

# Second Language Learners' Use of English Articles: A Case Study of Native Speakers of Japanese

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the use of the English article *the* in L2 Japanese learners based on Ionin and Wexler's (2003) study and examines Lardiere's (2004) 'reassembling of features' proposal in L2 Japanese learners' interlanguage.

The results are the following: (1) Japanese intermediate L2 learners of English associate *the* with referentiality. 2) Findings regarding the relationship between Japanese demonstratives and English articles suggest that the learners' task may not consist of incorporating new features but of re-assembling (Lardiere 2004) the features associated with a given lexical item in the L2 grammar.

*Keywords:* second language acquisition, feature re-assembling, morphological competence, definiteness, referentiality, Japanese

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of first language (L1) in the acquisition of the English article system by Japanese learners of English.

It has been said that many second language (L2) learners have difficulty in acquiring the English article system (Thomas 1989 and Huebner 1983 among others). Ionin and Wexler (2003) report that Russian L2 learners of English optionally allow either *the* or *a*, especially in referential indefinite contexts and associate *the* with referentiality. Ionin and Wexler also claim that definiteness and referentiality are two settings of a parameter governing article choice and they attribute variability in L2 learners' use of articles to their inability in setting the correct parameter.

However, the notion of parameter-setting does not explain the issue of variability since parameter-settings are typically all or nothing phenomena, the resetting of parameters should represent an abrupt change in L2 learners' interlanguage (Van Kemenade and Vincent 1997). Lardiere (2004) claims that the notion of 'morphological competence' (which is the knowledge of morphological features) and the concept of 'reassembling of features', explain variability with respect to morphological inflection in L2 data. According to this claim, L2

learners need to develop the knowledge of which linguistic forms in their L1 go with which features in their L2.

This study focuses on the following: (1) whether or not Japanese learners of English also show sensitivity to referential indefinite contexts in their article choice and (2) examining how Lardiere's (2004) 'reassembling of features' proposal works in the case of Japanese L2 learners of English.

## **2. The Relationship Between Japanese Demonstratives and English Articles**

Although Japanese does not have an article system, definiteness and indefiniteness are conveyed to some extent by different linguistic means such as case markers and demonstratives (Goto-Butler 2002).

Kuno (1973) claims that the non-deictic use of the demonstrative in Japanese *sono* '[of] that' is used for referring to something that is not known personally to either the speaker or the hearer or has not been a shared experience between them. For example when A and B are talking about C, A knows C but B does not know about C. Then A would use *sono-hito* 'that person' to refer to C. Therefore the demonstrative *sono* has [+referential] and [-definite]. *Ano* '[of] that over there', on the other hand, is used for referring to something (at a distance either in time or space) that the speaker knows both the speaker and the hearer know personally or have experience in. Therefore *ano* 'that' carries the features [+referential], and [+definite] (Kuno 1973).

Lyons (1999) claims that the Japanese topic marker *wa* has the features [+definite] or [+generic], whereas the Japanese nominative case marker *ga* has features of either [+definite] or [-definite]. According to Lyons (1999), [+generic] is commonly grammatically indefinite in languages that have definiteness marking. However despite the fact that Japanese does not have definiteness markings, [+generic] in Japanese has the feature of [+referential] since a marked nominal in Japanese is required to be identifiable.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Participants:

Participants in this study were five adult Japanese learners of English: three advanced learners<sup>1</sup> (Takako, Hiro and Mami) and two intermediate learners (Misa and Aki). Their age range was 16-29 (a mean age of 25.5). Their age at the start of intensive exposure ranged from 27-29 (mean 27.5).<sup>2</sup> As a control group, two native speakers of English were tested.

#### 3.2 Task 1: Elicitation Task

This study conducts two tasks: an elicitation task and a translation task. The elicitation task is based on Ionin and Wexler's (2003) task which employs three semantic distinctions: definiteness, referentiality and *de re/de dicto*.<sup>3</sup> Definiteness is defined as marking a noun requiring both the speaker's and the hearer's understanding. Referentiality only requires the speaker's reference (knowledge of the target entity). In other words, an indefinite DP is referential if the speaker has its referent 'in mind' and intends to refer to it. If not, the DP is quantificational, which implies that its referent does not exist in the speaker's mind. An indefinite DP is *de re* if the speaker mentions something that actually exists in the world, otherwise the DP is *de dicto* (Ionin and Wexler 2003).

There are fifty-two dialogues corresponding to fourteen different context types. Each of the contexts has four dialogues except for two context types (i.e., indefinite generic and definite generic) each of which has two dialogues. Nine out of the fourteen context types will be discussed in this paper.

In the elicitation task, test sentences are translated into Japanese except for each of the last sentences where participants were asked to choose appropriate articles (i.e., *a*, *the* or *no article*). The first two types (Context A) are definite contexts (examples 1 and 2), one containing relative clause (RC) modification

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<sup>1</sup> The participants' English level is based on the scores of English proficiency test (e.g., Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and the Society for Testing English (STEP). See appendix for the detail.

<sup>2</sup> Aki who is a high school student in Japan is excluded since she did not have an intensive exposure to English.

<sup>3</sup> We would like to thank Tania Ionin for giving access to the questionnaires to the director of the language acquisition lab, Juana .M.Liceras.

(example 1) and the other not (example 2). The target article for the type A is *the*. The participants would choose *the* whether or not they associate *the* with either referentiality or the *de re* reading.

**Context code A**

**Definite, RC-modification (target article: *the*)**

(1) A: Dorothy decided to buy a house last year. She looked at a lot of houses, and she really liked two: a small blue house and a big pink house.

B: So which house did she buy?

A: She bought \_\_\_ house which was small and blue.

**Definite, no RC (target article: *the*)**

(2) A: Last night, Paul decided to eat some dinner. He had just two things in his refrigerator—a pot of soup and a cheese sandwich.

B: So what did he eat?

A: He ate \_\_\_ sandwich.

The other contexts exemplified in (3) to (9) are aimed to elicit *a*. Examples (3) to (5) in Type B are instances of the indefinite wide scope over an intentional verb or modal. Example (3) has RC-modification whereas example (4) does not. Example (5) illustrates wide-scope (referential) context which involves the use of *certain* with RC modification. According to Fodor and Sag (1982), the existence of wide scope and /or RC-modification biases participants in favor of a referential reading. Therefore if the participants associate *the* with referentiality, they would choose *the* for this category.

**Context code B (target article *a*)**

(3) A: John is planning to get married next month. I don't approve of his choice of bride.

B; Why not?

A: He wants to marry \_\_\_ woman who has been divorced seven times and has five children.

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- (4) <In a restaurant>  
A: Are you ready to order, sir? Or are you waiting for someone?  
B: Can you please come back in about twenty minutes?  
B: I am waiting for \_\_\_ woman from Brookline.
- (5) A: Nancy went to the museum yesterday. She didn't look around at all, but went directly to the room with 18<sup>th</sup> century Dutch art.  
B: Why?  
A: Because she wanted to see \_\_\_ certain painting that she had heard a lot about.

Examples (6) and (7) in Type C have no scope interactions, no intentional verbs and modals are used. Example (6) has RC-modification while (7) does not. Ionin and Wexler (2003) claim that the RC-modification in (6) biases the DP towards a referential reading. In example (7), however, the unmodified DP is considered to be non-referential (but *de re*). If the participants associate *the* with *de re* reading, they would choose *the* in a non-referential sentence such as (7).

### Context C (target article *a*)

- (6) A: Alice just came to visit her nephew Andy.  
B: Did she bring him anything?  
A: Yes, she brought him \_\_\_ picture which shows some children playing games in their garden.
- (7) A: John looked very happy today. Do you know why?  
B: He got \_\_\_ dog for his birthday yesterday.

The last two examples (8 and 9) in Context D involve *de dicto* indefinites and require non-referential reading. Example (8) has RC-modification whereas example (9) does not. RC-modification in (8) does not give the DP referential reading, because there is no particular secretary under discussion. In context D, the participants would choose *a* whether or not they associate *the* with either referentiality or *de re* reading.

**Context D (target article *a*)**

(8) A: Tom has just been promoted. He has a new office, and a lot of responsibilities. I wonder how he'll handle it all.

B: He is planning to hire \_\_secretary who will help him organize the work.

(9) A: I was late for work again today. My car wouldn't start!

B: Is it ok now?

A: No, it's at the mechanic's. I'll have to take the bus to work this week again!

A: I need to buy \_\_ new car.

**3.3 Task 2: Translation Task**

This task is to examine whether or not the features [+referential] and [+definite] in the demonstrative *ano* '[of] that over there' share the same semantic features as the ones in the English definite article *the* which also has [+referential] and [+definite]. If they share the same semantic features, then the demonstrative *ano* '[of] that over there' would appear in a place where the English *the* would appear. Mami (advanced learner) and Misa (intermediate learner) participated in this task. The participants were asked to translate the last sentence of each dialogue written in English into Japanese.

**4. Analysis**

**4.1 Results: The Elicitation Task**

First let us look at the group results of the elicitation task (Table 1). Overall, the results show high correctness in the learner's article choice (over 80% correct except for the category 5). The Japanese data shows a high percentage of correct use of the article *a* even in type B which contains referential indefinite contexts. Does this mean Japanese learners do not associate *the* with referentiality or does it just mean they pick *a* more without knowing which one is the L1 choice?

**Table 1.**

**Elicitation task results: % article used by context**

Category	Control <sup>4</sup>	Type <sup>5</sup>	% the	%a	% missing
<b>1. narrow scope</b>	a	D	10	85	5
<b>2. narrow scope, RC (0)</b>	a	D	5	95	0
<b>3. no scope (0)</b>	a	C	10	85	5
<b>4. no scope, RC (0)</b>	a	B	15	85	0
<b>5. wide scope</b>	a	B	30	65	5
<b>6. wide scope, RC</b>	a	B	10	90	0
<b>7. wide scope, certain (0)</b>	a	B	20	80	0
<b>8. definite (0)</b>	the	A	95	5	0
<b>9. definite, RC (0)</b>	the	A	95	5	0

Table 2 shows the individual results for type B (category 4 to 7). The intermediate learners Misa and Aki have difficulty in choosing the right article in indefinite referential contexts. The percentage of correct use of the article by Misa and Aki is 37.5 % and 50% respectively. Advanced learners (Takako, Hiro and Mami), on the other hand, have no difficulty in choosing the right article in these categories (100% correct).

**Table 2.**

**Elicitation task results: Individual (% of correct answer)**

Category	Control	Takako	Hiro	Mami	Misa	Aki
<b>4. no scope, RC</b>	a	4/4 (100)	4/4 (100)	4/4 (100)	2/4 (50)	3/4 (75)
<b>5. wide scope</b>	a	4/4 (100)	4/4 (100)	4/4 (100)	1/4 (25)	0/4 (0)
<b>6. wide scope, RC</b>	a	4/4 (100)	4/4 (100)	4/4 (100)	3/4 (75)	4/4 (100)
<b>7. wide scope, certain</b>	a	4/4 (100)	4/4 (100)	4/4 (100)	0/4 (0)	1/4 (25)
<b>Total</b>		16/16 (100)	16/16 (100)	16/16 (100)	6/16 (37.5)	8/16 (50)

Table 3 shows detailed results of the elicitation task in type B (category 4 to 7). As mentioned in 3.2, three choices are given to the participants (i.e., *a*, *the* and *no*

<sup>4</sup> Control here means the target articles for each category.

<sup>5</sup> Type here refers to the type of category (i.e., type A, type B, type C and type D appeared in 2.2)

*article*). Despite the fact that the Japanese language does not have an article system, the zero-article-option was not the main choice among the participants. The zero article choice appeared twice only in Aki's data.

**Table 3.**

**Elicitation task result: Individual in type B**

Category	Takako			Hiro			Mami			Misa			Aki		
	The	a	0*	the	a	0	the	A	0	The	a	0	the	A	0
4. noscope, RC	0	100	0	0	100	0	0	100	0	50	50	0	50	50	0
5. wide scope	0	100	0	0	100	0	0	100	0	75	25	0	75	0	25
6. wide scope, RC	0	100	0	0	100	0	0	100	0	75	25	0	75	25	0
7. wide scope, certain	0	100	0	0	100	0	0	100	0	100	0	0	50	25	25

\*0 refers to missing articles

The results from the advanced learners (Takako, Hiro and Mami) show 100% correctness in choosing indefinite article *a* in categories 4 to 7. According to this data, it is plausible that the features of the English article can be acquired.

The results from the intermediate learners (Misa and Aki), however, show the variability in the indefinite referential contexts.

#### 4.2 Results: Translation task

In the translation task, there are ten sentences which are aimed to elicit the English definite article *the* (sentences 33-36, 45-48, and 51-52). Table 4 shows the results of this task.

**Table 4.**

**Translation task (the number of the occurrence of *ano* 'that' in definite context)**

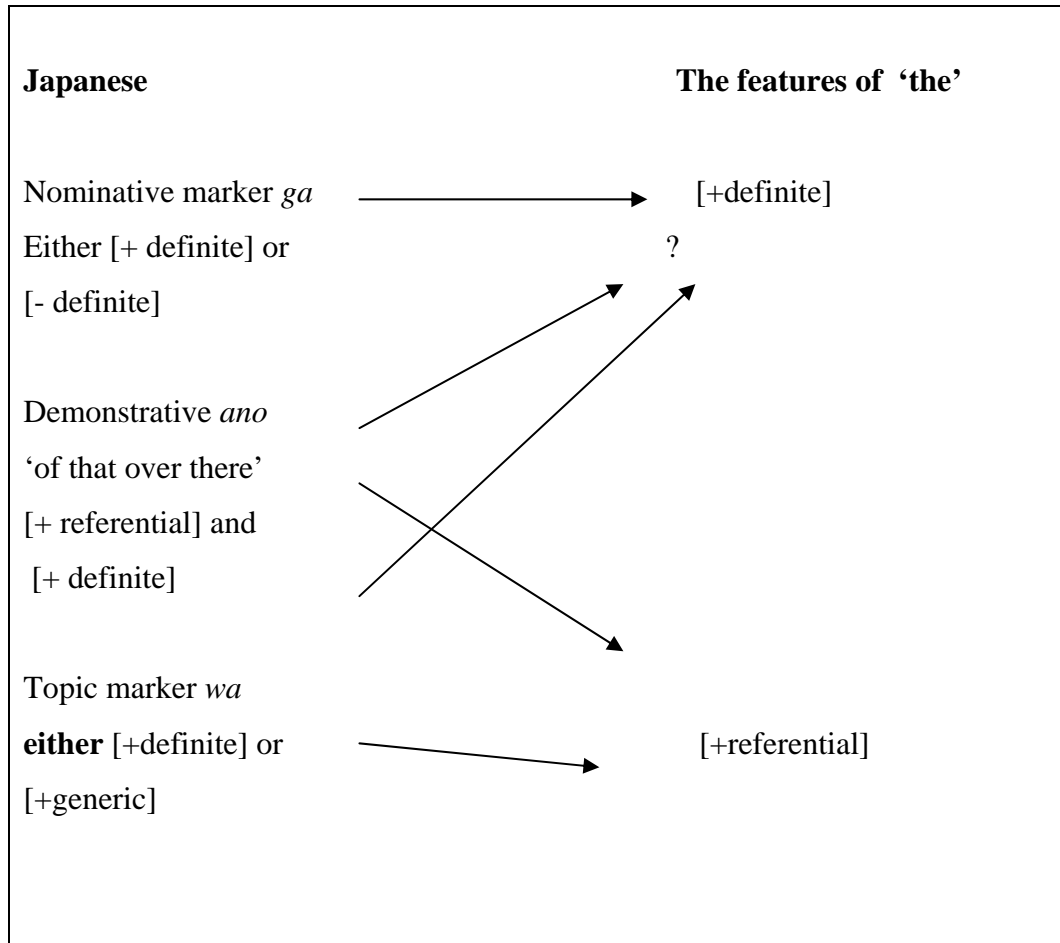
	<b>Mami</b>	<b>Misa</b>
<b>33-36 (Definite RC modification)</b>	0/4	0/4
<b>45-48 (Definite generic)</b>	0/4	0/4
<b>51-52 (definite generic, subject position)</b>	0/2	0/2

Table 4 shows that the demonstrative *ano* '[of] that over there' did not appear in any of the sentences where the English *the* would have appeared. This is worth mentioning because *ano* '[of] that over there' has the [+referential] and [+definite], which are the two necessarily features for the definite article *the*. This suggests that the semantics in Japanese *ano* '[of] that over there' and the English definite article *the* are different.

### **4.3 Summary**

Figure 1 shows that neither case markers *ga* nor *wa* nor the demonstrative *ano* indicate the two features required for the definite article *the* at one time.

Figure 1.



The nominative *ga* only has [+definite] and the topic marker *wa* can have either [+definite] or [+generic], which are features of referentiality. That is to say, the topic marker *wa* cannot have two features (i.e., [+definite] and [+generic]) at one time. The demonstrative *ano* 'of that over there' has the features [+referential] and [+definite], however as the result from the translation task showed, the demonstrative *ano* 'of that over there' never appeared in the sentences where the English *the* would have appeared. In other words, the semantics of [+definite] in English *the* and Japanese demonstrative *ano* 'of that over there' are different.

Therefore one can say that although there is no single linguistic form that bears both features required for the English definite article *the*, they are present in

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Japanese in the different linguistic forms (e.g., case markers and the demonstratives)

### 5. Conclusion

This study examined the role of L1 in second language Japanese learners' use of English articles.

The results showed that the intermediate learners, but not the advanced learners, showed sensitivity to referentiality. This supports Ionin & Wexler's claim that L2 learners of English associate *the* with referentiality. The analysis of the relationship between Japanese demonstratives and English articles suggested that both of the features required for the English definite article *the* are present in Japanese though they are conveyed by different linguistic forms (e.g., case markers and the demonstratives). This indicates that the variability in choosing the right article is not due to learners' inability in setting the right parameter. Rather it is because the learners are in the process of re-assembling the features that the English article system is made up of.

### Appendix 1.

	Takako	Hiro	Mami	Misa	Aki
1. when did you start learning English?	13 years old	13 years old	13 years old	13 years old	10 years old
2. English education (except school)	-ESL -College	-ESL (4 weeks) -ESL (4 weeks) -ESL (4 weeks)	-ESL (14 weeks)		-College (2 years) -ESL (24 weeks)
3. How long have you been staying in an English speaking country?	1.7 years		2 years		2 years
Scores of TOEFL/TOEIC/STEP	TOEFL 600	-TOEFL: 250 (computer based ) -TOEIC: 840	TOEFL: 550	STEP: Pre-2 <sup>nd</sup> grade	TOEIC: 675

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