

Lopez E.

[Bringing theoretical L2 acquisition research findings to the language classroom: a materials development challenge.](#)

In: Sheffield Linguistics Postgraduate Conference. 2014, University of Sheffield, UK: Track Changes: The Postgraduate Journal of the Arts and Humanities.

Copyright:

This is the author's manuscript of a paper that was presented at *Sheffield Linguistics Postgraduate Conference*, held 4th February 2014, Sheffield, UK

Link to article:

<http://goo.gl/WQK7Us>

Date deposited:

14/10/2016



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/)

Bringing theoretical L2 acquisition research findings to the language classroom: A materials development challenge

Elaine Lopez

University of York

esl505@york.ac.uk

Since the majority of second language (L2) acquirers receive instruction at some point, it may seem obvious that second language acquisition (SLA) research would be relevant to language teachers and learners. However, theoretical SLA research conducted within the framework of generative linguistics (henceforth GenSLA) does not commonly influence classroom practice. Increasingly, there has been a disconnect between language teaching and acquisition research, as demonstrated by this statement from Lightbown (2000 p.437): “SLA researchers whose work is focused on solving theoretical puzzles [are] increasingly separating their research activities from those of researchers whose questions [are] more pedagogical in nature.” Possible reasons for this perceived separation could be an overuse of subject specific terminology in research publications, or disagreement about the theoretical underpinnings of SLA. GenSLA research may be perceived by teachers as inaccessible

and irrelevant. However, as Bruhn de Garavito (2013, p.32) states, “Research carried out within the generative tradition has something to say regarding language teaching. It is a valuable resource that should not be squandered.” This paper will discuss applying the results of GenSLA research to language teaching using the example of specificity in the English article system.

There are four parts to the paper. Section 1 gives an overview of GenSLA research into the acquisition of English articles which has highlighted the importance of specificity for speakers whose first language (L1) does not have articles. Section 2 shows how articles are currently taught, providing evidence of standard teaching materials focusing only on definiteness and excluding specificity; and also of inaccurate use of the term 'specific' in some textbooks. Section 3 discusses the process of developing the results of GenSLA research into a teachable concept, and finally, an example of linguistically-informed teaching materials will be given.

1. Specificity in article acquisition research

Article errors take two forms, misuse or omission, and are widely documented in L2 English. Example (1) shows an article misuse error, taken from the written work of an L1 Chinese student at Sheffield Hallam University. Here, the definite article (the) has been used in a context that is obligatorily indefinite.

- 1) Tomorrow I going shopping because I need to buy the new suit.

In last decade, a growing body of GenSLA work has investigated how articles are acquired by L2 learners of English. The possibility that two-article languages, such as English, select articles on the basis of either definiteness or specificity was suggested by Ionin (2003), who proposed a parametric variation between languages which set articles on the basis of definiteness (like English) or specificity. The definition of definiteness and specificity given by Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004 p.5; henceforth IKW) is shown in (2).

- 2) Definiteness and Specificity: Informal definitions

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

1. [+definite], then the speaker and hearer presuppose the existence of a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP.
2. [+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 hypothesised that more L2 errors would be made in contexts which were either definite and non-specific or indefinite and specific. Examples (3) and (4) show the potentially difficult contexts.

3) definite/non-specific

I read a very good book recently. I don't remember the name of the author.

4) indefinite/specific

Two ladies are sitting in a restaurant. They are waiting for a friend but she is late.

Results of a forced-choice elicitation task conducted on groups of L1-Russian and L1-Korean learners of English by IKW (2004) supported the proposal that learners struggle to produce articles correctly in these two contexts. The error-rates for definite non-specific dialogues were 33% for the L1-Russian learners of English, and 14% for the L1-Korean learners of English. The indefinite specific dialogues had slightly higher error rates of 36% and 22% respectively (IKW, 2004). In contrast, the error rates for definite specific and indefinite non-specific contexts were between 4 and 8% for each group of learners. IKW (2004) concluded that both specificity and definiteness have a significant effect on article choice for both groups of learners.

Other research, whilst not always agreeing with Ionin's explanation of a parametric variation, nonetheless supports her finding that learners' with an article-less L1 will fluctuate between correct and incorrect use of English articles on the basis of specificity. Ionin, Zubizarreta and Bautista Maldonado (2008) found an effect of specificity on Russian learners, but not Spanish learners. The

presence of article errors in the L1-Spanish group appeared to be caused by L1 transfer since Spanish, like English, selects articles on the basis of definiteness. Likewise, Hawkins et al. (2006) found an effect of specificity on Japanese learners, but not Greek learners. Finally, Tryzna (2009) tested L1-Polish and L1-Mandarin Chinese adult learners of English and found that indefinite specific contexts had a higher misuse of the definite article amongst learners from both language groups. This context also showed the highest error rates in the IKW (2004) study.

Whilst generative researchers focus on explanations for these errors, for example parameter resetting or a feature re-assembly account, the important point for teaching is knowing that these problem areas exist. If learners can be made aware of these problematic contexts in the L2 classroom, it may improve article accuracy. Therefore, the next section will consider how articles are currently taught to L2 learners of English.

2. Standard teaching materials

A review of four series of general English coursebooks has uncovered some trends in the way that articles are currently taught to L2 learners of English. These titles were chosen because they are some of the most widely-used general English coursebooks in the UK. The books are New English File (Oxenden, Latham-Koenig and Seligson, 2004; 2005; 2008; 2009), Cutting Edge (Cunningham and

Moor, 2005; 2007), Language Leader (Cotton, Falvey and Kent, 2008; Lebeau and Rees, 2008), and New Headway (Soars and Soars, 2003; 2005; 2006). Across these courses, articles were generally introduced at an elementary level, although with a simplification of the rules. Most then continue to teach articles at every level of proficiency. In theory at least, this approach should allow for the gradual acquisition of articles, with learners being presented with progressively more complex rules. The widely documented problems with article use amongst L2 learners, however, seem to suggest otherwise. All of the materials in the four series of books focused on definiteness; no published teaching materials could be found which provide instruction on the specific/non-specific contrast. This suggests a disconnect between what research has demonstrated about the acquisition of the English article system, and how it is taught to L2 learners of English.

In addition, the term 'specific' is used within several published textbooks as a synonym of 'definite'. Not only is this linguistically inaccurate, but could create problems if it leads L2 learners to believe that all specific contexts are definite and all non-specific contexts are indefinite. Such a misconception could lead to the exact type of errors uncovered by the GenSLA research discussed in Section 1.

One such example of linguistically inaccurate use of the term 'specific' comes from a textbook for students of academic English (Bailey, 2006). Examples (5) and (6) both contain problematic uses of the term 'specific', which have been underlined. First is an

explanation of the rules for article use, where 'specific' is used as a synonym of 'definite' when describing the examples.

5) **Unless they are uncountable, all nouns need an article when used in the singular.**

The article can be either *a/an* or *the*. Compare:

- a) Research is *an* important activity in universities.
- b) *The* research begun by Dr Mathews was continued by Professor Brankovic.
- c) *A* survey was conducted among 200 patients in the clinic.

In (a) research, which is usually uncountable, is being used in a general sense.

In (b) a specific piece of research is identified.

In (c) the survey is not specified and is being mentioned for the first time.

Bailey (2006, p.130)

Secondly, in this exercise 'specific' is used as a synonym of 'definite' when use of the definite article is contrasted with generic uses of the zero article.

- 6) ***In the following sentences, decide if the words in italic are specific or not.***
Insert the if specific.

Example: inflation was the greatest problem for
 Brazilian government.

Inflation was the greatest problem for *the* Brazilian
 government.

a) *engineering* was the main industry in the region.

b) *global warming* is partly caused by
fossil fuels.

c) *Russian revolution* was partly a result of
First World War.

[d) . . . n]

Bailey (2006, p.131)

Examining these teaching materials in the context of what GenSLA research has shown about the importance of specificity demonstrates one area where such research could be applied to teaching. Research findings strongly suggest specificity is important and yet learners are only taught about definiteness. The next section of this paper will go on to explain the present study's application of IKW's (2004) findings to the language classroom through the development of new, linguistically-informed teaching materials.

3. Process of materials development

In order to develop linguistically-informed grammar instruction materials based on the results of IKW's study, a consultation with practising English teachers was carried out. The teachers had no

background in generative linguistics, and the consultation continued at all stages of materials development. Feedback was given by the teachers on the positive and negative points of the materials, as well as whether they understood the concepts being presented. There was an initial objection to instruction on specificity, as the teachers did not feel confident teaching a property of which they had no detailed knowledge, and which they considered too abstract to be teachable. Therefore, although the materials needed to be linguistically accurate, there was also a requirement to make them simple enough so that teachers could use them without a prior knowledge of specificity.

Once an initial version of the materials had been produced, extensive piloting was conducted with learners of different proficiency levels, all of whom were university students at Sheffield Hallam University. The use of a traditional presentation/practice lesson format was decided on so that input could be controlled when the materials were used by different teachers. Additionally, the presentation materials were put onto PowerPoint, again due to the need to control input across different groups. A decision was made to adapt current article instruction materials for the practice materials.

One challenge when developing the teaching materials was changing the linguistic definition of definiteness and specificity given in Section 1 into something that was comprehensible and teachable for non-linguists. After consultation with the teachers and piloting, the definitions were simplified for teaching use, as shown in (7).

7) Definiteness and Specificity: pedagogical definitions

If a noun phrase is...

1. [+definite], then *both* the speaker *and* the listener can identify the noun, and answer the question 'Which one?'
2. [+specific] then the speaker is referring to one particular individual.¹

The simplification was particularly important when describing the concept of specificity. Therefore, 'speaker intent to refer' to an individual was maintained from the original definition, but the concept of that individual possessing some 'noteworthy property' was removed.

At the end of the consultation period and after piloting, the final version of these materials was used as part of a larger research project looking at the role of instruction on the L2 acquisition of the English article system. A pre-test and post-test was administered to the learners, and results will be contrasted with two other groups of learners, one of whom was taught using standard materials, and one group who received no instruction on articles. All of the learners

¹ This definition refers to the singular form of the noun since it is an adaptation of IKW's (2004) informal definition which refers to a 'unique individual'. Plural noun phrases, like singular nouns phrases, can be either specific or non-specific, and examples of plural nouns requiring the definite article were included in the teaching materials.

who participated in this project are L1 speakers of Mandarin Chinese, a language that does not have articles².

A lesson plan and materials were provided for three 90-minute grammar lessons. Lesson 1 focused on definiteness only, Lesson 2 contrasted definiteness and specificity, and Lesson 3 was an error correction lesson including examples of article errors.

4. Presentation of teaching materials

This section provides an overview of the materials used to present definiteness and specificity to the learners. In addition, a number of practice exercises were adapted from currently published teaching materials in order to make reference to specificity. As demonstrated above, definiteness was presented as shared knowledge between a speaker and listener and the definite/indefinite contrast formed the basis of the first 90-minute grammar lesson. Pictures were provided for both definite and indefinite uses of the article, as shown in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

The use of thought bubbles in Figures 1 and 2 allows the learners and teachers to visualise the concept of ‘shared knowledge’.

² Further details of the research project, as well as cross-linguistic facts about the role of specificity in Chinese, are not included here due to the length limitations of the paper.

Figure 1: slide used to illustrate use of the definite article

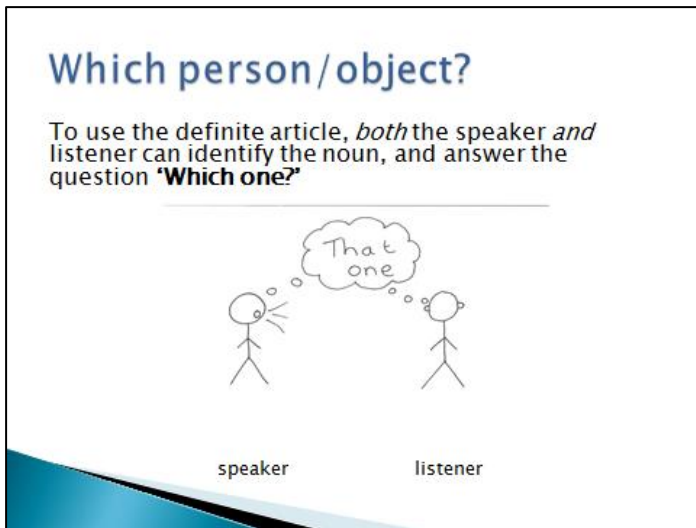
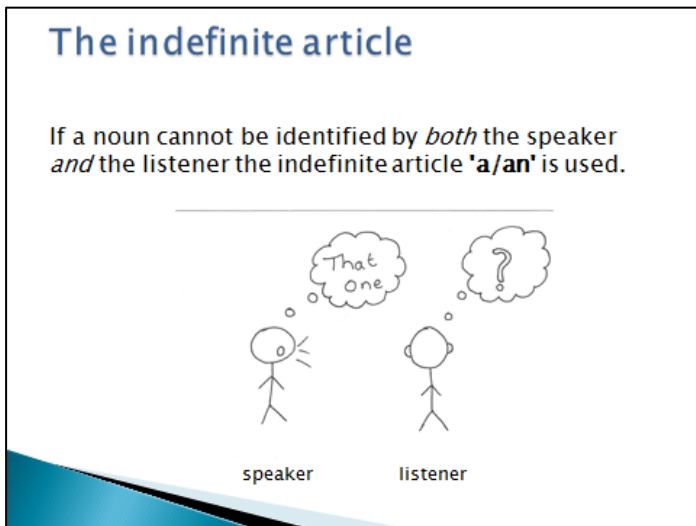


Figure 2: slide used to illustrate use of the indefinite article



Following these slides, the PowerPoint presentation goes on to provide example sentences, and was designed in an interactive manner so that teachers could engage with their students and maintain a communicative teaching style.


Specificity was taught during Lesson 2, and the materials were also designed to last approximately 90 minutes, including time for discussion. This concept was presented as ‘speaker intent to refer’ and, as specificity is not normally taught to L2 learners of English, it was necessary for teachers to ensure that their learners’ understood the concept. Pictures and an example sentence for specific and non-specific contexts can be seen in Figures 3 and 4, respectively.

The difference between specific and non-specific reference was again visualised with the use of thought bubbles. In Figure 3, the specific sentence shows the speaker visualising a particular person, whereas in Figure 4, which is non-specific, the speaker has no such person in mind. As with definiteness, more example sentences were provided before students worked in groups to complete the practice exercises. Typical exercises included labelling sentences as either specific or non-specific, and recognising the difference between similar sentences on the basis of specificity.

Figure 3: slide used to explain specific and non-specific reference, with an example of a specific sentence

Specific and non-specific


- Specific and non-specific noun phrases are different depending on who/ what the speaker intends to refer to.
- If the speaker refers to one particular individual then it is specific.
e.g. I am meeting **a rich man** after work today.



At the end of the teaching period, none of the students or teachers reported any problems with these materials and, whilst the specificity lesson appeared to provoke more discussion amongst students, they were generally able to arrive at the correct answer and explain the reasons for their choice. A presentation of the results of the pre-test and post-test goes beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear from the response of the teachers and learners that it is possible to teach specificity to L2 learners of English.

Figure 4: slide used to illustrate, and provide an example sentence for, non-specific reference

- If they refer to any individual within a group then it is non-specific.
e.g. I want to marry **a rich man** when I'm older.



• It does not matter whether the listener can also identify the person/ object.

6. Conclusion

As both an English language teacher and a generative linguist, it is my belief that GenSLA research *is* relevant to language teaching. This paper has demonstrated this using the example of the English article system. Furthermore, it has shown that it is possible to develop linguistically-informed teaching materials, and that the seemingly abstract property of specificity can be taught. There is no reason why there cannot be more collaboration between GenSLA researchers and teaching professionals in the future; however, for such collaboration to be successful I would recommend both groups

avoiding the use of specialist terminology. Furthermore, to make GenSLA research relevant to teaching professionals, I believe that the focus should be on what research results say about potential sources of learner errors, which could then be targeted in the classroom with the aim of increasing learner accuracy.

References

- Bailey, S. (2006). *Academic writing: a handbook for international students*. (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Cotton, D., Falvey, D. and Kent, D. (2008). *Language Leader. Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate*. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Longman.
- Cunningham, S. and Moor, P. (2005; 2007). *Cutting Edge*. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Longman.
- Hawkins, R., Al-Eid, S., Almahboob, I., Athanasopoulos, P., Chaengchenkit, R., Hu, J., Rezai, M., Jaensch, C., Jeon, Y., Jiang, A., Leung, Y.I., Matsunaga, K., Ortega, M., Sarko, G., Snape, N., and Velasco-Zarate, K. (2006). Accounting for English article interpretation by L2 speakers. *EUROSLA yearbook*, 6, 7-25.
- Ionin, T. (2003). Article semantics in second language acquisition. (PhD dissertation). MIT.
- Ionin, T., Ko, H. and Wexler, K. (2004). Article semantics in L2 acquisition: The role of specificity. *Language Acquisition*, 12(1), 3-69.

- Ionin, T., Zubizarreta, M.L. and Bautista Maldonado, S. (2008). Sources of linguistic knowledge in the second language acquisition of English articles. *Lingua*, 118, 554-576.
- Lebeu, I. and Rees, G. (2008). *Language Leader. Elementary and Pre-Intermediate*. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Longman.
- Lightbown, P. (2000). Anniversary article. Classroom SLA research and second language teaching. *Applied Linguistics*. 21(4), 431-462.
- Oxenden, C., Latham-Koenig, C. and Seligson, P. (2004; 2005; 2008; 2009). *New English File*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Soars, L. and Soars, J. (2003; 2005; 2006). *New Headway English course*. (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tryzna, M. (2009). Questioning the validity of the Article Choice Parameter and Fluctuation Hypothesis: Evidence from L2 English article use by L1 Polish and L1 Mandarin Chinese Speakers. In M. Garcia Mayo & R. Hawkins (eds.), *Second language acquisition of articles* (pp. 67-86). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.