

Title – The Complexities of Teaching for Acquisition: Article Semantics

Program of Study – Teaching English as a Second Language

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Abstract

This presentation examines the semantics of the English definite and indefinite articles and how they affect second language acquisition. While this presentation primarily focuses on acquiring English articles, it also explores how definiteness is expressed and learned in languages such as Hebrew and Russian (Schwartz & Rovner, 2015). This presentation first explores how the Fluctuating Hypothesis is used as a theoretical framework for studying article acquisition and predicating L2 learner errors. The Fluctuating Hypothesis states L2 learners will fluctuate between the parameters of definiteness and specificity until exposure to enough L2 input causes the correct parameter of the L2 grammar to set (Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004). This paper describes multiple studies conducted with speakers learning English from a variety of L1 backgrounds, including Tamil, Persian, and Russian, and how their article usage patterns offers evidence for the Fluctuating Hypothesis (Jacob & Tan, 2018; Momenzade, Youhanaee, & Kassian, 2014). This presentation then describes current research efforts to combine linguistic theory and knowledge with comprehensible classroom instruction. One study which attempted to create linguistically informed instruction only further complexified for ELLs the already difficult concept of the definite and indefinite articles (Lopez, 2017). Other research shows more successful attempts of teaching articles without metalanguage and with context so that the meaning of the entire noun phrase is kept in focus, which is central as article usage is primarily determined by semantic factors (Wulf, 2016). Overall, an analysis of the current linguistic knowledge of articles leaves both linguists and ESL teachers with the task of interpreting such a

complex grammatical concept in a way that ESL student can acquire and use. The conclusion of the presentation offers ESL instructors guiding principles for teaching articles based on the linguistic research and semantic factors.

References

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