

Does the Distance Between Articles and Nouns Have an Effect on Students' Article Accuracy for Japanese Students of English?

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Abstract

This study will examine the problems that Japanese students face when attempting to use articles accurately in English. The main focus will be whether the distance of the article to the noun causes problems with article accuracy. The study will aim to find if respondents answers questions more accurately when the article-noun distance is closer, or whether there is no significant difference in accuracy of article use.

Introduction

It has long been identified that L2 learners of English have problems learning the English article system, especially those whose L1s do not use articles (Huebner, 1985; Master, 1987; Mizuno, 1999; Robertson, 2000). However, this is a significant problem for English learners as “the definite and indefinite articles are among the ten most frequent words of English discourse” (Hewson, 1972. p. 131). Therefore, maybe unsurprisingly researchers have highlighted that articles account for some of the most frequent errors made by English learners (Bitchener, Young & Cameron, 2005). The above points could be made to account for the English learning community as a whole, however the focus here will be on problems that have been argued to affect Japanese learners of English specifically.

It has been argued that Japanese learners in particular have great difficulty when attempting to master the use of English articles, as there is no grammatical equivalent of English articles (Mizuno, 1999). In Yamada and Matsuura’s study it was noted that students’ use of articles “bears little or no resemblance to established English practice; the students seem to use articles almost randomly” (1982. p. 50). Some researchers have pointed out that a lack of article system in the learners’ L1, in this case Japanese, can cause negative L1 transfer. In her study, Nomura pointed out “Japanese novice learners of English tend not to supply any articles in the contexts which need articles because of L1 transfer. The Japanese language has no article system, thus, learners seem to have a tendency to omit articles” (2012. p. 298).

Furthermore, Hawkins and Chan (1997) proposed the Failed Functional Features Hypothesis which asserted that if the L1 is lacking a particular functional category, then it cannot be learnt in the L2. Although other researchers have argued less absolutely, stating “the absence of a grammatical morpheme in the learner’s L1 will pose great difficulty for the learner in acquiring that morpheme in the target language” (Luk & Shirai, 2009, p. 727). However, despite the importance of articles being outlined above, “many learners may feel that the effort involved in learning the system correctly is not proportionate to the benefits accrued” (Master, 1997, p. 216).

Most previous studies have focused on either the type of article which causes the most problems for students to use, or the most difficult category or function of noun which an article is paired with. Those studies which have focused on the type of articles that English learners have problems with have noted Japanese learners’ tendencies to overuse the definite article (Chaudron

& Parker, 1990; Ogawa, 2008; White, 2009). This has often been linked to problems with identifying definiteness (Master, 1987) and specificity (Chaudron & Parker, 1990; Lu, 2001). Further to this, Trenic (2008) argued that learners with article-less L1s may judge too simplistically that the definite article signifies something identifiable and the indefinite article signifies something unidentifiable. Furthermore, another previously identified trend is using the indefinite article, or no article in the case of indefinite contexts, as they involve more complicated article decisions (Lardiere, 2005).

Other studies have instead focused on the problem Japanese learners of English have with issues of countability. Hiki (1991) identified that problems with countability were related to the noun types, for example abstract or proper nouns. Similarly, Yoon (1993) found that there was a correlation between Japanese L2 English learners' countability judgements and their use of the indefinite article, whereas the same was not found in native English speakers. Furthermore, Butler (2002, p. 462) asserted that "Mis-detection of noun countability [...] constituted a major obstacle to correctly choosing articles". It has also been argued that the overuse of the definite article may be linked to such problems of countability. Ogawa (2008) found that "When the learners cannot decide whether a noun is countable or uncountable, they may use *the*, which allows any type of noun to follow, in order to avoid making countability judgements" (p. 149). To add to this, it has also been argued that the problem of countability when choosing articles is another sign of L1 interference, as Japanese does not differentiate between count and mass nouns (Snape, 2005).

However, this study will, to a large extent, not be concerned with the examination of noun countability, definiteness, or specificity. As it has been seen in the many studies outlined above, these factors of course play a part in the way Japanese learners of English use articles. Although there is much scholarship surrounding and examining these factors, there seems to be a distinct lack of studies examining the distance of articles from nouns and the influence that may have on accuracy of article use. Therefore, if there can be found to be a relationship between the distance of articles from nouns and the accuracy of those articles in Japanese learners of English, then it could potentially be useful. For example, teachers would have to be aware in terms of the article-noun distance when introducing new vocabulary, or adjusting the difficulty of graded tests. Similarly, it may prove a basis to examine the effect of this alongside other aspects of article difficulty such as countability, definiteness, and flexibility.

Method

This study involved the collection of purely quantitative data collection in the form of a research questionnaire which was sent out to a sample of seventy Japanese learners of English. The use of quantitative data collection was chosen due to both time constraints in the collection and collation of data, and concern over response/participation rates if respondent anonymity could not be ensured. Therefore, in this study, although it could have proved useful, face-to-face interviews were ruled out.

Similarly, due to time constraints it was not feasible to seek a probability sample, instead a method of convenience sampling was employed, therefore generalisations about what these results might mean for the population of Japanese learners of English as a whole would be problematic. However, the results of the study may be used as a platform for further research, where a probability sample could be used.

The sample of 70 participants was comprised of former students who were known to the researcher, as it was felt this would ensure the highest response rate to the questionnaire. Furthermore, to try to achieve a high response rate, the questionnaire was posted online, and a link to the questionnaire was sent out to the sample of 70 Japanese learners of English. By posting the questionnaire online it was hoped that more of the sample would respond, rather than if the questionnaire was sent out by post, or was required to be sent back by e-mail. Of the 70 who were contacted, 39 responded to the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 56%.

The questionnaire comprised of three sections. The purpose of the first section was to collect some basic data about the respondent (e.g. gender, age bracket, previous experience of studying English). The second and third sections (hereafter called part one and part two) comprised of test questions to assess the respondents' use of articles for differing article-noun distances. The first part was a cloze test comprised of 27 questions. The respondents had to choose the article which best fit the blank in the sentence. The respondents could choose *a*, *the*, or *no article* for each question. In this test the noun-article gap was spread between *articles adjacent to their noun* (adjacent), *articles separated by one word* (one-word gap), and *articles separated by two words* (two-word gap). A cloze test such as this was chosen due to the availability of *no article* as an answer option. If a production task had been chosen, it is possible that incorrect article omissions by students could have been categorised as correctly supplied *no articles*, so as Ogawa (2008) pointed out, "a cloze test, where appropriate articles have to be

supplied in blanks, is appropriate as a research method” (p. 137).

Similarly, production tasks were not used due to skewing the results because of respondents’ avoidance tactics. It has been noted that production tasks, where respondents have had to write an essay, or give answers in an interview, have produced lower error rates due to English learners avoiding articles which they find troublesome (Khama, 1981; Mizuno, 1999).

The second part of the questionnaire simply supplied a short paragraph of English in which all of the articles had been removed. The respondents had to rewrite the paragraph including the appropriate articles. A total of 14 articles had been omitted including the *no article* choice. In this test, *adjacent* articles gave six correct answers, *one-word gaps* gave four correct answers, and *two-word gaps* gave four correct answers.

In choosing two slightly different tests it was hoped to see if there was a difference between test one (where students were alerted to a missing article at each appropriate point) and test two (where students had to choose for themselves where the articles were missing from).

Results

Figure 1



Figure 1 shows the total correct answers for the part one test of the questionnaire. Out of a possible 351 correct answers for each article-noun gap, the adjacent category was correctly selected 253 times (72.1% correct), the one-word gap category was correctly selected 252 times (71.8%), and the two-word gap category was correctly selected 213 times (60.7%). This indicates that there was not much difference between the adjacent and one-word gap categories, but there was a rather larger difference compared to the two-word gap category.

Figure 2

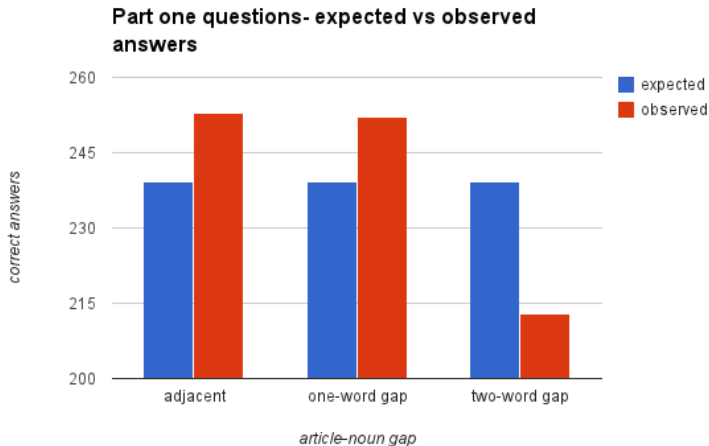


Figure 2 shows the expected correct answers against the observed correct answers. As the correct answers were evenly distributed among the three different article-noun gaps in the part one test, we could assume that the correct answers would also be distributed evenly. In this case, the total correct answers for part one was 718. Therefore, we might expect that each article-noun gap would be chosen 239.3 times as a correct answer. However, we can see that the adjacent and one-word gap categories were chosen more times than could be expected, and the two-word gap category was correctly chosen far fewer times than could be expected.

Figure 3

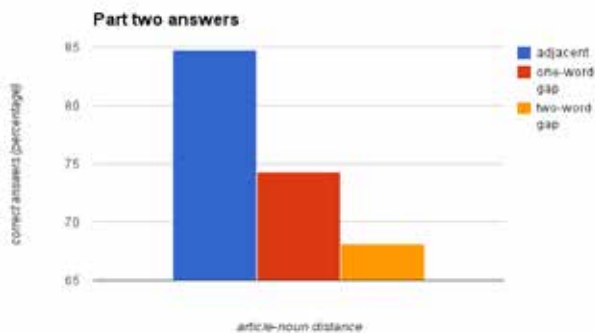


Figure 3 shows the percentage of correct answers for part two questions. Note that the percentage is shown here rather than the total correct answers (as in Figure 1 and Figure 2) because the article-noun gaps were not evenly distributed as correct answers in the part two test. Here we can see that adjacent article-noun gap questions were answered correctly 84.6% of the time; one-word gap questions were answered correctly 74.3% of the time; and finally, two-word gap questions were answered correctly 68.4% of the time. Again, we can see a downward trend in correct answers as the article-noun gap increases.

Figure 4

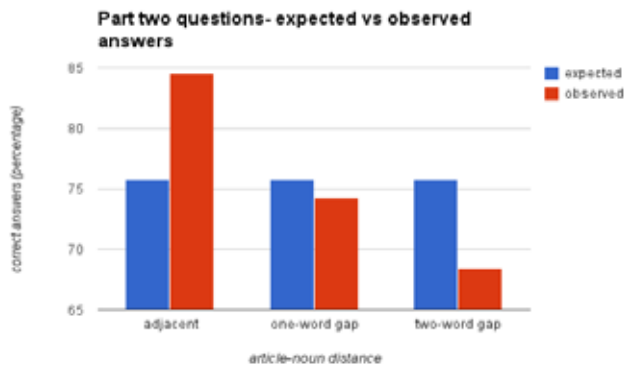


Figure 4 shows the expected correct answer distribution against the observed correct answer distribution for part two questions. Given that part two questions were answered correctly 75.8% of the time, we could expect that would be the average correct percentage over the three article-noun distance categories. But, in slight contrast to part one, we can see that again the adjacent article group was answered better than we could expect, but this time both the one-word and two-word categories were answered at a lower percentage than we could expect.

Figure 5

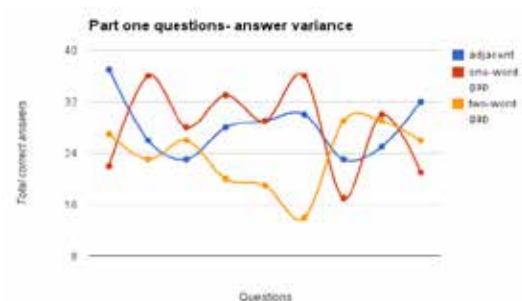


Figure 5 shows the variation in total correct answers given for the nine questions in each article-noun distance category in part one. We can see that there appears to be a wide range in correct answers given for each article-noun group.

Figure 6



Figure 6 shows the variation in correct answers given for each article-noun distance category in part two answers. Again, we can see great variation between the correct answers within the same categories.

Figure 7

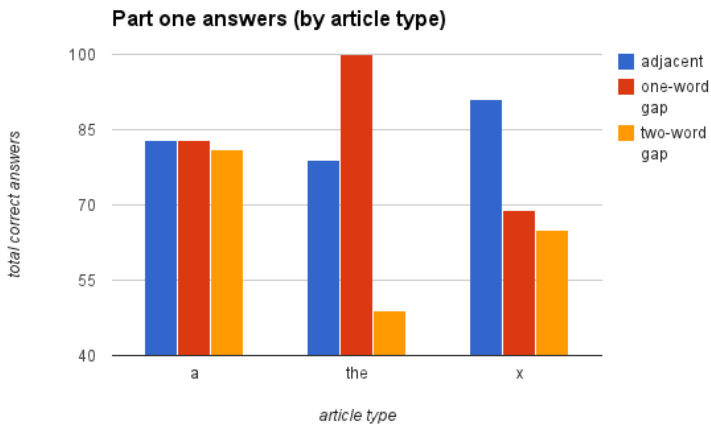


Figure 7 shows the difference in correct answers when cross-referencing article-noun distance and article type. Evidently, there is a slight progression towards loss of accuracy over article-noun distance when using *a*, a marked loss in accuracy when using *no article*, but there seems to be an outlier in that *the* respondents were more accurate with a one-word gap than with an adjacent article. Unfortunately, no such chart can be illustrated for part two answers due to a flaw in the question design whereby some articles could not be chosen as correct answers for certain article-noun distances.

Figure 8

Who's (the) tallest person in your family?			92% correct
I saw two movies yesterday. (The) first movie was really funny.			92% correct
Have you been to (the) new cafe near the station?			72% correct

Figure 8 shows the specific questions which were asked in part one, which fell under the category of using the definite article with a one-word article-noun distance. We can see that the first two questions were answered at 92% correct, while the third question only received 72% correct answers.

Discussion

As the research question “Does the distance between articles and nouns have an effect on students’ article accuracy for Japanese students of English?” suggests, this study aimed to investigate whether Japanese students’ accuracy rates with article selection depended on the distance of the article to the noun.

Firstly, looking at the findings from the part one questions, in Figure 1 there is a significant difference between adjacent article-noun pairs and two-word gap article-noun pairs. However, very little difference in accuracy was observed between adjacent article-noun pairs and pairs with a one-word gap. Figure 7 illustrates that there is a slight loss of accuracy when using the indefinite article over larger article-noun distances, and there is a more marked difference when using a zero or null article over longer article-noun distances. However, it seems that there is one category which does not fit with this trend, namely, the definite article with a one-word gap between article and noun. If we examine the individual questions in this category (Figure 8) we can see that the first two questions received 92% correct answers, much higher than the third one which received only 72%. It seems that the reason for this is possibly due to the specific grammar which is used in the question. Both question one and question two use superlatives, which follow a set rule of always taking the definite article, so are therefore removed from any difficult decision-making which might normally have come into play when using a definite article. Indeed, if we ignore this result, the other results would all display a downward trend of

article use becoming less accurate as the article-noun gap increases.

Again, the answers in part two (Figure 3) seem to support the trend of article accuracy decreasing as the article-noun gap increases. However, the results for the adjacent article-noun group might be slightly inflated due to including zero/null articles as possible responses. As the written task did not specify to make a mark indicating *no article*, it is possible that some articles in this category were mistakenly marked as correct. This problem was indeed pointed out by Ogawa (2008) who asserted, “it is difficult to objectively judge whether [omission errors] are really omissions or the use of zero article” (p. 137).

By examining only Figures 1-4, it could be argued that there seems to be a definite relationship between article accuracy decreasing as the article-noun gap increases. However, at this stage it is important to consider the variations in answer accuracy in parts one and two (Figures 5 and 6). As we can see there are wild variations in correct answers across all three article-noun distance categories. This seems to suggest that there are factors other than simply the article-noun gap at play which are affecting accuracy to a great extent. Examining the most and least accurate answers for each category, it is possible to see other factors that could have influenced these results.

Countability also seems to have been a problem. The least accurately answered question in the one-word gap category required giving *no article* referring to an uncountable noun *ice cream* which can be countable or uncountable depending on the situation. Yoon (1993) pointed out that Japanese speakers find it difficult to determine how native speakers of English categorise nouns that can be countable or uncountable according to their context. Likewise, Butler (2002) argued that “those with lower level proficiency tended to think that noun countability was a fixed or static entity” (p. 466). Furthermore, other noun features seemed to influence respondents’ accuracy. Bickerton (1981) identified four types of nouns according to referentiality, a specific/non-specific referent and a known/unknown referent. It has been put forward that “the successful detection of referentiality was problematic across groups and remained a major obstacle for learners in determining the appropriate article regardless of proficiency level” (Butler, 2002. p. 462).

Since this study focused almost solely on the distance between the article and the noun in producing article errors, many other factors which may have affected the results of the study were overlooked in the design of the research. Consequently, many possible mitigating factors

were not isolated or accounted for in the best way in this study. The class of noun was not taken into account, and to a lesser extent, neither was the article type. Similarly, limitations on the ability to generalise the findings to a wider population were also imposed due to the selection of a non-probability sample.

Conclusion

In summary, this study was able to put forward a general idea that the distance between the article and the noun may play a part in Japanese L2 English learners' article accuracy. However, due to factors such as countability and noun class not being nulled or manipulated in the data, it is difficult to draw conclusions that the article-noun distance is the main, or even accurately measurable reason for article accuracy.

If the study were to serve as a platform for future research, the design of the questions in the questionnaire should be carefully considered in terms of noun countability and class, so that those variables can be more effectively isolated and measured. Similarly, without a probability sample it would be impossible to assert anything representative of the wider population of Japanese learners of English. Likewise, the articles should be taken into consideration in terms of ensuring that each is represented equally. Furthermore, a larger set of questions would be needed to ensure that the article and noun types are represented enough times to give a reasonable spread of data. To complement this larger set of questions, a larger sample size would be ideal as a longer, more difficult questionnaire may result in a lower participation rate.

Beyond this, it could also be useful to employ post-questionnaire interviews with a select number of respondents to investigate reasons for their answers, so that some ambiguity may be removed as to their linguistic intention. This in turn would be helpful to clarify the individual thought processes of the learners when they are faced with articles. If these measures were put in place to assure a more rigorous theoretical framework, then perhaps there could be implications on how we should teach articles to students in the future, in terms of focusing on general rules, types of nouns, or adopting a more flexible approach.

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Appendix: Sample Questionnaire

Questionnaire

Please try to complete this questionnaire in 20 minutes or less.

このアンケートには20分以上かけずにお答えください。

*Required

Top of Form

How old are you? *

あなたの年齢を教えてください。

Do you study currently study English? *

現在、英語を勉強していますか？

- Yes
- No

Where have you studied English? どこで英語を勉強しましたか？（または、していますか？） *

Tick all boxes that apply to you 当てはまるもの全てにチェックをしてください。

- At Elementary School (小学校)
- At Junior High School (中学校)
- At High School (高校)
- At University (大学)
- At a school/university club (部活動・サークルなど)
- At a language school (英会話スクール・塾など)
- Overseas (海外留学)

- At work classes (職場の研修)
- Self study (独学)
- At vocational school/college (専門学校)

Part 1

There is an article missing from each sentence. Please choose one option to make the sentence correct. 下記の英文には、冠詞が抜けているものがあります。選択肢から1つ選び、正しい英文に直してください。冠詞が必要ないものには、×を選んでください。

Sorry, but I ate one of () delicious, green apples in the fridge *

- a/an
- the
- x

Wow! There's () dog in my garden! *

- a/an
- the
- x

I gave my wife () beautiful, pink flower for her birthday. *

- a/an
- the
- x

Is () newspaper on the desk yours? *

- a/an
- the
- x

We have () new information about our project *

- a/an
- the
- x

Did you study a lot when you were () student? *

- a/an
- the
- x

() Weather is really bad today. *

- a/an
- the
- x

Who's () tallest person in your family? *

- a/an
- the
- x

Have you lost () weight? *

- a/an
- the
- x

This hat is made of () paper. *

- a/an
- the
- x

Would you like () drink? *

- a/an
- the
- x

Have you been to () new café next to the station? *

- a/an
- the
- x

I saw () huge bear in the zoo. *

- a/an
- the
- x

Please don't eat () chocolate in the fridge *

- a/an
- the
- x

There is () sand in my shoe from the beach. *

- a/an
- the
- x

I'm () big fan of the Giants. *

- a/an
- the
- x

Ken Watanabe is () handsome Japanese actor in Inception *

- a/an
- the
- x

It's important to use () strong, solid wood to make a table. *

- a/an
- the
- x

Do you like () old British music? *

- a/an
- the
- x

My pen is () big, green one on the desk. *

- a/an
- the
- x

I want to take () nice, long bath tonight. *

- a/an
- the
- x

I saw two movies yesterday. () first movie was really funny. *

- a/an
- the
- x

Have you tried () blueberry ice cream? *

- a/an
- the
- x

I have to take () difficult, important test tomorrow morning. *

- a/an
- the
- x

Hey, give me some of that () delicious chocolate ice cream. *

- a/an
- the
- x

I love drinking () fresh orange juice. *

- a/an
- the
- x

When you were () young child, did you play baseball? *

- a/an
- the
- x

Part 2

The text below has some articles missing e.g. 'a/an' or 'the'. Please write out the text including the correct articles. 下記の文章には、冠詞が抜けている部分があります。冠詞を入れて、英文を正しく書き直してください。

Yesterday I saw really tall guy at Tokyo station. Guy was really tall. Maybe he was basketball player. The guy was wearing shorts and blue shirt. Blue shirt looked really fashionable. I have bright blue shirt, but it's not so fashionable. I bought my shirt from shop in London. Shop was in cool, old building. Do you have favourite station in Tokyo? Because I want you to recommend nice, cheap place to go to next weekend. *

Bottom of Form