

Is *that* different from *the*?

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Abstract

English is a language with overt morphological representations of articles. On the other hand, Malay and Mandarin Chinese have none. In Malaysia, pupils are exposed to English articles as early as four years old. Despite early exposure, articles, or the definite article *the* specifically, appear to be a marked grammatical property for Chinese-speaking and Malay-speaking learners, two languages without articles. Based on the Fluctuation Hypothesis and Article Choice Parameter, this study seeks to investigate and compare the role of first language (L1) transfer on the article acquisition of the 77 L1 Chinese and 116 L1 Malay ESL learners, who were teacher trainees recruited from three teachers' training institutes in Malaysia. The respondents were tested utilising a production task and a comprehension task. The statistical analyses of the participants' performance revealed that only the advanced and intermediate groups of both L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners registered clear distinctions between *the* usage in the 'Unique and salient' and 'Unique and non-salient' categories and *that* usage in the 'Non-unique' category. The high accuracy rates suggest that L1 lexical transfer contributed to the positive performance by the ESL learners. The advanced and intermediate L1 Chinese and L1 Malay learners continuously interpreted the singular definite descriptions as referring to uniquely immediate salient entities similar to the demonstrative descriptions, making interpretations of *the* and *that* seemed similar.

Keywords: definiteness, demonstratives, grammaticalization, salient, transfer

1. Introduction

The English articles which include the indefinite article *a(n)*, the definite article *the*, and the *zero(Ø)* article are recognised as three functional words with one of the most challenging structural fundamentals (Chrabaszcz & Jiang, 2014; Ekiert, 2004; García Mayo, 2008; Ionin & Montrul, 2010; Liu & Gleason, 2002; Master, 1987) for learners of English as a second language (ESL) to master. In Malaysia, English is used widely and students are exposed to English articles as early as four years old in kindergartens. Despite early exposure, first language (L1) Malay and first language (L1) Chinese adult learners make errors in the acquisition of the articles (Wong & Chan, 2008; Wong & Quek, 2007). The definite article *the* specifically is one of the marked grammatical properties for L1 Malay-speaking learners (Khazriyati Salehuddin, Tan, Marlyna Maros, & Maros, 2006; Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, Norsimah Mat Awal, & Kesumawati Abu Bakar, 2008; Wong & Quek, 2007).

Based on previous studies on second language (L2) article acquisition, article omission and article substitution are two common types of errors committed by L2 learners. Analyses of such errors show the level of L2 learners' awareness of articles and the representations of articles in their interlanguage grammar (Trenkic, 2008, p.1). L2 grammar is proposed to be constrained by Universal Grammar (UG) and L2 learners are able to acquire features not instantiated in their L1 through UG access (Hawkins, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2006; Ionin & Montrul, 2010; Snape, Leung, et al., 2006; Trenkic, 2008; Xu et al., 2016). Demonstratives are claimed to be the common source of articles, as can be seen in the English definite article, *the* which has developed from *that* (Lyons, 1999; p. 331). In many contexts including the anaphoric contexts, *the* and *that* are interchangeable and still maintain the semantic meaning.

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between L1 and L2 learners' article acquisition and determine if L1 affects the use of English articles among the L1 Malay and L1 Chinese-speaking ESL learners with article-less L1 backgrounds. This study will address the following research question:

How do L1 Malay and L1 Chinese ESL learners compute and distinguish definite and demonstrative accounts in the use of *the* and *that* respectively in singular contexts?

2. Literature Review

Over the decades, researchers have found that the semantic context (\pm definite vs \pm specificity) of a noun (Chondrogianni, Vasić, Marinis, & Blom, 2015; Fodor & Sag, 1982; Geng, 2010) also affects L2 learners' article accuracy rate which is triggered by their ability to determine not only the countability (countable versus abstract, and singular versus plural) (Lee Amuzie & Spinner, 2013; Lee, 2012; Miller, 2005; White, 2009; Whong, Gil, & Marsden, 2013) and also the familiarity or uniqueness of a noun (Abbott, 2006, 2014; Hinenoya, 2008; Lee, 2007; Snape, 2006). A number of studies propose the positive influence of L1 transfer on L2 English article acquisition (Chrabaszcz & Jiang, 2014; Crosthwaite, 2014; Ionin, Baek, Kim, Ko, & Wexler, 2011, 2012; Ionin, Zubizarreta, & Maldonado, 2008; P. Master, 1997; Robertson, 2000; Snape, García Mayo, & Gürel, 2013; Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008).

There is a close relationship between definite and demonstrative determiners. In many

contexts, *the* and *that* could be used interchangeably and claimed to share the same central semantics of uniqueness. Hence, it is proposed that the second language (L2) learners of English transfer the semantics of *that* lexically from their first language (L1) to interpret the definite article *the* (Ionin et al., 2012; Ionin & Montrul, 2010b; Lee, 2012; Roberts, 2002; Wolter, 2006).

2.1 Fluctuation Hypothesis and the effects of L1 transfer in L2 article acquisition

Article Choice Parameter (ACP) and Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH) were first proposed by Ionin et al. (2004). Many studies have since tested them with different L2 populations with [-Art] languages (Ionin et al., 2004b; Kim & Lakshmanan, 2008; Kim & Lakshmanan, 2009; Ko et al., 2006, 2009; among many others) and these are followed suit by L2 with [+Art] languages (Al-Mohanna, 2014; Cho, 2016; Kupisch, 2012; Montrul & Ionin, 2010; Montrul, 2011; Morales-Reyes & Soler, 2016; Snape et al., 2006; Snape, 2006, 2008; White, 2008; Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008). These studies found similar and contradicting results but some interesting variations are also uncovered. Studies that tested effects of L1 transfer on L2 adult learners with Fluctuation Hypothesis and Article Choice Parameter can be divided into two main groups; first languages with articles [+Art] and those without articles [-Art].

L2 learners whose first languages with articles [+Art] (such as French and Spanish) and overt semantic features of articles have the tendency to transfer the features that encode definiteness from their L1s and thus assist them in their article acquisition process. On the contrary, L2 learners with first languages without articles [-Art] such as Chinese, Russian, Korean and Japanese registered distinctive traces of fluctuation and L1 transfer effect (see Thomas, 1989; Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004; Garcia-Mayo & Hawkins, 2009; Snape et al., 2013; Ionin et al., 2011). Although article-less, these languages have demonstratives to denote definiteness. Demonstratives are claimed to share the same central semantics of uniqueness as definites (Wolter, 2006).

2.2 L1 Transfer and languages with definiteness-based articles

Since the proposal of ACP and FH, many studies have tested them with different L2 populations. In order to tackle an open question pertaining to the role of UG, fluctuation and L1 transfer in the second language acquisition of articles, a number of studies have focused on comparing acquisition patterns of L2 learners with [+Art] and [-Art] first languages with English as the base. Ionin, Zubizarreta and Maldonado (2008) administered an experimental study on twenty-three L1 Russian and twenty-four L1 Spanish L2 learners of English, with six adult English native speakers as controls. Fluctuation patterns were traced among the L1 Russian learners but not with the L1 Spanish learners instead they were comparatively highly accurate (target-like) in the elicitation task. The positive transfer of definiteness from L1 facilitates the L1 Spanish learners in the article acquisition whereas the L1 Russian learners fluctuate due to L1 interference or dissimilarities between L1 and L2 (Bardovi-harlig & Sprouse, 2018, p.1).

The fluctuation patterns exhibited by the Japanese in Hawkins et al.'s (2006) study was in fact similar to the Russian and Korean speakers (in Ionin et al., 2004) and thus reaffirms Ionin

et al.'s claim that speakers of [-Art] languages follow a developmental stage permitting a choice offered neither by the L1 nor the L2 (L2 interlanguage grammar). Based on FH, that input will eventually lead learners 'to set the parameter to the appropriate value' (2004a: 16). In contrast, the L1 Greek speakers and native speakers mainly chose *the* or *a* to mark definiteness or indefiniteness. In line with FH, the L1 Greek's performance proves that fluctuation is not a general L2 developmental phenomenon for L2 speakers with an L1 that uses articles to mark definiteness like English. Hawkins et al. (2006) asserts that the L1 Japanese speakers access [\pm definite] and [\pm specific] directly from UG directory and not from the features grammaticalized in their L1.

Adopting the Wolter's (2006) semantic proposal, Ionin, Baek, Kim, Ko, and Wexler (2011) claim that L2 learners from article-less L1's adopt demonstrative analysis to both *the* and *that*. In their quest to determine whether L2 learners with [-Art] L1 can distinguish definites from demonstratives, Ionin et al. (2011) conducted an empirical study on 33 L1 Korean L2 learners of English. L1 Koreans' performance in the definite contexts indicated that learners used *the* to denote uniqueness/ maximality. As for the comprehension task, the findings showed that the native speakers made a clear distinction between the definites and demonstratives in line with Wolter's (2006) analysis by denoting plural definites as the maximal set in the discourse context (i.e., all four pencils, or knives, or pens in the picture), and plural demonstratives as the maximal set in the immediate situation made salient by the previous action (i.e., the two apples, or bananas, or balloons just acted upon). Conversely, the L1 Koreans acted upon just the two objects previously acted upon to display preference for the maximal set in the immediately salient situation in both cases, treating definites and demonstratives as equivalents. Ionin et al. (2011) asserted that L1 has influenced the L2-learners' demonstrative analysis because Korean has only demonstratives.

3. Linguistic Assumptions

Ever since extensive research are being done on the acquisition of articles, second language (L2) learners of English with first languages (L1) without articles (-Art) such as Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Russian (Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2003; Thomas, 1989) seem to find the acquisition of the English article system even more difficult than those learners whose L1 has an article system (Kim & Lakshmanan, 2009; Montrul & Ionin, 2010). To better understand the integral underlying processes in acquiring the English article system, this paper provides a sketch of the grammatical and semantic properties of the noun phrase (NP) in Mandarin Chinese, Malay language and English, specifically with regard to the notions of definiteness ([\pm Def]) and followed by the demonstrative descriptions of these three languages.

3.1 Definite and Demonstrative Descriptions in Mandarin Chinese

In Mandarin Chinese, definite or indefinite noun phrases must be referential in order to be definites or indefinites (Li and Thompson, 1981, p. 129). The speaker must have a particular referent in mind and intends to refer to it in order to classify the context as referential (Lyons 1999, p.178). A referential noun phrase refers to an entity which may be singular or plural, physical or conceptual, real or hypothetical. Some of the referential noun phrases are bold in

the examples from (1) and (2) given below:

- (1) **zhèi- tiào xiāngjiāo wō chī- bu -xià**
 this - CL banana I eat- can't -descend

This banana I can't eat.

- (2) **tā yǒu yí ge fāngfǎ zhuàn qián**
 3SG exist one CL method earn money

He/She has **an idea** for making money.

From Li and Thompson (1981, p.127)

A referential noun phrase with a classifier phrase is always definite (refer 3 & 4):

- (3) **zhèi - ge rén**
 this - CL person

this person

- (4) **nèi - xiē yǐzi**
 That- PL chair

those chairs

3.2 Definite and Demonstrative Descriptions in Malay

The use of *itu* 'that' and *ini* 'this' in the following sentences demonstrates the notion of definiteness in the Malay noun phrases, although they are not equivalent to the English article *the*. In the first part of their book, Nik Safiah Karim, Farid M. Onn, Hashim Hj. Musa and Abdul Hamid Mahmood (2006, p. 102) state that *ini* and *itu* are two words used to refer to a thing or subject that is near or far respectively, as shown in examples (5) and (6).

- (5) **Ini** hasil nukilan penulis muda itu.
 DET outcome excerpt writer young DET

This is the young writer's excerpt.

- (6) **Itu** buku biografi *Pendeta Za'ba*.
 DET book biography *Pendeta Za'ba*

That is *Pendeta Za'ba's* biography book.

According to Nik Safiah Karim et al. (2006), determiners are elements that give the notion of definiteness to a noun phrase and they can be positioned before or after the noun. There are two types of determiners: *Penentu Hadapan* (Pre-Determiner) and *Penentu Belakang* (Post-Determiner). As shown in (7), the Pre-Determiner generally occurs in front of nouns, consists of numerals followed by classifiers. The use of *seorang* here is claimed to be functioning almost like the indefinite article *a*, although not as an equivalent.

- (7) **seorang** askar
 one CLS soldier

a/one soldier

Post-Determiners, *itu* that and *ini* this, are elements that occur after the nouns, as shown in (8) and (9). The use of *itu* 'that' and *ini* 'this' in these sentences demonstrates a notion of definiteness in the Malay noun phrases, although they are not equivalent to the English article

the.

(8) orang **itu**

person Det

that person

(9) rumah **ini**

house Det

this house

3.3 Definite and Demonstrative Descriptions in English

Just like many languages, English definite and demonstratives determiners are claimed to have a close relationship. In many semantic contexts, the definite article *the* and demonstrative determiner *that* can be used interchangeably as well as the anaphoric context shown in (10) (Lyons, 1999; K. L. Wolter, 2006) due to their sharing of the same central semantics of uniqueness. Both *the* and *that* can be used in the context in (10) as the conditions on uniqueness are met.

(10) A girl was sitting next to a window as I walked into the room. As I was leaving, *the/that* girl started to cry bitterly.

This study replicates Ionin et al's (2012) semantic proposal of demonstratives and definites which is a combination of Wolter's (2006) semantic proposal and the semantic of uniqueness where both denote uniqueness/maximality.

4. Research Methodology

The research is designed to investigate and compare the possibility of L1 transfer on article acquisition of the L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners across three proficiency levels. The performance of the L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners was measured by the article accuracy scores obtained from two production tests consisting of a written and a comprehension task. A group of native speakers was recruited to serve as the control group in the pilot study. For statistical analyses, the mean scores of the participants in each group (L1 Chinese and L1 Malay) were recorded and analysed using the same test measures such as ANOVA, pairwise t-test, Scheffé post hoc test and repeated measures ANOVA (Creswell, 2012, p. 325). Descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted using the SPSS version 23.

4.1 Participants

A total of 193 adult ESL learners involving 77 L1 Chinese speakers and 116 L1 Malay speakers from three teachers' training institutes in Terengganu, Kuala Lumpur and Seremban, Malaysia were recruited for the study. The learners' levels of proficiency were determined by the standardised Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)(Council of Europe, 2001) using the Oxford Online Placement Test (OOPT). The OOPT was carried out last online after the forced-choice written elicited production task (refer to examples in Appendix 1) and picture-based comprehension task (Ionin et al., 2012) (refer to examples in Appendix 2) were completed by the participants on different occasions.

4.2 Instruments

The picture-based comprehension and forced-choice elicited production tasks taken from Ionin, Baek, Kim, Ko, and Wexler (2012) were carried out to determine the ESL learners' interpretation of uniqueness. The focus of this part of the study was to determine whether L2 learners' transfer their perception of uniqueness from the demonstrative *itu* or *nei* 'that' to interpret the definite Noun Phrase (NP) in the targeted sentence.

The forced-choice elicited production task had 32 items, divided into eight categories of four items each. Each item consisted of a short story of four or five sentences. Participants read a series of mini stories and filled in the blank in one of the sentences (but not the last sentence) in each story with a choice of four determiners, *the*, *that*, *a*, or *one*. They were given two tasks to be fulfilled. Firstly, they were asked to choose any of the four answers given to fill in the blank which they deemed appropriate. Only three out of the eight test categories, shown in Appendix 2, where the marked singular NP was used anaphorically, were the focus of this study.

The picture-based comprehension task was a modification consisting of 40 items, divided into 10 conditions of four items each (refer to Appendix 1). In the comprehension task, the participants read the three level of instructions given, viewed pictures of objects and drew arithmetical shapes on the objects as directed.

5. Findings and Discussion

Studies have shown that positive L1 transfer assists L2 learners whose L1s are with articles (for example L1 Spanish and L1 Greek) in their acquisition of English articles. This study hypothesized that the ESL learners from article-less L1s such as Mandarin Chinese and Malay language might interpret English definites as having the meaning of demonstratives. Since Mandarin and Malay do not have articles, there is a high possibility that the learners transfer the semantic meanings of demonstratives from their L1s and associate them to definites in a process known as lexical transfer (Ionin et al., 2012, p. 71; Kim & Lakshmanan, 2009, p. 95; Robertson, 2000, p. 169). The L1 Chinese and L1 Malay L2 learners are expected to equate *nei* or *itu* 'that' to *that* or *the* or both *that* and *the*. The predictions for L1 transfer are formulated due to the absence of articles in Mandarin Chinese and Malay as compared to the English language facts.

5.1 Computation of 'the' vs 'that'

To compare the effect of *the* choices in the three categories on the ESL groups, the percentage of *the* choices out of all *the* + *that* choices for each of the three test categories was conducted. The three groups' performance on each category was checked if it was significantly different from chance using one-way ANOVA. It is predicted that if the respondents could not differentiate between *the* and *that*, they should choose each one about 50% of the time (Ionin, Baek, Kim, Ko, & Wexler, 2012; p.82).

Figures 1, 2 and 3 report the percentages of the frequency each determiner form (*a*, *one*, *the* or *that*) was selected as the 'best choice' for the blank in the short stories; the results are divided by category, and by proficiency level of the L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners.

The advanced group of L1 Chinese ESL learners showed the greatest resemblance with the advanced group of L1 Malay learners for their choice of *the* in the ‘Unique and non-salient’ category 88.7% and 90.7% respectively (refer Figure 2). The advanced L1 Chinese clinched 82.3% of *the* choice in the ‘Unique and salient’ category (refer Figure 1) and 81.5% of *that* in the ‘Non-unique’ category (refer Figure 3). As for their Malay counterparts, the advanced L1 Malay ESL learners rated *the* at 76.4% of the time in the ‘Unique and salient’ category and a 75% acceptance rate for *that* in the ‘Non-unique’ category.

The intermediate L1 Chinese learners lagged closely behind the intermediate L1 Malay learners with slightly lower percentages (62.1% and 75%) for *the* choices in both the ‘Unique’ categories and *that* in the ‘Non-unique’ category (79.6%). At the same time, *the* was also the strongly preferred response by the intermediate Malay learners, with *the* chosen more than 70% of the time in two ‘Unique’ categories as compared to *that* which was preferred in the ‘Non-unique’ category at 59.7%.

On the contrary, the elementary Chinese learners registered 65.6%, which is 3.5% higher than the intermediate group in the ‘Unique and salient’ category but registered the lowest percentages in *the* choices (65.6%) for the ‘Unique and non-salient’ category and *that* (64.6%) for the ‘Non-unique’ category. Meanwhile the elementary Malay learners rated *the* as acceptable at 50.9% and 47.2% of the time in the ‘Unique’ categories and chose *that* 45.4% of the time which is 2.8% more than *the* (42.6%) in the ‘Non-unique’ category.

The highest percentages of *the* choice were found in the ‘Unique and non-salient’ category. The percentages of *the* choice increased parallel to the proficiency level of the L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners for the two ‘Unique’ categories. Conversely, the lowest percentages of *the* choice are found in the ‘Non-unique’ category among the advanced L1 Chinese and Malay ESL learners, and also the intermediate L1 Chinese learners. The advanced learners from both L1 groups also chose *the* more than 90% of the time in both the ‘Unique’ categories. Even the elementary groups of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners registered higher percentages in the use of *the* in both ‘Unique’ categories as compared to *that* usage in the ‘Non-unique’ category. The elementary Malay learners used *the* and *that* interchangeably about 50% of the time in this category. Based on FH, the elementary groups showed traces of fluctuating until sufficient input lead to the correct parameters which enable them to differentiate the use of *the* and *that*.

In the production task, the advanced and intermediate learners from both ESL groups were fairly target-like in their performance, preferring *the* for the ‘Unique and salient’ and ‘Unique and non-salient’ categories as well as *that* for the ‘Non-unique’ category. The advanced L1 Malay and L1 Chinese groups seemed to perform near native-like in the Non-unique category, choosing *that* more than *the* whereby in this category *that* should be preferred over *the*.

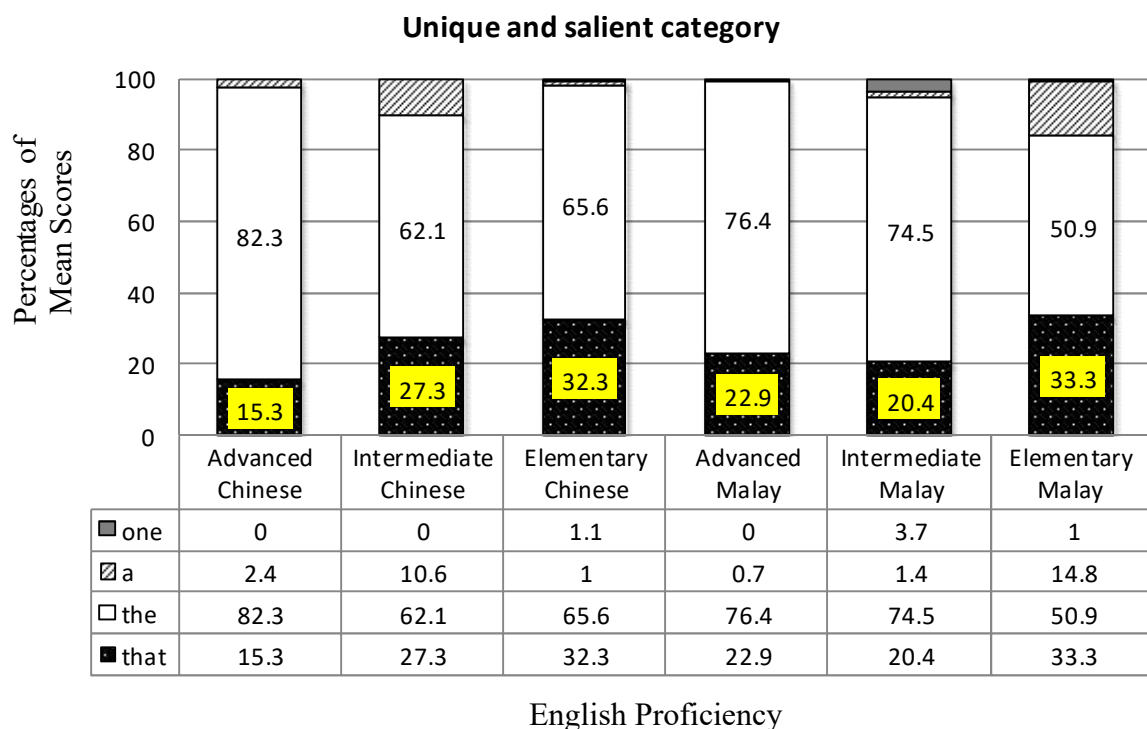


Figure 1. Proportion of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners' best choice of determiner form (that, the, a, one) in the 'Unique and salient' category

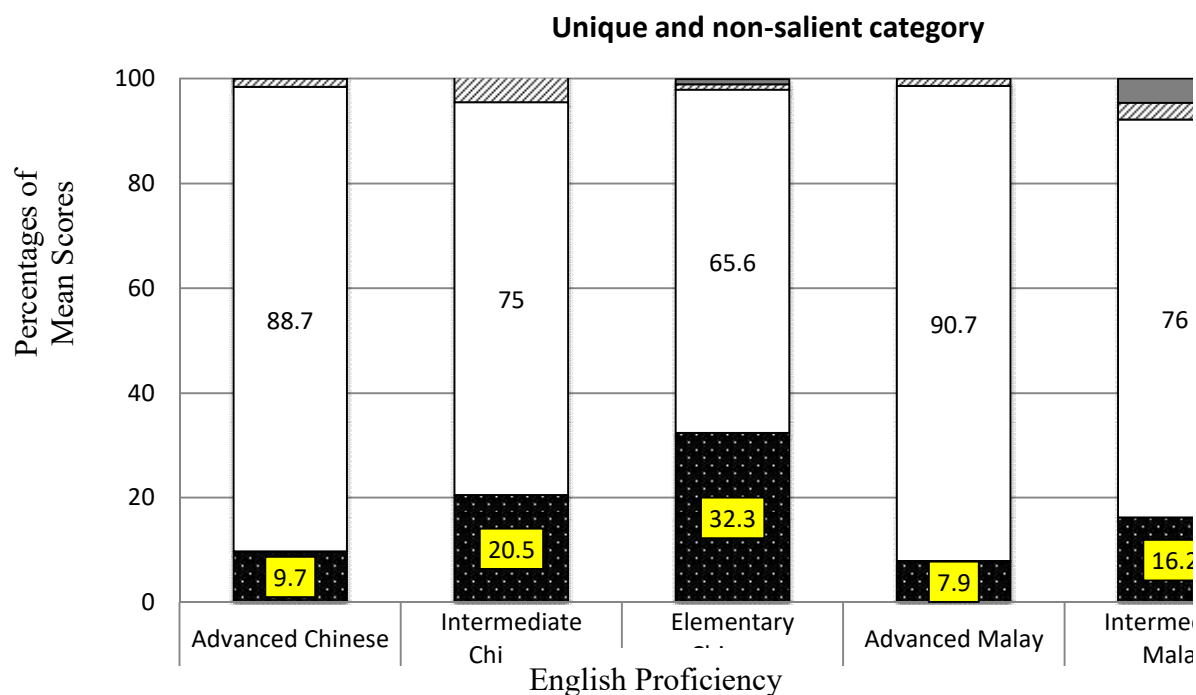


Figure 2. Proportion of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners' best choice of determiner form (that, the, a, one) in 'Unique and non-salient' category

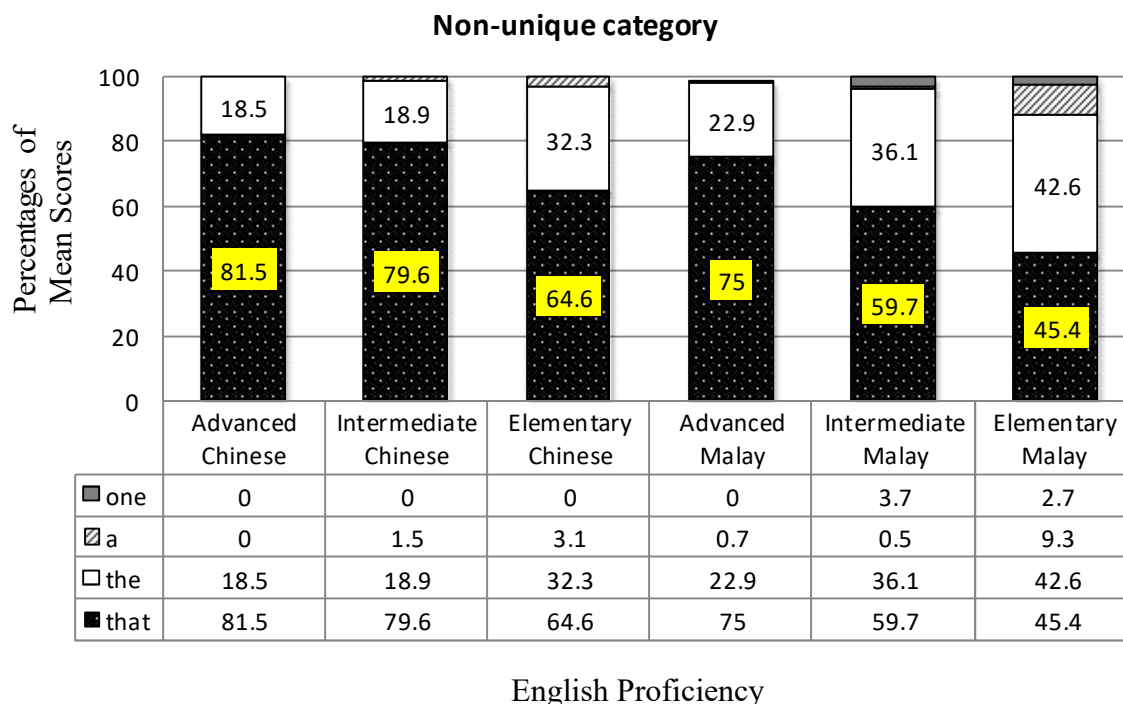


Figure 3. Proportion of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners’ best choice of determiner form (that, the, a, one) for ‘Non-unique’ category

By comparing the ratio of *the* out of all *the* + *that* choices, only the elementary L1 Malay learners performed significantly different from the advanced group in the ‘Unique and salient’ category. For the ‘Unique and non-salient’ category, significant differences were registered by both elementary groups of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners with the native speakers. In fact, the elementary groups from both L1s showed preference for *the* over *that* in the ‘Unique non-salient’ category although native speakers exhibited more resilient article choice. The elementary groups had not fully acquired the fact that *the* requires uniqueness in the discourse. However, all the ESL learners’ performance did not differ significantly in the ‘Non-unique’ category to show ESL learners’ distinct mastery on the use of demonstrative *that*.

This shows that ‘Non-unique’ category is not a marked context for the ESL learners as they could use *that* more accurately in this category as compared to *the* uses in the two ‘Unique’ categories. When uniqueness was established in the discourse, L1 Chinese and L1 Malay learners did not use *the* and *that* as entirely compatible as they displayed an inclination to choose *the* over *that*, similar to the native speakers. However, in the ‘Non-unique’ category, the elementary Malay ESL group used *the* and *that* interchangeably and hence failed to distinguish *the* from *that*. Based on the data in Tables 1 and 2, the predictions were largely supported by the L1 Chinese and L1 Malay learners. The two groups of ESL learners show very similar patterns in their use of *the* in the two ‘Unique’ categories and *that* ‘Non-unique’ category concerned despite the quantitative differences. Crucially, the L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners probably map *nei* and *itu* respectively onto both *the* and *that*.

5.2 Interpretation of Uniqueness and L1 transfer in Singular Conditions

Based on Wolter's (2003, p. 12) proposal of definites and demonstratives, it is compulsory for definite and demonstrative singular NPs to denote uniquely for the native speakers. For definites, uniqueness is computed relatively to the default situation. In this scenario, saliency is taken into account to decide the usage of articles or demonstratives. For L2 learners, there are possibly two ways of forming the discourse situation: the participant may take the entire situation to be the discourse situation or the participant may take just the immediate situation established in response to the first line. Turning to demonstratives, the relevant situation is the non-default situation, immediately salient situation.

The results of the three singular conditions of the L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners are shown in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. The advanced groups of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners chose mainly 'same' responses in the definite (88.3% and 88.9% respectively) and demonstrative (97.5% and 99.3% respectively) singular conditions. The advanced L2 learners seem to have established the default discourse situation in response to line 1 for both the definite and demonstrative conditions to compute uniqueness. Their preferences to act upon the 'same' responses for these two categories (88.3% and 97.5% respectively) were almost as strong as the native speakers. For the definite singular condition (refer to Table 1), the intermediate L1 Chinese learners showed essentially similar trait performances as the intermediate L1 Malay-speaking learners. The advanced Chinese learners showed the highest preference for the 'same' response at 88.3% while the elementary learners scored approximately 50% of 'same' (54.2%) and 'different' (45.8%) responses. However, the elementary learners chose 92.7% of 'same' responses in the demonstrative singular condition as compared to 86.2% scored by the intermediate learners.

Based on the results, the learners registered the 'same' object in line 2 as response to line 1 most of the time and did not seem to act upon any object randomly or by chance in the demonstrative singular condition. This shows that the learners are distinctly able to differentiate between the definite and demonstrative conditions, and are not adopting a presuppositional analysis of 'the' in the singular conditions.

Table 1. Mean percentages of L1 Chinese ESL Learners' responses to line 2 in singular conditions

Condition	definite singular 'the'			demonstrative singular 'that'			indefinite singular 'a'		
	Ele	Int	Adv	Ele	Int	Adv	Ele	Int	Adv
% ALL response	0	0	0	1	0	.8	0	0	0
%SAME response	54.2	73.3	88.3	92.7	86.2	97.5	1	4.3	1.7
% DIFFERENT response	45.8	26.7	11.7	6.3	13.8	1.7	99	95.7	98.3

Table 2. Mean percentages of L1 Malay ESL Learners' responses to line 2 in singular conditions

Condition	definite singular 'the'			demonstrative singular 'that'			indefinite singular 'a'		
	Ele	Int	Adv	Ele	Int	Adv	Ele	Int	Adv
% ALL response	2.8	.5	0	1.9	0	0	.9	0	.7
%SAME response	41.7	74.1	88.9	68.5	93.1	99.3	20.4	5.1	7.6
%DIFFERENT response	55.6	25.5	11.1	29.6	6.9	.7	78.7	94.9	91.7

The results for the three singular conditions of the L1 Malay ESL learners are given in Table 2. Similar patterns of responses are distinctly visible between the two groups of ESL learners. The results for the indefinite singular condition show higher percentages in the 'different' response as compared to the 'same' response for the second line in response to the first line for the three groups of proficiency of both sets of ESL learners indicating that the learners do pay attention to the form of determiner used and answers are not chosen randomly.

The L1 intermediate and advanced Malay learners' performance in the definite and demonstrative singular categories resembled the L1 Chinese learners'. The advanced and intermediate Malay learners always registered the 'same' responses in the definite and demonstrative singular conditions similar to their Chinese counterparts which are acceptable and correct based on the native speakers' responses. As for the elementary Chinese learners, they showed an almost equal preference for 'same' and 'different' responses when uniqueness was recognized in the definite discourse. On the other hand, in the demonstrative condition, the elementary Chinese group exhibited a quite high preference (92.7%) for 'same' responses only, even higher than the intermediate Chinese group.

6. Conclusion

Figures 1, 2 and 3 show similar preferences across groups in the production task: the two 'Unique' categories registered highest frequency use of *the* while *that* was most favoured for the 'Non-unique' category among the six groups of ESL learners. Results of the advanced L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners were quite similar and target-like on all the three categories. The results show that the advanced and intermediate Malay learners were target-like in their performance and they exhibited differentiation between the definite and demonstrative singular conditions especially the advanced group. Both the elementary Chinese learners and the elementary Malay learners portrayed fluctuation patterns in the interpretation of *the* in the definite condition. All the five groups of ESL learners were able to differentiate between the uses of *the* and *that*. Based on the results, the elementary L1 Malay ESL learners used *the* and *that* interchangeably in the 'Non-unique' category. Hence, they seemed to treat definite and demonstrative descriptions similarly. Coming back to the predictions, the results showed that majority of the Malay learners treated *the* and *that* differently as definites and demonstratives. In addition, the higher accuracy rates recorded in the 'Non-unique' category for both advanced Chinese and Malay groups show that there is a possibility of L1 transfer lexically that assists the ESL learners in their interpretations of *the*

and *that*.

In the comprehension task, both advanced groups of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners treated the definite and demonstrative singular as denoting uniquely. However, they did not act upon ‘all’ in the three singular conditions (the highest percentage for the ‘all’ response was 2.8% by the elementary L1 Malay group). This reflects the learners’ ability to distinguish uniqueness based on the discourse given.

The advanced L1 Chinese and L1 Malay speakers seemed to interpret the definite and demonstrative singular NPs similarly as unique, just-mentioned, salient referents in the discourse. On the contrary, the elementary learners viewed definite and demonstrative as immediately salient entities consistent with the proposal by Ionin, Baek, Kim, Ko and Wexler (2012). Likewise, the advanced learners seemed to treat *the* in the definite condition and *that* in the demonstrative condition quite similarly as the referent is treated as unique in the immediate salient situation based on their highest rates of ‘same’ responses in both singular conditions which were even higher than the native speakers. On the other hand, the elementary Chinese group did not interpret *the* and *that* as completely interchangeable in the definite singular condition. The results of the elementary Chinese learners are more compatible with the possibility that *that* is mapped on to *nei* as a demonstrative. However, they have not yet acquired the fact that *the* here requires uniqueness with regard to the situation established in response to line 1 in the definite singular discourse. Although the intermediate Chinese learners acted upon the ‘same’ responses at a lower rate (86.2%) compared to the advanced and elementary groups, their performance is considered as accurate as the accuracy rate is above 75%. There might be some conflict and confusion among the intermediate Chinese learners in interpreting *that* as *nei*, indicating signs of fluctuation. The high percentages of ‘same’ responses registered by the intermediate and advanced Chinese and Malay learners in the definite and demonstrative conditions indicate a possibility that *nei* or *itu* ‘that’ are mapped on to *the* and *that* by the L1 Malay and L1 Chinese ESL learners. Judging by the high percentages of ‘different’ responses in the indefinite contexts for all the Chinese learners of three proficiency levels, it seems that the numeral *yi* ‘one’ in Mandarin Chinese is fully grammaticalized into the indefinite article, *a* whereas the numeral *satu, se* ‘one’ in Malay is partially grammaticalized into the indefinite article *a*.

In conclusion, it is found that the results in the singular conditions do not tease apart the definite analysis *the* from the demonstrative analysis *that* because both analyses predict actions on the ‘same’ object. It is recommended that L2 learners’ performance on the plural conditions has to be included to further determine the L2 learners’ interpretation of *the* and *those*.

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Appendix 1. Forced-choice written elicited production task (Ionin et al., 2012)

There are altogether 32 questions. Half of the items (sixteen items) comprised of the definite/demonstrative descriptions while the other half of the items targeted indefinite descriptions. In the test instruments, all the items were blocked and randomised. Only singular NPs were included in the test.

1. Bill is really sick. He has been coughing and sneezing for a long time. He insists that he'll get better soon, as long as he gets enough rest. But he's been sick for two weeks and he isn't getting any better. So his sister tells him, "Go see ___ doctor!"

For each of the four options, please indicate whether it is appropriate in the blank above:

	Yes	No
the		
that		
a		
one		

Which word is the best option for the blank?

- the
- that
- a
- one

a. ‘Unique and salient’ category: both ‘*the*’ and ‘*that*’ possible, but ‘*the*’ preferred

Rob was really hungry when he came home. He looked in his fridge, and the only thing he found in there was a rather old sandwich. Still, Rob was really hungry, so he ate ____ **sandwich**. It didn’t taste too good.

b. ‘Unique and non-salient’ category: ‘*the*’ preferred over ‘*that*’

Julian loves sweets. He went to a bakery this morning, and bought a cake and a box of cookies. Then he went home and made some tea. Julian sat down with his tea, and ate ____ **cake**. He finished it all, to the last crumb!

c. ‘Non-unique’ category: ‘*that*’ preferred over ‘*the*’

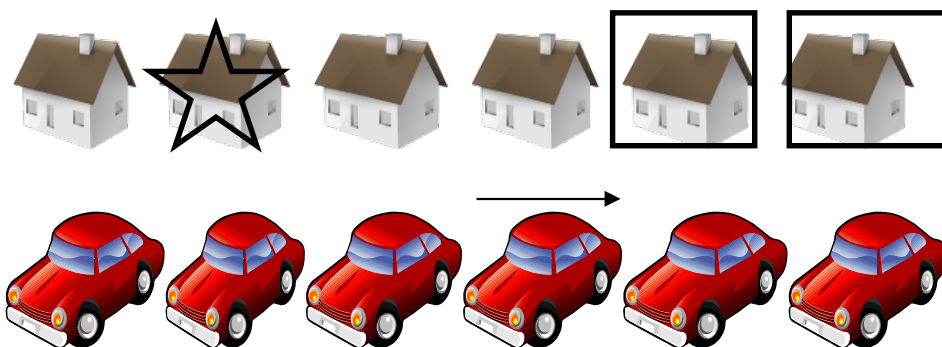
Nora bought two sandwiches for lunch. Nora is a vegetarian. One of the sandwiches turned out to have meat in it, so Nora didn’t want to eat it. The other sandwich had just vegetables in it. So Nora finished ____ **sandwich**. But she was still a bit hungry afterwards.

Appendix 2. Picture-based comprehension task (Ionin et al., 2012)

The task had 40 items, divided into 10 conditions of four items each. The focus of this part of the study was only three singular conditions, exemplified in (b-d). An illustration of how the task given is supposedly carried out is shown in (a).

(a) Here are six houses and six cars.

1. Please draw **a star** on one house.
2. Now, please draw **an arrow** above one car.
3. Now, please draw squares around two houses.



(b) Definite singular condition:

Here are six cups and six houses.

1. Please draw a circle around **one cup**.
2. Now, please draw an arrow above **the cup**.
3. Now, please draw a square around one house.



(c) Demonstrative singular condition:

Here are six chairs and six pencils.

1. Please draw a line above **one pencil**.
2. Now, please draw a star on **that pencil**.
3. Now, please draw a triangle around one chair.



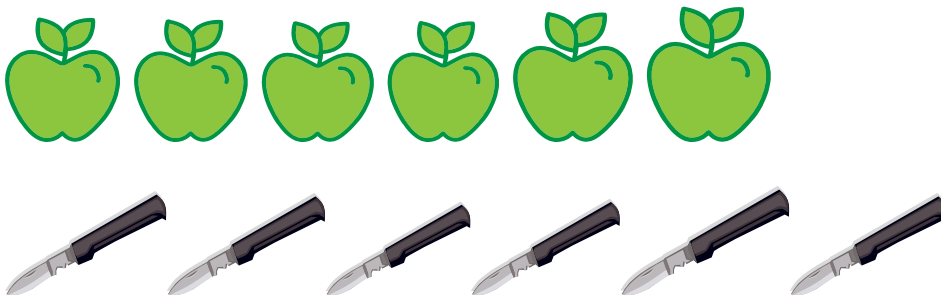
(d) Indefinite singular condition:

Here are six apples and six knives.

Please draw a square around **one knife**.

Now, please draw a line above **a knife**.

Now, please draw arrows below three apples.



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