

# EFL Learners' Acquisition of the English Article System:

*A Comparative Study*



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By

Mahmoud Hajjar

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## **Abbreviations**

ACP:	Article Choice Parameter
FH:	Fluctuation Hypothesis
L1:	First language
L2:	Second Language
NP:	Noun phrase
O OQPT:	Oxford Quick Placement Test
SLA:	Second Language Acquisition
UG:	Universal Grammar

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background to the Book

The goal of a generative programme of research into second language acquisition (SLA) is to provide a theory of the grammatical knowledge that underlies the use of second languages (L2s) by L2 learners and a theory of how they acquire that knowledge. Two important elements of the research included in this book are determining the role that the L1 plays in guiding L2 knowledge, and uncovering the role that Universal Grammar (UG) plays. UG provides language learners with a finite set of properties that allow them to reduce the possible hypotheses they could entertain about the structure of the input they encounter.

One area where these issues have been debated in recent work is the acquisition of articles. The reason is that while some languages have articles (English, French, Spanish, for example) not all languages do (Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Russian, etc.). Furthermore, of those languages that do have articles, in some these are associated with definiteness (English), and in others with specificity. Even within languages that have articles marking definiteness, some differences can be found in their distribution. For example, in English, plural count nouns and mass nouns can appear without any phonologically overt article (*I bought books/water*), whereas in French an article must always be phonologically overt (*J'ai acheté des livres/de l'eau*). Some linguists have proposed that these options realise quite constrained possibilities allowed by UG in terms of the range of semantic possibilities for articles, whether definite or specific (Lopez, 2019; Ionin 2003; Ionin et al. 2004), and the licensing of nouns as whether they are argumental and can appear directly in linguistic expressions or are predicative and need to merge with a determiner category for licensing proposal of the Nominal Mapping Parameter as an important factor of capturing variation between languages).

It turns out that English articles pose persistent difficulty for some groups of L2 learners. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999),

articles are the most difficult functional words for L2 learners of English to the extent that even advanced L2 learners may encounter problems in their use of English articles. This difficulty may even increase for L2 learners whose L1 does not have an article system, such as Japanese and Russian. In this regard, Young (1996) argues that “learners’ problems appear to be exacerbated when their native language does not have articles or article-like morphemes” (p. 136). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) attribute the difficulty of the acquisition of English articles by L2 learners to the fact that function words, including articles, are telegraphic words, i.e. words that are usually unstressed and unimportant communication devices, and hence are very difficult for L2 learners to recognize. In this regard, Murphy (1997:2) observes that L2 learners’ difficulty in using English articles is “compounded by the fact that articles are monosyllabic and unstressed; consequently, they are difficult to hear”. Moreover, articles, unlike content words, have little communicative value and could even be overlooked by some speakers of English in oral communication since they do not impede intelligibility. Likewise, L2 learners tend to pay little attention to their use of articles “when processing language primarily for meaning” (Ekiert, 2004: 2).

It should be noted, though, that Murphy (1997:3) acknowledges that even though articles are unstressed grammatical forms, they are used “to express subtle differences in meaning”. Similarly Pica (1985, cited in Lee 2007:2), argues that “English articles are a functional category which has little communicative value while each of them has multiple functions and meanings in one form”. As a result, L2 learners may encounter some difficulties processing both meaning and form at the same time. Young (1996) observes the same problem by L2 learners in their acquisition of the English article system. According to Young (1996: 35) “part of the problem for learners lies in the complex ways in which meaning is mapped onto form in the English article system”. The point that L2 learners have problems re-mapping meaning to form will play an important role in one part of the present work which examines the acquisition of the English article system by Japanese L2 learners.

With the above in mind, the aim of the research reported in this book is to investigate the acquisition of the English article system by adult Syrian and Japanese L2 learners. The purpose is to gather evidence about several controversial issues related to L2 acquisition, such as the role of the L1, the ability of L2 learners to acquire functional categories, and whether L2 development is constrained by Universal Grammar (UG). By comparing Syrian Arab and Japanese L2 learners in their use of articles, the potential

effects of their respective L1s can be identified. Arabic and English both have articles marking definiteness, while Japanese lacks an article system, making it easier to establish whether Japanese L2 learners of English can acquire knowledge of the properties of the definiteness and whether the transitional grammars that intermediate proficiency learners construct for English articles show evidence of being UG-derived. In addition, by comparing the acquisition of the English article system by speakers of two languages with different ways of marking definiteness from English, it is possible to test the claims of specific SLA hypotheses in terms of L1 transfer and access to UG.

Notably, Ionin et al. (2004) investigated article usage by L2 learners whose L1 has no article system, namely Korean and Russian. The results show that the Korean and Russian L2 learners were overusing the definite article *the* with [-definite, +specific] contexts and the indefinite article *a* with [+definite, -specific] contexts, hence allowing English articles to encode both values of the Article Choice Parameter, definiteness and specificity. Ionin et al. (2004) leave open the question of whether fluctuation between the two values of the Article Choice Parameter can also be found in L2 learners whose L1 has an article system, and more specifically an L1 that realizes a  $\pm$  definite distinction (Spanish, French, Greek, etc.). In this regard, the current work on the acquisition of the English article system by two different L2 learner groups attempts to answer Ionin et al.'s (2004) question, by comparing speakers of a language without articles, Japanese which is like Russian and Korean, and speakers of Syrian Arabic learning English whose L1, like English, has an article system marking definiteness. The question is whether proficiency-matched speakers from these L1 backgrounds will show any differences in terms of fluctuation between the two values of the Article Choice Parameter, definiteness and specificity.

Further, this work aims to contribute to the debate about whether functional categories of the L1 grammar are present in the initial state of L2 acquisition. To approach this goal, the work considers and compares in the following section the implications of a number of competing hypotheses on L1 transfer and access to UG in relation to the acquisition of the English article system by Syrian and Japanese L2 learners.

## 1.2 Comparison of the Claims of Competing Hypotheses about SLA

### *Full Transfer Full Access Hypothesis (FT/FA)*

Schwartz and Sprouse (1994, 1996) indicate that L1 grammar in its entirety constitutes the initial state in L2 acquisition (full transfer), and L2 learners have access to UG properties that are not instantiated in the L1 grammar (full access to UG). In other words, there is a full transfer from the L1 at an initial stage and all functional and lexical categories are accessible to the L2 learner. White (2003a: 68) thinks of this absolute L1 influence as “a copy (or clone) of the L1 grammar, a copy which can be modified without affecting the original”. This means that the starting point of L2 acquisition is the final state of L1 acquisition. From this perspective, Pienemann (1998: 17) argues that “L2 acquisition is seen as the process of restructuring of the existing system of grammatical knowledge”. However, this does not mean in any way that L2 learners are limited or “stuck” with L1 based-representations, as the L1 is not always able to cope with L2 properties. When the L1 fails to comply with the properties of the L2 input, the latter will trigger grammar change as the L2 learner resorts to UG options to make up what the L1 lacks and achieve an analysis that is more suitable to the L2 input. What results is an interlanguage grammar which is UG-constrained, although it may not be very native-like grammar, as “convergence with the TL grammar is not guaranteed” (Schwartz and Sprouse 1996: 42).

An example of experimental research supporting the Full Transfer Full Access hypothesis may come from the findings of Yuan (1998) in a study conducted on the acquisition of the Chinese long-distance reflexive *ziji* by intermediate Japanese and intermediate and advanced English L2 learners. It is worth mentioning that English, unlike either Japanese or Chinese, does not have a long-distance reflexive.

The Japanese and English L2 learners were given a judgement task, where they were required to choose from a given set of antecedents for the reflexive *ziji*. The study shows that the intermediate Japanese and English L2 learners showed quite different behaviour towards their treatment of the reflexive *ziji*. The Japanese L2 learners, influenced by their L1, were native like in being able to accept long-distance antecedents for *ziji*. However, the intermediate English L2 learners, who were found to reject long-distance antecedents for the reflexive *ziji*, were significantly different from both the Japanese counterparts and from the native controls. These results show that the intermediate learners in both L2 groups were L1-influenced in their



treatment of long-distance reflexives, in support of full transfer. The following table shows acceptances of long-distance antecedents from embedded finite clauses by all English and Japanese L2 learners and the Chinese native speakers.

*Table 1.1: Acceptances of long-distance antecedents from embedded finite clauses by all participants*

L2 groups	
L1 Japanese (n=24)	92%
L1 English-intermediate (n=32)	53%
L1 English –advanced (n=25)	71%
Control group (n=24)	94%

(Based on Yuan (1998), cited in White 2003a: 63)

As Table 1.1 above shows, the English advanced L2 learners, different from their intermediate peers, were able to show evidence of grammar restructuring to the correct L2 value, suggesting that the advanced English L2 learners in the study are not confined to L1 properties, in support of full access.

The current work is concerned with the acquisition of the English article system by L2 learners who come from different L1 backgrounds, Syrian ([+ART] group) and Japanese ([-ART] group). The empirical results of the present research will be consistent with the claims of the Full Transfer Full Access hypothesis if these two L2 learner groups show different developmental paths in their use of articles, reflecting properties related to the functional domain in their L1 (with particular reference to the Syrian L2 learners). Having said that, what are the implications of the empirical results of the present research for the claims of the Full Transfer Full Access hypothesis?

### **Full Transfer**

1. Low proficiency Syrian Arab L2 learners of English will diverge from native speakers in their use of articles in just those cases where English and Arabic diverge: use of articles with indefinite generics and with indefinite NPs modified by relative clauses with overt relative pronouns.

2. In the absence of L1 influence, the Japanese L2 learners of English are beyond the ‘full transfer’ stage. As a result, the low proficiency Japanese L2 learners will diverge from the low proficiency Syrian Arab L2 learners in their use of articles with indefinite generics and with indefinite NPs

modified by relative clauses with overt relative pronouns (this can also serve as evidence for L2 developmental variation).

3. Low proficiency Syrian Arab L2 learners of English will diverge from low proficiency Japanese L2 learners in their treatment of English articles both in definite and indefinite contexts if they transfer both definite D and an underlying abstract indefinite D into the English grammars.

### **Full Access**

1. Advanced Syrian and Japanese L2 learners of English will be highly accurate in providing the appropriate article in all definite and indefinite contexts, whether specific or non-specific.

### **The Fluctuation Hypothesis**

According to Snape (2006) one of the important and recent SLA theories that seems to support the implications of the Full Transfer Full Access hypothesis (FT/FA) in terms of L2 development and parameter settings is the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH). The Fluctuation Hypothesis, proposed by Ionin (2003), aims to explain how and why L2 learners fluctuate between parameter settings in their acquisition of the L2. The Fluctuation Hypothesis proposes two important claims that seem to go hand in hand with the Full Access view of the FT/FA hypothesis:

- a. L2 learners have full access to UG principles and parameter-settings.
- b. L2 learners fluctuate between different parameter-settings until the input leads them to set the parameter to the appropriate value.

(Based on Ionin 2003:23)

As far as the L2 English article choice is concerned, the Fluctuation Hypothesis proposes the following:

- 1) L2-learners have full UG access to the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter (namely definiteness and specificity).
- 2) L2-learners fluctuate between the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter until the input leads them to set this parameter to the appropriate value.

(Based on Ionin 2003:89)

In the acquisition of the English article system, L2 learners are expected either to fluctuate between the two values of the Article Choice Parameter (ACP) or alternatively associate articles with definiteness only. Since L2 learners' grammars are UG-constrained, they are not expected to associate articles with specificity alone or adopt other patterns. According to Ionin et al. (2004:16-17) "L2 learners should have no initial preference for one setting of a parameter over another. If they have full UG access, then they should have access to all of the possible parameter-settings, until the input leads them to choose the parameter-setting appropriate for their L2".

According to the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH), it might be easier for L2 learners whose L1 has the same setting as the L2 (verb raising, article choice, reflexive binding, and so on) to select the relevant parameter settings for their L2. In the acquisition of the ACP, for instance, Ionin et al. (2004b:6) suggest that "if speakers of Spanish, which also encodes the feature [+definite] in its article system, are learning English as an L2, they may transfer article specifications from Spanish to English and correctly treat *the* as [+definite]". Thus, the FH might predict that the Syrian L2 learners in the present work, influenced by their L1 which has the same setting as English for articles, namely [+definite], will not fluctuate between the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter. Since "the role of L1-transfer in L2-English article choice is an interesting question awaiting further study" (Ionin et al. 2007:6), the present research aims to investigate whether or not the Syrian L2 learners will be able to divide articles on the basis of definiteness only.

However, the Fluctuation Hypothesis might predict that the Japanese L2 learners in the current work, with particular reference to the low proficiency Japanese L2 learners, will encounter greater difficulty with setting the Article Choice Parameter to the correct L2 value. This is mainly because Japanese, unlike Arabic, lacks morphological markers (articles) for the existing semantic features of definiteness and specificity (see chapter 3, section 3.5.2. for more discussion). The results of the Japanese L2 learners in the present research, therefore, would either weaken or strengthen the predictions of the Fluctuation Hypothesis. Nonetheless, as the FH assumes that at advanced levels, L2 learners can correctly set parameters in their L2 grammars, the advanced Japanese L2 learners are assumed to correctly set the Article Choice Parameter to the appropriate L2 value.

### ***Partial Transfer Full Access***

The Partial Transfer Full Access view, proposed by Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994,1996a,b), differs from that of Full Transfer Full Access discussed earlier in the amount of transfer that might occur from the L1 grammar to the L2: while lexical categories are present in the initial interlanguage grammar, functional categories are lacking, however. Since the early stages of the interlanguage grammar reflect only the lexical part of the L1 grammar, L2 learners can transfer the VP, for instance, from their L1, but they need to gradually build the higher functional projections like IP or CP. Vainikka and Young-Scholten describe their view as the *Minimal Trees* view, “positing only the minimal structure required (in relation to the grammar as a whole) that is consistent with the data” (Schwartz and Sprouse 1996: 49). Functional categories emerge in stages on the basis of input and UG, exhibiting properties relevant to the L2, regardless of L1 characteristics. Under the Minimal Trees approach, the final state of L2 development is L2-like grammar, when L2 learners are able to converge on the correct L2 functional properties, in support of full access.

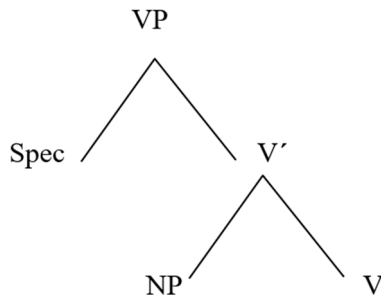
Different from the Full Transfer Full Access hypothesis, the Minimal Trees hypothesis argues that the initial state of L2 learners who come from different L1 backgrounds is the same with regard to functional categories. “Since there is predicted to be no transfer in this domain, no stage or grammar in which properties of the mother-tongue functional categories are found, an assumption which differs from Full Transfer/Full Access” (White 2003a: 69). Hence, if both the low proficiency Syrian and Japanese L2 learners in the current work tend to show similar stages of development in their acquisition of the English article system, this would constitute evidence in favour of the Minimal Trees hypothesis. At the same time, any evidence for transfer of functional categories by these L2 learner groups, with particular reference to the behaviour of the low proficiency Syrian L2 learners, would undermine the claims of the Minimal Trees hypothesis. In this regard, White (2003a: 73) claims that in order to argue against the Minimal Trees hypothesis “it is sufficient to show that at least some functional categories are in fact present from the beginning”.

To support their view, Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994, 1996a, b), in a series of papers, collected data from different L2 learners of German, which is an SOV language. Some of the L2 learners were native speakers of Turkish and Korean whose L1 is also an SOV language. Other L2 learners of German included native speakers of Spanish and Italian whose L1, different from German, is an SVO language. In the studies, it was found that

the low proficiency Turkish and Korean L2 learners were L1 influenced in treating German as a head-final language. Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994), for instance, have found that the Turkish and Korean L2 learners were able to produce over 95% head-final VPs. These L2 learners produced sentences as in (6) below:

- (6) Oya Zigarette trinken  
 Oya cigarette drink-INF  
 'Oya smokes cigarettes'  
 (Based on Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994, cited in White 2003a:70))

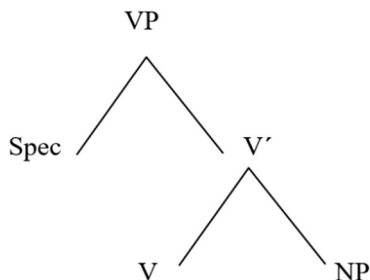
The above sentence, which helps illustrate the initial state (lexical VP stage) of the Turkish and Korean L2 learners, can be represented as:



By contrast, the Spanish and Italian L2 learners, also influenced by their L1, were initially treating German as a head-initial language. They were producing head final VPs and head initial VPs about equally. Typical utterances of these L2 learners can be shown in (7) below (which is ungrammatical in German):

- (7) Trinke de orange oder?  
 Drink the orange or?  
 '(She's) drinking the orange (juice), right?'  
 (Based on Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1996a, cited in White 2003a:70))

The above sentence can be represented as:



These results, according to Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1994, 1996a), indicate that all of the L2 learners investigated transfer the headedness characteristics of their L1 lexical properties by adopting different word order in their early interlanguage grammar. L2 learners' utterances were represented as VPs, as shown in the minimal syntactic tree structures above, in accord with the headedness of the VP in their L1. The L2 learners, however, did not show any evidence of transfer of any functional projections like IP or CP, consistent with Vainikka and Young-Scholten's claim that in the initial state, L2 learners' grammars lack L1 functional categories and their projections. However, Vainikka and Young-Scholten (1996b) argue that the advanced learners from all L2 learners groups, with evidence for functional categories and their projections in the L2 grammar, were native-like in their acquisition, again consistent with Vainikka and Young-Scholten's claim that advanced L2 learners can converge on the target L2 grammar. Similarly, the advanced Syrian and Japanese L2 learners in the present work are expected under the Minimal Trees approach to set the Article Choice Parameter correctly for English.

### ***No Transfer Full Access***

The No Transfer Full Access position claims that L1 parameter settings do not form the initial state for L2 acquisition. In other words, the final state of L1 grammar cannot transfer and therefore cannot form the initial state of the L2. Only properties of UG, which are fully available to L2 learners at any age, constitute the initial state for L2 acquisition, independently of L1 representations. According to Sauter (2002:10) "under this approach, the L2 initial state mirrors the L1 initial state, in that all (both used and unused) properties of UG are still available to the L2 learner (hence, Full Access)". The conception of the No transfer Full access that L2 acquisition is totally constrained by UG seems to be in line with the Full Access view of Schwartz and Sprouse's (1994, 1996) hypothesis. In this regard, (White

2003a: 89) argues that “the *full access* of Full Transfer Full Access is the full access of Epstein et al.”.

Since UG constitutes the initial state in both L1 and L2, the process of L2 acquisition is very similar to that of the L1 and “therefore, this position is also known as the L2A = L1A position” (Sauter 2002:10). Moreover, the interlanguage grammar of L2 learners who come from different L1 backgrounds is very similar, again due to UG influence apart from the L1. Hence, both the Minimal Trees and the No Transfer Full Access hypotheses seem to share the same assumptions with respect to the acquisition of L2 functional categories (recall that the Minimal Trees hypothesis claims that no functional categories drawn from the L1 grammar can be present in the initial state of L2 grammar). As a result, based on these two approaches, both the low proficiency Syrian and Japanese L2 learners are expected to show similar stages of development in their acquisition of the English article system, with an entire absence of L1 influence.

However, if it is the case that results from the Syrian L2 learners suggest the influence of L1 grammar in the functional domain (as Japanese does not have the functional category D, the results of the Japanese L2 learners cannot be due to L1 transfer), this can be used to argue against both the Minimal Trees and the No Transfer Full Access views. Moreover, if results from both the Syrian and Japanese L2 learners serve to show different initial states by these two learner groups, this would also constitute counter-evidence to both the Minimal Trees and the No Transfer Full Access hypotheses. According to the No Transfer Full Access position, the final state of L2 interlanguage grammar resembles that of native speakers of the L2. Learners’ errors can be only considered as performance errors rather than a systematic divergence from the L2. This point is further stressed by White (2003a: 95) that with regard to grammatical development after the L2 initial state, the No Transfer Full Access hypothesis claims that “the linguistic competence of L2 learners will be effectively identical to that of native speakers (Flynn 1996), any apparent differences being attributable to performance factors”. Consequently, both the advanced Syrian and Japanese L2 learners in the present work are expected, under the No Transfer Full Access hypothesis, to show evidence of L2-like grammar in their use of articles.

Evidence for the No Transfer Full Access position may come from Epstein et al.’s (1996) study conducted on Japanese L2 learners of English in their acquisition of the functional projections IP and CP, which are lacking in the L1. Both adult (n=18, aged 22-36) and child L2 learners (n=33, aged 6-10)

were involved in the study. It is worth mentioning that the adult Japanese L2 learners were of lower-intermediate proficiency; the child L2 learners, on the other hand, lived for around 3 years in the United States and their proficiency in the L2 was not reported in the study.

According to Epstein et al. (1996), in the absence of L1-influence, if the Japanese L2 learners show evidence of access to L2 functional categories, this would constitute evidence that L1 transfer plays only a minimal or no role in L2 acquisition. The results of both child and adult L2 learner groups are given in Table 2 (based on Epstein et al. 1996: 706, cited in White 2003a:91)

*Table 1.2: Percentage of accurate imitations by both child and adult L2 learner groups*

Control group (n=24)	IP=12	CP=12	
L2 groups	Children (n=33)	69%	50%
	Adults (n=18)	68%	45%

As Table 2 shows, both the child and adult Japanese L2 learners seemed to have tackled the tasks of imitation in much the same manner. Both learner groups were more accurate in their imitation abilities for sentences testing for the presence of IP than for sentences aimed to test for the presence of CP. Epstein et al. (1996) did not attribute the Japanese L2 learners' low performance on items testing for CP to the absence of CP projection in the L1; instead, they argue that this low performance is because the CP structures involve long-distance movement which is usually problematic for L2 learners in general (in contrast to the high performance of both the child and adult L2 learners in the IP structures which involve short-distance movement, see Epstein et al. 1996:706 for more discussion).

Epstein et al. (1996) conclude that Japanese L2 learners have access to L2 functional categories which are not instantiated in the L1; these are accessed directly from UG. In this regard, Epstein et al. (1996:706) claim that the results "suggest that the L2 learner does not attempt at early stages of acquisition to impose an L1 grammatical analysis (perhaps lacking functional categories), upon the L2 PLD". The findings seem to be consistent with Epstein et al.'s claims that age is not a factor for L2 acquisition and that L2 learners' grammar cannot be attributed to an early L1-based representation, and therefore L2 learners have only access to principles and parameter settings allowed by UG. Moreover, these findings



seem to be in line with Epstein et al.'s (1998: 61) claims that “L2 learners have knowledge of the full inventory of both lexical and functional syntactic categories provided by Universal Grammar”.

### ***Full Transfer Partial Access***

According to the Full Transfer Partial Access hypothesis, L2 learners do not resort to UG options to restructure their L1 grammar on the basis of the L2 input. Instead, L2 learners have access only to those principles and parameter settings that are realized in their L1 but can never acquire any properties beyond those. In other words, L2 learners are unable to acquire L2 parameters that differ from those in the L1, hence they can access UG only via the L1. In this regard, White (2003a:119) argues that under the Full Transfer Partial Access approach, “representations like those of native speakers of the L2 will necessarily be unattainable whenever the L1 and L2 differ in parameter values. On this account, then, there is full transfer but not full access. The L1 grammar constitutes the learner's representation of the L2 initially and subsequently”.

As a result, the Full Transfer Partial Access hypothesis would possibly predict that all of the Syrian Arab L2 learners in the current work, whose L1 like English has an article system marking definiteness, will set the Article Choice Parameter correctly for English. However, it may also predict that the Syrian L2 learners at every level of proficiency will diverge from English native speakers in their use of articles with indefinite generics and with indefinite NPs modified by relative clauses with overt relative pronouns, i.e. in those cases where English and Arabic diverge. As far as the Japanese L2 learners whose L1, unlike English, is an article-less language are concerned, they are expected, also at every level of proficiency, to experience difficulties in resetting the Article Choice Parameter correctly for English. This is mainly because Japanese L2 learners cannot access a parameter which determines whether English encodes definiteness or specificity.

## **1.3 An Outline of the Research Supporting the Book**

This book focuses on the acquisition of the English article system by two different L2 learner groups, Syrian and Japanese, whose native languages are +Article and –Article respectively. The empirical data of the study included in this book comes from a grammatical gap filling task given to low proficiency and advanced adult Syrian L2 learners and low proficiency

and advanced adult Japanese L2 learners of English. It is predicted that as Arabic is a language with articles marking definiteness whereas Japanese lacks an article system, there will be potential differences between the Japanese and the Syrian L2 learner groups in their acquisition of the English article system. This book aims to find out whether the Japanese L2 learners will show evidence of accessing the UG semantic features [+/-definite] and [+/-specific] which are not grammaticalized in the L1. In other words, the current research aims to investigate the distinction between the Syrian and Japanese L2 learner groups in terms of development from a generative point of view. Most importantly, by examining the use of articles by these two different L2 learners in their acquisition of the English article system, it is possible to test the claims of the SLA hypotheses described in the previous section in terms of L1 transfer and access to UG. This helps us identify which of the SLA hypotheses can best be described as the most compatible with the findings proportionate to article acquisition by both the Syrian and Japanese L2 learners.

The decision to compare Syrian and Japanese L2 learners in their use of articles was motivated by similarities and differences between these two languages and English. As regards the question of transfer from the L1 to the L2 grammar in the early stages of development, the prediction is that Syrian Arabic speakers will show evidence of the L1 distribution of articles in their interlanguage grammars. This will be investigated in the low proficiency Syrian L2 learners' use of articles in generic and relative clause contexts, as well as in contexts testing Ionin et al.'s (2004) Article Choice Parameter. The following research questions guide the study presented in this book.

### ***RQ1***

*Will low proficiency Syrian L2 learners transfer properties of the L1 to their L2 in extending the use of the definite article *the* to all indefinite generic contexts?*

This research question is based on claim Ryding's (2005) claim that Arab L2 learners in general, especially those at a low proficiency level, influenced by their L1, will overuse the definite article *the* with all generic nouns in English.

**RQ2**

*Will low proficiency Syrian L2 learners mistakenly transfer the L1 value to their L2 in extending the use of the definite article the to all indefinite contexts involving relative clauses [+pronoun].*

The above research question was based on the assumption that Syrian Arab L2 learners, again influenced by their L1, might tend to overuse the definite article *the* with all contexts involving relative clauses with a relative pronoun.

Since the first two research questions aim to test for L1 influence of Arabic on the Syrian L2 learners' use of English articles, the best research design seems to include a comparator group whose L1 (Japanese), unlike Arabic, lacks articles and who are therefore beyond the full transfer stage, so that the researcher can find out how different L2 learner groups may show distinctly different behaviour towards their use of articles. The performance of the Syrian L2 learners in the generic and relative clauses with pronoun contexts will be compared with that of their Japanese counterparts. Moreover, comparing the behaviour of the Syrian L2 learners with that of their Japanese counterparts in L2 article usage gives an important chance to test the existing claims of SLA hypotheses in terms of L2 development. Recall that both the Full Transfer Full Access and Full Transfer Partial Access hypotheses share the assumption that different L2 learners with different L1 backgrounds are expected to behave differently with regard to some particular phenomenon in the same L2; both the Minimal Trees and the Partial Transfer Full Access hypotheses, on the other hand, claim the opposite.

Having said that, the third research question aims to test the following:

**RQ3 A**

*How does L1 background influence the use of L2 English articles?*

**RQ3 B**

*Will the Syrian and Japanese L2 learners show different developmental paths towards their use of L2 English articles?*

The fourth research question was formulated to test Ionin et al.'s (2004) findings that L2 learners of English, whose L1 has no article system such as Russian and Korean, tend to fluctuate between the two values of the Article

Choice Parameter, definiteness and specificity, in their use of English articles until input leads them to set the Article Choice Parameter correctly for English. The prediction then for the Japanese L2 learners whose L1, like Russian and Korean, has no article system is that they will encounter difficulties with setting the Article Choice Parameter to the correct L2 value.

#### ***RQ4***

*Will Japanese L2 learners, like Ionin et al.'s (2004) Korean and Russian subjects, mis-set the Article Choice Parameter and fluctuate between allowing English articles to encode both definiteness and specificity?*

Ionin et al. (2004) might predict the Syrian L2 learners whose L1, like English, has an article system and it marks the definiteness setting not to fluctuate between the two values of the Article Choice Parameter. However, the fact that spoken Arabic (non-standard variety), unlike standard Arabic, has no overt phonological realisation of an indefinite article may cause the Syrian L2 learners to fluctuate between the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter in the indefinite specific contexts. Having said that, the fifth research question can be divided into two parts which are mutually exclusive:

#### ***RQ5 A***

*Will Syrian L2 learners positively transfer the value of their L1 into L2 in dividing articles on the basis of definiteness and thus not fluctuate between the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter?*

#### ***RQ5 B***

*Will Syrian L2 learners, whose spoken L1 has no overt phonological realisation of an indefinite article, tend to fluctuate between the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter in the indefinite specific contexts, using \*the and a interchangeably?*

The sixth research question was based on testing the claim of the Full Access view that high proficiency L2 learners, with increasing L2 input, have the propensity to show evidence of grammar restructuring to the correct L2 value. Therefore, the sixth research question aims to test comparability in the behaviour of the advanced Syrian and advanced Japanese L2 learners:

**RQ6**

*Will advanced Syrian and Japanese L2 learners of English show evidence of grammar restructuring to the correct L2 value and therefore be highly accurate in providing the appropriate article in all definite and indefinite contexts tested?*

**1.4 Audience**

Those who might find this book useful include:

- *Policy makers* – since there has so far been so little research done to uncover the challenges faced by Arab and Japanese learners of English in EFL contexts, this book provides insights into these realities for those responsible for implementing educational policies.
- *Thesis writers*– the volume provides a valuable source of information on the acquisition of English articles by non-native English language speakers and suggestions for further research, which could be especially useful for thesis writers from a wide range of contexts worldwide.
- *Students and their teachers/private tutors* – this volume provides a large bank of wide-ranging information and evidence which can be used to inform teachers/private tutors and their students about teaching and learning the acquisition of English articles in EFL contexts and beyond.
- *Researchers* (especially those in the field of second language acquisition) can benefit from reading this book to keep abreast of the latest developments in this area in the hope of stimulating further research.

**1.5 Structure of the Book**

This book comprises seven chapters. **Chapter 1** states the rationale, aims, and theoretical context of the book. It provides a brief overview of how a focus on the English article system has gained increasing attention in SLA research, which is moving in more multilingually-attuned directions. **Chapter 2** presents the theoretical details of the characteristics of the English article system, by describing the distribution of articles which is determined by a complex of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic factors. The chapter also discusses several subtypes of the use of the definite article *the* in English, along with tackling the notion of specificity and its relation to

the article choice parameter. The generics and relative clauses in English are also elucidated in Chapter 2. **Chapter 3** focuses on the use of the definite article in Arabic with all nouns modified by a relative clause with a relative pronoun. The differences between relative clauses in Arabic and English are also highlighted in this chapter, along with explaining definiteness and indefiniteness in Japanese. **Chapter 4** is devoted to a review of previous studies conducted on different L2 learners in their acquisition of the English article system. It highlights the main findings of these studies and explains how this background work leads to the research questions that guided the present research. As regards **Chapter 5**, it reports on the experimental study of article choice in the L2 English of L1 Syrian speakers. The methodology part in terms of participants, materials, procedures, and research hypotheses is presented in this chapter. The results based on the grammatical gap-filling task that was administered to the Syrian learners of English are then given and discussed in the chapter. **Chapter 6** documents the experimental study of article choice in the L2 English of L1 Japanese speakers. The methodology considerations and the results based on the grammatical gap-filling task that was administered to the Japanese learners of English are presented and discussed. This chapter ends with a comparison of article usage between Japanese L2 learners and their Syrian counterparts. **Chapter 7** highlights the main findings of both studies conducted, explains the limitations of the work, suggests general directions for future research, and concludes the work.