

A Longitudinal Analysis of the Use of the Article System by Spanish Learners of English at University Level: Main Findings

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Abstract

Students at an advanced level of English are supposed to master some aspects of the foreign language, for example, the article system. This is even more the case when they have an article system in their L1. However, problems concerning the expression of definiteness and specific or generic reference by means of the central articles, i.e. *the*, *a/n* and \emptyset , are found to be one of the main problematic areas for Spanish first-year students doing a degree in English Studies (Valero Garcés, 1997: 75; Díez Bedmar, 2005).

Following a previous study (Díez Bedmar and Papp, forthcoming), this piece of research analyses the development of the usage of the central articles by a group of Spanish University students of English during their four-year degree. In order to do so, Bickerton's (1981) semantic wheel for noun phrase reference was applied to a 200,268-word *UCLEE*-error tagged learner corpus. This corpus consists of the essays that thirteen Spanish learners of English wrote for their Literature courses (using the academic variety), and courses on the usage of English (using the non-academic variety), along their four-year degree at the University of Jaen (Spain).

Both the quantitative and the posterior qualitative analysis of the findings, based on the binary features [\pm specific reference], [\pm hearer knowledge], cast light on the specific problems that these students have as they receive more input in the foreign language and understand the differences between the English and Spanish article systems. Furthermore, the analysis of the two varieties in the learner corpus (academic and non-academic) makes it possible to check if the development of the usage of the article system in both varieties is similar or not.

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