THE EFFECTS OF CHINESE ON ENGLISH ARTICLE USE BY CANTONESE ESL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT
This paper discusses the effects of Chinese on the use of English articles by Hong Kong Cantonese ESL learners. A total of 63 Cantonese ESL learners participated in two language tasks about the use of English articles, including a cloze passage task and a noun countability task. In the cloze passage task, participants completed two cloze passages by providing a suitable article for each of 50 blanks and explained, immediately after the completion of each passage, the reason for each article choice. In the noun countability task, participants used a bilingualized dictionary to determine the countability and associated article use of seven nouns in different contexts and explained, in an introspective questionnaire, how their judgements were made. Results of the tasks showed that despite the absence of structural equivalents of English articles in Chinese, Cantonese ESL learners occasionally resorted to their mother tongue in their article selection processes. A translation and comparison strategy was often employed to validate an article choice by comparing a given English sentence with its seemingly equivalent Chinese version. In teaching the use of English articles, ESL teachers are suggested to alert learners to the differences and similarities between English and their mother tongue and to help learners tackle possible adverse L1 influence.

Keywords: English article system, Cantonese ESL learners, language acquisition, L1 influence, article selection

INTRODUCTION
Negative L1 transfer has well been documented in the literature as one source of learner errors. Many errors have been argued to be the result of negative L1 transfer, such as the topic-comment structure (Kwan, Chan & Li, 2003) and “the independent clause as subject” structure (Chan, Kwan & Li, 2003) commonly used by Chinese ESL learners. There are, however, target language items where no structural parallels exist in the native language. For these areas of L2 learning difficulties, arguments about the effects of L1 are diverse. While it has been argued that the difficulties can be seen as the results of an absence of a comparable system in the native language (Chan, 2010), L1 effects for such language items cannot be easily attested.

The English article system is an area which has been seen as controversial. There are languages which have structural equivalents of English articles, such as French, but there are also article-less languages, such as Chinese, Korean and Thai. Although empirical evidence for L1 transfer has been observed for article-less languages, and the poor acquisition of English articles by Chinese ESL learners has been argued to be related to the first language, especially at the early stages of language learning (Master, 1997), the effects of L1 on article acquisition by speakers of article-less languages are often countered (e.g. Serratrice, Sorace, Filiaci & Baldo, 2009).
For example, Mede and Gurel (2010), who studied the acquisition of English articles by a bilingual child and two monolingual English speaking children, noticed cross-linguistic transfer for the bilingual child whose native language, Serbo-Croatian, did not have articles. These ascertained the effects of article-less L1 on the acquisition of English articles. On the other hand, Zdorenko and Paradis (2008, 2012) found counter-evidence for L1 influence, that the overuse of the for a in indefinite specific contexts was observed in children whose native languages had articles as well as in those whose native languages did not have articles. This disconfirmed the influence of the L1. Ionin et al., (2004) also found that ESL learners whose native language lacked articles (e.g. Korean, Russian) showed fluctuations between the definiteness and specificity settings in the article choice parameter, yet access to the specificity feature cannot be explained by L1 transfer or L2 input. Although different theoretical perspectives have been adopted in these previous studies, (e.g., Ionin et al., 2004) adopted an article semantics perspective and used a strategy based explanation to account for the findings, whereas Master (1997) focused more on actual usage), it can be seen that the effects of L1 on L2 learners’ use of English articles have been under debate in the literature irrespective of the theoretical orientations.

Not only have there been conflicting findings about the influence of article-less L1 on L2 article acquisition, but there also exists a gap in the nature of the investigations: previous research into the effects of L1 transfer on the acquisition of English articles focused mostly on learner performance with particular reference to learner errors or difficulties (e.g. Ionin & Montrul, 2010; Liu, Dai & Li, 2013; Serratrice, Sorace, Filiaci & Baldo, 2009; Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008, 2012). Learners’ knowledge of the English article system, as well as their thinking processes, has not been the focus of extensive investigation. Although it is true that learners’ performance may be indicative of the extent of L1 influence, our understanding of L1 effects can be enhanced if we probe into learners’ knowledge of the English article system and the reasons underlying their selection of a certain article. The focus of the present paper is on learners’ thinking processes during article selection.

**GOAL AND METHODOLOGY**

The present paper aims to uncover how L1 influence works in Hong Kong Cantonese ESL learners’ acquisition of English articles by putting together relevant results and insights obtained from two sub-studies (tasks) of a larger study, including a cloze passage task (Chan, 2017a) and a noun countability judgment task (Chan, 2017b). These two tasks were not specifically designed to investigate the effects of Chinese on the acquisition of English articles, yet the effects of L1 were revealed during the course of the investigations.

**Participants**

A total of 33 Hong Kong Cantonese ESL learners participated in the cloze passage task whereas another group of 30 learners participated in the noun countability task. They were all English majors at a local university, including a total of 12 males and 51 females. They had all studied English for 14 years or more. Among them 49 learners had received a C or above in the Hong Kong Advanced Level Use of English (UE) Examination¹ or General Certificate of Education (GCE) A-level Examination, 7.5 or above in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test, or 5 or above in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE)². The rest had received a D in HKALE, 6.5-7 in IELTS, 4 in HKDSE, or C in the
Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE). They could all be regarded as advanced learners of English.

**Objectives and Procedures of Tasks**

**CLOZE PASSAGE TASK:** The objective of the cloze passage task was to investigate the reasons behind learners’ article selection and the hypotheses they made in their selection processes. Whether a certain correct article choice could be the result of an inappropriate learner hypothesis was also investigated. Participants completed a cloze passage task by providing the most suitable articles (a/an, the, /) for a total of 50 blanks in two short passages of about 200 words each. Immediately after the completion of each passage, participants were asked to explain verbally why they had chosen a certain article for each blank. In the explanation of article choices, participants were allowed to use whatever language(s) they were comfortable with. As a result, 94% of them used a mixed-code of Cantonese and English, and the rest used English throughout the whole process (For other details, see Chan, 2017a).

**NOUN COUNTABILITY TASK:** The objective of the noun countability judgement task was to investigate the effectiveness of a bilingualized dictionary in helping learners determine the countability of English nouns and associated article use. Participants were required to consult the Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (8th Edition) (Hornby, 2013) to help them make decisions about the countability (i.e., deciding whether the noun was countable or uncountable) and related article use for three sentence contexts for a total of seven nouns (e.g. feeling, reason, understanding, etc.), all of which had different countability when used in different contexts. They had to show their decisions on article use by choosing the most appropriate option from three choices (singular form without an article (e.g., basic understanding), plural form without an article (e.g., basic understandings), and singular form with a/an (e.g., a basic understanding)). All the sentence contexts for all the target nouns were chosen from popular dictionaries available on the market, including Cambridge dictionaries Online (http://dictionary.cambridge.org/), Collins COBUILD Advanced Learners’ English Dictionaries 4th edition (Sinclair, 2003), etc. After completing all three sentence contexts for a noun, participants had to complete an introspective questionnaire to report on the feelings about their decisions on ending a search (whether they were sure that their decisions were correct, and why), to write out the definitions, examples etc. which led them to their decisions, to describe how such definitions, examples, etc. showed them that their decisions should be correct, to explain why they were doubtful about a certain decision and to spell out the difficulties they encountered. All the participants used English in their completion of the introspective questionnaire, as the questions were all given in English (For other details, see Chan, 2017b).

**RESULTS**

As noted earlier, the two tasks did not specifically aim to investigate the effects of L1 transfer on learners’ article use, yet a few phenomena related to L1 influence could be observed from the results of the tasks. Because both tasks involved some form of self-reports (verbal explanations of article choices for the Cloze Passage task and answering of questions in the introspective questionnaire for the Noun Countability task), relevant self-reports will be included in this paper to illustrate participants’ thinking processes during article selection
and/or countability determination. Numerical results on participants’ performance in the two tasks and other data not relevant to the goal of this paper will not be presented.

**Influence of Similar but Distinct Structural Items in the Native Language**

Despite the non-existence of structural equivalents in Chinese, learners were prone to formulate their thoughts in Chinese and model their article selection on the “corresponding” Chinese structures. This was manifested in a “translation and comparison” strategy, in that an article choice was validated by comparing a given English sentence or phrase with its seemingly equivalent Chinese version, notably those with Cantonese determiners showing definite reference, such as demonstratives.

In the Cloze Passage task, where participants were asked to insert the most appropriate article in two passage contexts, some participants made their article selection based on translations from Chinese, especially when the article selected was **ZERO**. For example, for the clause **handle your lenses with / damp hands**, a participant said that she chose **ZERO** for **damp hands** because of direct translation of the clause from Chinese.

> 唔好 用 潮 嘀 手,  
not good use damp POSSESSIVE hand,  
唔係 唔好 用 嘿嘅 潮 嘀 手, 所以,  
not not good use ‘those’ damp POSSESSIVE hand, so,  
就 譯 吃,  
then translate PERFECTIVE  
我 用 廣東話. 覺得 唔 用 嘿嘅,  
I use Cantonese, think not will use ‘those’,  
就 捡 吃 無嘅 啥  
then choose PERFECTIVE nothing PARTICLE (participant 11)  
(Do not use “hands that are damp”. Not “do not use those hands which are damp”, so I just translated. I used Cantonese. I think we should not use ‘those’, so I chose nothing (no articles)).

When the chosen article was other articles, such as **the**, similar contention about Chinese translations was given in participants’ descriptions of their article choices. An example was the selection of **the** in the clause **If the following simple rules are followed**, as illustrated in the self-report from another participant:

> 嘿嘅 嘤樣 嘤 步驟,  
those like POSSESSIVE procedures  
我 好 鍾意 中文 用 譯 嘤樣; 嘿嘅,  
I very much like Chinese use translate like ‘those’  
就 捡 吃 the 啥  
then choose PERFECTIVE ‘the’ PARTICLE (participant 22)  
(Those procedures like this. I like to use Chinese to translate like this: ‘those’, so I chose ‘the’.)
It can be seen that the acceptable presence of a determiner (a demonstrative in the above examples) in Cantonese was taken as confirmation for learners’ choice of the, whereas the absence of such was taken as confirmation for the choice of ZERO. Although the articles selected were correct, the participants’ selection was based on inappropriate comparisons of target language structures with native language structures.

Influence of Native Language Translations of Head Nouns in the Same Noun Phrase

The translation and comparison strategy discussed in the previous section was manifested in another form in the Noun Countability Task, where participants were asked to use a bilingualized dictionary to help them determine the countability of an English noun and associated article use. Because the task involved the use of a bilingualized dictionary which included Chinese definitions and examples, the influence of the native language became more apparent, in that participants determined the countability of an English lexical item (e.g., feeling) based on the countability of the “thought-to-be” best Chinese translation (e.g., 情感) as used in the given sentence contexts. The associated article use for the target English noun was modelled on the structures of the English examples and/or English definitions for that chosen “best Chinese translation”. The majority of the nouns under investigation showed instances of such inappropriate modelling, which sometimes resulted in correct article choices but sometimes incorrect choices.

In determining whether to choose feeling, feelings or a feeling for the sentence

It’s incredible that Peter can behave with such stupid lack of feeling (Sinclair, 2003, p. 526),

Participant 40 found the Chinese meaning 情感 for the target noun feeling and was puzzled whether the word feeling meant情感 in the given target sentence. Irrespective of her puzzle, the Chinese meaning 情感 and the corresponding structure feelings in the example sentence He hates talking about his feelings and I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings (Hornby, 2013, p. 761) led her to use feelings instead of the target answer feeling. Her introspective report shows her thinking process:

I am struggling what is the feeling means here. I don’t know whether it means 情感.情感 and ‘feelings’ led to my decision. (Participant 40)

Reliance on Chinese translations sometimes resulted in correct article choices. In determining whether to choose was understanding, were understandings, or was an understanding for the sentence

We had not set a date for marriage but there was an understanding between us (Sinclair, 2003, p. 1579),

Participant 38 chose the correct answer based on the English example shown for the “thought to be” best Chinese translation of the target English word understanding (協議):

協議 + the example ‘We finally came to an understanding led me to my decision.'
The definition 協議 fits perfectly and ‘came to an understanding’ shows me an article should precede ‘understanding’. (Participant 38)

When explaining whether they were sure about their decision for choosing a certain option for a certain sentence and/or whether their determination of the countability of a target noun as used in a certain sentence context was correct or not, some participants explicitly mentioned their reliance on Chinese translations during the decision process:

I was not sure whether my decision was correct because the Chinese translations are similar (Participant 61; target word reason)

The Chinese translations of definitions helped me a lot in making my decisions. (Participant 56; target word reason)

The Chinese definition really stands out and eye catching and it fits with the situation the question is positioned in. (Participant 39; target word understanding)

The translation and comparison strategy as discussed in the previous section was, thus, manifested in learners’ search for a Chinese translation which was thought to be the best fit for the meaning of a target English noun in a certain context and their modelling their article selection on the syntactic structure of an English definition/example for that selected Chinese translation.

DISCUSSIONS
It can be seen from the above results that, in their selection of English articles, Cantonese ESL learners tend to formulate their thoughts in their native language, translate their thoughts to the target language and compare the structures of the two languages in their minds. This kind of translation and comparison strategy clearly reveals the effects of L1. That a translation and comparison strategy was employed in article selection in the Cloze Passage task can be understood by learners’ confusion between English articles (e.g. a/an, the, ZERO) and demonstratives (e.g. these), as the latter are sometimes regarded as examples of articles by Cantonese ESL learners. In Chan (2016), which reports on the result of another sub-study of the same study about the inventory of English articles, it has been shown that demonstratives such as this, that, these, those, and their were listed by some Cantonese ESL learners as members of the English article system. It has also been argued in the literature that Cantonese demonstratives, such as 呢個 (that) or 呢啲 (those), being the most commonly used determiners in Cantonese and often used for deictic functions pointing or referring back to noun phrases mentioned in the same context, are quite like English the in terms of functions (Chan, 2004). Learners’ modelling their article selection on the use of Chinese demonstratives in their decision of whether to use English the or not may have been a result of this similarity. Such reliance may not result in wrong article choices, but it reveals learners’ misconceptions about the English article system and their unawareness of the subtle differences between articles and demonstratives.

Learners’ modelling their sentence construction for a target English lexical item on the syntactic structure of an English definition/example based on the Chinese translations of that English definition/example, on the other hand, shows their insensitivity to the differences in
the syntactic requirements of the different senses of a lexical item. As documented in Chan (2012), some lexical items have different senses which are dependent on the grammatical contexts the items are in (e.g. the verb boast has different meanings when used transitively (boast something) and intransitively (boast about something)), so the usage of these words is governed by the syntactic requirements of a particular sense in a particular context. What is more, lexical items in two languages seldom have precisely the same meaning. Different languages may also have different syntactic requirements (e.g. verb transitivity) for corresponding vocabulary items (e.g. While listen is intransitive in English, its corresponding Chinese 聆 is transitive) (Chan, 2017b). The syntactic context of a Chinese word is, thus, not necessarily an appropriate model for the corresponding English word. Choosing a certain sense of an English lexical item based on its translations in another language (e.g. Chinese) and then modelling corresponding sentence construction on the English syntactic requirements of that chosen sense is not a desirable strategy and may result in errors not noticeable to learners. However, such a strategy shows learners’ tendency to resort to their native language when encountering difficulties in making a judgment, revealing that the extent of L1 influence is not restricted to a target structure (e.g. articles) but also to the surrounding syntactic environments (e.g. head noun of a noun phrase) which trigger the use of the target structure.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of the study have both theoretical and pedagogical significance. They confirm that L1 influence operates not just when the target language items have functional equivalents in the native language but also when the target language structures do not have functional equivalents in the native language. In learners’ production of these target language structures, they may rely on native translations of distinct language items (e.g. demonstratives instead of articles) or even native translations of other (key) lexical items in the syntactic environments (e.g. head noun of a noun phrase) and be (mis)led by the structural requirements and/or usages of those items. While inappropriate reliance on the L1 may not necessarily lead to learner errors, the potential problems brought by the shadowy effects of correct language use as a result of L1 influence are clearly revealed and merit attention. Learner performance can be deceptive, as learners’ correct language use may be grounded on inaccurate hypotheses (Chan, 2017b). Our findings support this contention, disclose the inadequacy of empirical evidence which is restricted to performance data, and expose the need for more in-depth qualitative research probing into learners’ thinking processes. To bridge the gap of previous research which focused mostly on learner performance (see Introduction), future research into the acquisition of English articles should not just analyze learner errors and/or compare and contrast the L1 and the L2. A qualitative component, such as introspective think-aloud protocols or post-task interviews requiring learners to articulate the reasons for their article choices, should be incorporated alongside language tasks.

Pedagogically, our findings suggest that a contrastive analysis approach can be employed, irrespective of whether the native language is article-less or has articles, to discuss the functional and semantic similarities and differences between similar items in the two languages, such as English the and Chinese determiners (啲個 (that) or 啲啲 (those)), possessives or numerals. Though the differences between, say, demonstratives and articles might look indispensable in certain cases, such as when the target noun phrase has definite reference and the language items are substitutable without affecting grammaticality, ESL learners, especially advanced learners, should be made aware of the very subtle functional and
meaning differences between these seemingly equivalent items. For example, English the does not have a demonstrative function whereas Chinese demonstratives are not articles in the language, and, unlike English the, they cannot be used in non-definite contexts. These are subtle differences which ESL teachers should highlight in their classrooms. Teachers could design awareness-raising exercises which compare these similar but distinct items in the native and target languages and guide students to discover their similarities and differences. Language tasks which encourage learners to verbalize their knowledge of the use of such language items in the target and native languages could also be introduced, so learners’ misconceptions could be eradicated.

**LIMITATIONS**

Some limitations inherent to the present study may be of concern. No attempt was made to systematically investigate L1 transfer. The instruments used in the two language tasks were not specifically designed to probe into the influence of L1 on L2 article acquisition, so no comprehensive data from a sizable group of participants about the extent of L1 influence could be collected. The use of a bilingualized dictionary consisting of translations in the L1 in the Noun Countability task may also be argued to have aggravated or even triggered unintended L1 reliance. However, despite the diverse objectives and nature of the two tasks, unconstrained data about learners’ thinking processes were obtained from the self-reporting protocols (verbal explanations immediately after completion of the Cloze Passage task and introspective questionnaires for the Noun Countability task). The patterns of L1 influence observed from such elicitation protocols reflected learners’ conscious and subconscious reliance on the L1 and demonstrated the genuine presence of possible L1 effects. The insights obtained are, thus, worth attending to. Future research may include language tasks as well as self-reporting protocols which specifically probe into the effects of L1 transfer for comprehensive understanding and triangulation.

It may also be argued that language use is largely an unconscious process and therefore the self-reporting protocols used in the two tasks may not be authentic or natural enough in providing data for real language use. This may be true, but the diverse nature of the self-reporting protocols used in the two tasks, as well as the implementation times of the protocols, makes them reliable tools for understanding learners’ underlying cognitive processes during their language use: The two self-reporting protocols were both self-reports with no intervention from the researcher, and they were implemented either immediately after the completion of the language task (for the cloze passage task) or during the language task (for the noun countability task), so the protocols could relate clearly to learners’ learning behavior. The reasons reporting protocol for the cloze passage task has been used in other similar studies, such as Butler (2002), and the introspective questionnaire for the noun countability task has also been adopted in several similar studies, such as Chan (2012). Both of these protocols are useful in providing the data required.

**CONCLUSION**

The results of a study uncovering the effects of L1 on Cantonese ESL learners’ acquisition of English articles have been reported in this paper. While previous research has mainly focused on performance, the present study probes into learners’ thinking processes during article selection. It reveals the effects of L1 which are shadowed by correct language use and provides insights into the importance of tackling L1 effects on the use of target language items which
do not have native language equivalents. Teachers are advised not just to tackle errors which are clearly the result of L1 transfer but also to diagnose learners’ knowledge and hypotheses and eradicate their misconceptions so as to ensure that their language use reflects not just their performance but also their competence.

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REFERENCES


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1. The Hong Kong Advanced Level Use of English (UE) examination aimed to test students’ ability to understand and use English at a level that was required for tertiary education and/or for future employment. (http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/DocLibrary/HKALE/Subject_and_Syllabuses/2013/2013as-e-ue.pdf). It was normally taken by F.7 students in Hong Kong who had completed their two-year matriculation studies. UE Grade E was regarded as equivalent to Grade E in the GCE A level examinations (http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/en/recognition/ce_al_recognition/).

2. The Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education examination aims to measure the attainment of students upon their completion of six years of secondary education and has been the only public examination in the new 3-3-4 education system in Hong Kong since 2012. 5** is the highest grade that students can attain for a certain subject, followed by 5* and 5.

3. The use of a mixed-code of Cantonese and English in participants’ explanation of their article choices should not have any impact on the reliability of the data about the effects of Chinese, as only explanations which made explicit reference to the influence of Chinese were focused on in this paper.

4. A bilingualized dictionary (e.g. *Oxford Advanced Learners’ English-Chinese Dictionary*) is a dictionary with definitions and examples which have been translated in full or in part into the target language (e.g. Chinese), but there are also definitions and examples in the source language (e.g. English) (see Hartmann 1994; James 1994; Marello 1998).

5. The reasons for choosing a bilingualized dictionary instead of a monolingual dictionary are detailed in Chan (2017b): Because Chinese does not have structural equivalents of English articles and the countability of corresponding English and Chinese nouns is often different, the
use of a bilingualized dictionary instead of a monolingual dictionary may yield more interesting results about learners’ judgements of English noun countability.