coffee, Sue?
   Sue: You have already had a lot of coffee. I think you need _____ .
   ① sleeps ② the sleep ③ the sleeps ④ sleep ⑤ a sleep

2. When I woke up this morning, I saw ____ on a tree near my window and it soon flew away.
   ① the pretty birds ② a pretty bird ③ pretty bird ④ pretty birds ⑤ the pretty bird

3. ____ can be defined generally as a person who is learning at a school.
   ① Students ② A student ③ The student ④ Student ⑤ The students

4. 손님: I am looking for ____ for my son's birthday. Can you help me find one?
   서점주인: How old is he?
   ① the books ② a book ③ the book ④ book ⑤ books
5. My wife gave me _____ last Christmas. You didn't see it because I rarely wore it. Then while I was on an important business trip in New York, I lost it and I couldn't tell my wife the truth.
   ① the watch ② watch ③ watches ④ the watches ⑤ a watch

6. Last year I had _____ that were very big and very noisy. And I had a hard time taking care of them. I had to sell them quickly. You don't know how much they ate and how noisy they were.
   ① dog ② dogs ③ the dog ④ a dog ⑤ the dogs

7. I have known my neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Kim, for ten years but I didn't know they were _____ of American history. They are quiet and rarely talk with us.
   ① the teacher ② teacher ③ the teachers ④ teachers ⑤ a teacher

   Jane: Yes, she is here. She is sitting over there on the couch and wearing a red dress.
   Jack: Oh, I can see her. She is _____ with long hair! She is very pretty.
   ① a woman ② the woman ③ woman ④ women ⑤ the women

9. 손님: I ordered a glass of milk but I think something dropped into _____.
   웨이터: I am very sorry. I will bring you a new one right away.
   ① milk ② milks ③ the milk ④ a milk ⑤ the milks

10. Laura: Well, there were peanuts and _____ on the table. But the wine is spilt, and the peanuts are gone.
    Cindy: I think it is the cat, Betty, who did it.
    ① a wine ② the wine ③ wine ④ wines ⑤ the wines

11. Jack: I saw Joe this morning. He looked terrible. He coughed a lot, and he said he had a fever.
    Bill: Yes, he went back home to rest. I think he also needs some medicine for the cough and fever.
    He must have caught _____.
    ① the flu ② a flu ③ flu ④ flu ⑤ the flu

12. Mr. Kim bought a car last week. All of his family liked it very much. But yesterday he found a problem with _____.
    ① the engines ② an engine ③ engines ④ engine ⑤ the engine

Applicable levels: all levels
Key words: variation/variability, grammatical domain, indefinite article, zero article, definite article, specificity, task, second language acquisition

Dept. of English Language Education
Korea University
Tel: 02-3290-2356
E-mail: tchung@korea.ac.kr

Received in April, 2011
Reviewed in May, 2011
Revised version received in June, 2011