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Avoidance Strategy Usage of English Articles*

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This study examines whether English users at a U.S. university apply avoidance strategy in using English articles. All participants had learned English for at least 10 years and had used English for at least 15 years at the time of the data collection, so they made an ideal sample to examine the differences between native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English, in terms of avoidance strategy usage of English articles. To examine whether non-native speakers avoid using a certain feature when unsure of the correct usage, the mean differences of each article usage between NS and NNS groups were calculated and compared. On the basis of results showing that there are no statistically significant differences in terms of article usage between the groups, it is concluded that the highly advanced level participants did not use avoidance strategy in English articles, and that the type of English article and the task type did not affect learners' avoidance strategy usage. This research is expected to provide teachers and researchers with information about highly advanced level L2 language speakers' usage patterns with regards to avoidance strategy.

[English articles/avoidance/fossilization]

I. INTRODUCTION

Language learners tend not to use a certain grammatical structure when they are unsure of its appropriate usage. In Schachter's (1974) study, Chinese and Japanese participants made fewer errors on relative clause production than Persian and Arabic learners did because they used the structure less frequently and very cautiously. Therefore, Schachter concluded that it was hard to claim that Chinese and Japanese participants had learned the grammatical structures better than the other groups. Even though language learners

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produce fewer errors, language teachers need to encourage students not to use the strategy because consistent usage of avoidance strategy can hinder language learning and cause fossilization.

As concerns grammatical structures, English articles are often mentioned as an area for avoidance strategy usage, for numerous reasons. Han (2004) noted that English articles were one of the most complex and difficult grammatical structures to learn. Pica (1985) also argued that their form-function relationship was not transparent. Geranpayeh (2000) studied Persian learners' acquisition of the English article system; even advanced learners in his study made errors on articles, so he claimed that the English article system was a subject of fossilization and that avoidance strategy may cause fossilization or deepen fossilization. To find out whether participants used avoidance strategy in using articles, this research focused on analyzing the participants' patterns of English article usage in different types of tasks, online forums and their term papers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

When a language learner thinks that a target language feature is difficult to comprehend or to produce, they tend to avoid using it. To explain the avoidance phenomenon, contrastive analysis has blamed structural differences or similarities between L1 and L2 (Kleinmann, 1977; Liao & Fukuya, 2004; Schachter, 1974). Other factors that are claimed to affect avoidance usage are: an interaction of linguistic and psychological variables, pragmatic differences between L1 and L2, or L2 complexity (Kleinmann, 1977; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Li, 1996; Liao & Fukuya, 2004; You, 2003).

When Liao and Fukuya (2004) studied Chinese learners' avoidance of English phrasal verb production, they found that the participants' proficiency level, the phrasal verb type and the task type affected their avoidance strategy usage. Among words or structures learners tend to avoid, English articles were chosen to examine the phenomenon as they were considered one of the most difficult features to learn due to innate complexity. English articles are often defined as an unattainable grammatical structure in the morpheme acquisition order (Han, 2004). The definite article and the indefinite article are the most frequent words in English, but teaching and learning them is not so simple (Butler, 2002). Han (2004, p.138) remarks that "certain linguistic items do not lend themselves to a formal analysis, and hence are difficult for teachers to describe and for learners to internalize, typically they have multiple form-function mappings, having one form perform multiple functions or having one function performed by multiple synonymous forms."

Huebner (1983, 1985) found that low level language learners overused the definite article. His participants, whose native languages did not have an article system, learned

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how to appropriately use the indefinite article slower than the other participants, whose native language had the system. The participants learned usage of the definite article faster than they learned usage of the indefinite article, and their error frequencies were different depending on task type. In Master's (1997) study, no-article groups tended not to use the indefinite article until they were sure of the usage, which could increase the learning time and intensify fossilization.

English articles are one of the most susceptible candidates for discrepancy theory (Burns & Soja, 2000). In distributional theories, children can learn syntactic categories such as French gender contrasts or semantically arbitrary distinction without semantic information by checking references first to decide noun types. On the other hand, according to semantic theories, children learn a new syntactic category using semantic information. In cases of NP-type nouns such as 'church', 'school', or 'camp', a determiner decides their meanings. For example, there are meaning differences between "I go to school" and "I go to the school." Children have to decide meaning first and then whether to add a determiner or not. Burns and Soja (2000) claimed that children did not have a mapping problem due to the discrepancy between a semantic category and a syntactic category, but adult learners' inaccessibility to this mapping intuition caused errors and they tended to use avoidance strategy.

VanPatten (1996) agreed with the claim that lack of perceptual saliency could cause errors, and Skehan (1998) also claimed that morphology that did not have explicit semantic meanings was a candidate for fossilization; morphological features that have low communicative values can become pidginized or fossilized. Skehan's claim further extended to a hypothesis that communication-only based instruction could deepen errors with these kinds of morphological features. Thus, linguistic complexity and lack of perceptual saliency causes learners' avoidance tendency (Long, 2003: Nakuma, 1998), which can make language learners' interlanguage enter into long-term stabilization or fossilization.

Among many hypotheses on the reasons for fossilization, Selinker (1972) explains the reasons with five central processes. Three reasons which are related to the current research topic are as follows. The first reason concerns learners' language learning strategies. Learners, no matter how proficient, tend to simplify complex target language systems such as articles, plural forms, or past tense forms, and tend to avoid using them. In Kharma's (1981) study, the non-native speakers of English (NNS, hereafter) participants' level of syntactic structure complexity was similar to native speakers'; however, even the advanced level learners tended to avoid using the indefinite article.

The second reason concerns usage of communication strategies. Due to learners' experience with impatient interlocutors, they tend to focus more on delivering a meaning rather than properly using articles or plurals which do not affect the meaning exchanges.

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The third reason is their overgeneralization of target language rules or semantic features. According to this theory, language learners tend to overuse a grammatical structure by applying a regular rule to an irregular case or an unnecessary situation. For example, learners apply the regular past tense morpheme, the suffix –ed, to irregular verbs. Similarly, learners use one of the English articles for a situation where an article is not required. As seen in Huebner's (1983, 1985) study, when low level language learners overgeneralized usage of the definite article, they incorrectly overused it. Overgeneralization, as well as avoidance, can hinder language learning. In this study, usage of English articles is analyzed to see whether the participants avoided using them or overgeneralized the rules.

Participants in Huebner's (1983, 1985), Kharma's (1981), Mizuno's (1985) and Suh's (2007) studies showed different error frequencies depending on task type. Warschauer (1996) claims that an online discussion forum is more like an oral conversation. Therefore, in the present study, the participants' formal academic papers were analyzed to check whether NNS participants used the avoidance strategy in a formal writing setting, i.e. term papers, as well as in an informal writing setting, i.e. an online discussion forum.

Once learners' interlanguage becomes fossilized, Han (2004) and Selinker (1972) claimed that learners could not change the plateau status, despite their efforts, strong will to change or eager motivation to learn. External factors such as numerous opportunities or sufficient input would not help them to make progress either. As avoidance strategy is considered one of the learning strategies which can cause or intensify fossilization, information from research on avoidance strategy can help teachers and researchers to prevent language learners from using the strategy in the future. The present study focuses on the following two research questions:

1. Do the participants avoid using the English articles?

NNSs commonly avoid certain features when they are unsure of grammar or vocabulary usage. In this study, the means of the definite article and the indefinite article are compared in order to examine whether NNS participants avoided using the articles. Each participant had studied and used English for at least 15 years at the time of the data collection, so it is assumed that their language is at a static and native-like level, and retains fossilized features if they have any.

2. Does the type of task affect participants' article usage?

Many researchers (Huebner, 1983, 1985; Kharma, 1981; and Mizuno, 1985) have claimed that language learners' article usage can be different depending on task type, with Liao and Fukuya (2004) claiming that task type affected the avoidance phenomenon. It is hypothesized that NNS use English articles differently in an informal setting compared to a formal setting, so their article usage in term papers is compared to that in online discussion

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forums.

III. METHOD

1. Participants

Four native speakers of English (NS, hereafter) and twelve advanced level NNS graduate students at a U.S. university participated in this research. All twelve NNS participants had studied English grammar or conversation for at least ten years, ranging from 10 to 20 years, in their home countries; mostly through grammar-based or lecture-based instruction. One Thai and one Turk participated in this study, alongside three Korean and seven Chinese participants. Their average TOEFL score (PBT) was 623, ranging from 570 to 655, out of 677 when they first applied to an American university to pursue a graduate degree. They had spent an average of 54 months in the United States, ranging from 33 to 96 months, pursuing a graduate degree in language education at the time of the data collection.

They attended two graduate courses in a row that required weekly face-to-face class participation in addition to online discussion. The researcher took both courses as a student and every student in the courses could access the online forum site. Their English usage in online discussion forums was observed for two semesters, sixteen weeks per semester, while the researcher participated in the courses and the data, written forum discussion, was collected with the participants' consent. The current study focuses on analyzing their English article usage in online forums and their academic term papers in order to find a possibility of avoidance strategy usage, so the mean frequency of English articles were calculated and compared.

Their writing was almost flawless in terms of grammatical error frequency, and their lexical and syntactic complexity was similar to native speaker peers. Hinkel (2003) claimed that even highly advanced NNS college students who finished their high schools in the United States and did not make grammatical mistakes any more, used simple syntactic and lexical forms which hindered their successful academic achievement. They often used simple syntactic and lexical features such as *be*-copula, *it*-cleft, or existential *there* more than the NS did. To examine the current NNS participants' syntactic and lexical simplicity, these features were counted and then compared with that of the NS group.

2. Data Collection

In this study, frequencies of the articles in different types of tasks, online writing and

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formal academic writing, were compared in order to check whether the participants showed different usage patterns for avoidance strategy depending on task type like Huebner's (1983, 1985) did. After observing online discussion forums, the data was analyzed for common usage patterns among NNS participants. The same instructor taught both of the courses, whose topics were about language education, and used the same hybrid class structure which required participants to write their opinions on assigned readings in a class online forum site before weekly face-to-face meetings. Students assumed that the other classmates read the assigned articles as they did, so they barely summarized the readings. Instead, they shared their opinions about key points or an argumentative issue in the articles. Everyone in each course could access the online discussion forum site, read others' postings and reply to their classmates. As the participants were asked to give the researcher permission for the data collection after both of the courses had ended, they could not consciously modify their usual English article usage patterns for this study.

3. Procedures

To examine whether there was a difference between NS and NNS in terms of article usage, their online forum postings were sorted according to week and participant. After the number of definite articles and indefinite articles were counted using a computerized frequency counting software, a concordance program, the number of times the English articles were used per number of words in a weekly posting was calculated. When the indefinite article was a part of idioms such as 'a lot of,' 'a little,' 'a couple of,' 'for a while' or other idiomatic expressions, they were not counted in the total number of the indefinite article. The elimination of idiomatic expressions in the frequency for indefinite articles is expected to produce more accurate results.

After observing the participants' article usage in Fall of 2005 and in Spring of 2006 and collecting their term papers after both courses were ended, the researcher and another NS coder judged whether or not their article usage in obligatory contexts were correct. Their error percentages were reported in Lee (2008), and in this study, the same data were analyzed to examine the mean differences of article usage between NS and NNS, and between online forums and term papers to explore the possibility of avoidance strategy. The differences were compared by non-parametric statistical hypothesis tests, the Wilcoxon rank-sum test and the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. These tests, which have fewer assumptions about the normal distribution of variables, were used due to the small number of the participants. Instead of providing only a comparison of mean differences between the groups and descriptive statistics, the non-parametric statistical tests, were chosen to provide more meaningful results.

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IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Avoidance Strategy

Before exploring the participants' avoidance strategy, NNS's simple syntactic feature usage such as *be*-copula, *it*-cleft, or existential *there* (Hinkel, 2003) was examined to judge the participants' English proficiency levels. The results showing that mean differences of the features between NS and NNS are as follows:

TABLE 1

Ranks of Wilcoxon Rank-Sum on Syntactic Features

Category	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
be-copula	NS	4	13.25	53.00
	NNS	12	6.92	83.00
it-cleft	NS	4	9.75	39.00
	NNS	12	8.08	97.00
existential *there*	NS	4	7.75	31.00
	NNS	12	8.75	105.00

TABLE 2

Test Statistics of Syntactic Features between NS and NNS

	be-copula	*it*-cleft	existential *there*
Mann-Whitney U	5.000	19.000	21.000
Wilcoxon W	83.000	97.000	31.000
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.021*	.544	.716

*p<.05, two-tailed

As seen in tables 1 and 2, there is a syntactic structural complexity difference between NS and NNS in terms of *be*-copula usage, but there are no statistically significant differences for the usage of *it*-cleft and existential *there*. According to Hinkel (2003), NNS, including highly advanced English users, generally use *be*-copula, *it*-cleft and existential *there* more than NS do; however, the NS participants in this study used *be*-copula more than the NNS participants, resulting in a statistically significant difference. Overall, it is proved that the NNS participants did not use simple syntactic and lexical features, either in online forums or in the term papers, and that the NNS participants' English proficiency is almost native-like. When the researcher and the other NS coder examined the online forums, the average error percentage for the definite article usage was 4.82%, the average error percentage for the indefinite article usage was 10.17%, and the average error percentage for the zero article usage was 1.55% as reported in Lee (2008). The most errors occurred when they incorrectly used the zero article instead of the indefinite article, which

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required a further analysis to explore the possibility of avoidance strategy usage of the indefinite article.

To explore the possibility of a continuous usage difference throughout the semester, the participants' online forum (OF) was analyzed weekly. Weekly analysis was also chosen to see whether, if fossilization exists, there was any improvement or change. The means for the indefinite article usage between the groups were consistently different from each other; the means from the NS group are higher than those of the NNS group, except weeks 5 and 8. However, the differences between the groups are not statistically significant at .05 level except week 2 as seen in tables 3 and 4.

TABLE 3

Descriptive Statistics and Wilcoxon Ranks on Indefinite Article Usage in OF

Week	Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Week 2	NS	4	2.87	.10	13.50	54.00
	NNS	12	1.95	.75	6.83	82.00
Week 3	NS	4	3.42	.99	11.50	46.00
	NNS	12	2.59	.71	7.50	90.00
Week 4	NS	4	1.81	1.01	9.00	36.00
	NNS	12	1.66	.53	8.33	100.00
Week 5	NS	4	2.20	.61	8.00	32.00
	NNS	12	2.28	1.19	8.67	104.00
Week 6	NS	4	2.46	.87	9.50	38.00
	NNS	12	2.03	1.20	7.45	82.00
Week 7	NS	4	2.26	.83	10.75	43.00
	NNS	12	1.74	.75	7.75	93.00
Week 8	NS	4	1.86	.62	6.67	20.00
	NNS	12	2.15	.85	8.33	100.00
Week 9	NS	4	1.93	.39	9.33	28.00
	NNS	12	1.67	.55	7.00	77.00

TABLE 4

Test Statistics of the Indefinite Article Weekly Usage in OF

	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	W8	W9
M-W U	4.00	12.00	22.00	22.00	16.00	15.00	14.00	11.00
Wil. W	82.00	90.00	100.00	32.00	82.00	93.00	20.00	77.00
A Sig.	.015*	.146	.808	.808	.433	.275	.564	.392

*p<.05, two-tailed

After comparing usage of the indefinite article per week, all weekly postings were added altogether and sorted to calculate the total mean frequency for the indefinite article. The results in tables 5 and 6 show that the mean differences between the groups are not statistically significant at .05 level either. The NS group used the indefinite article more frequently in only two weeks, as seen in tables 3 and 4, and there is no statistically

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significant mean difference between NS and NNS in terms of indefinite article usage in the integrated online forums seen in tables 5 and 6.

TABLE 5

Ranks of Wilcoxon Rank-Sum on Indefinite Article Usage in Integrated OF

Category	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Week Total 'a'	NS	4	11.50	46.00
	NNS	12	7.50	90.00

TABLE 6

Test Statistics of the Indefinite Article in Integrated OF

	Week Total 'a'
Mann-Whitney U	12.000
Wilcoxon W	90.000
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.146

$p<.05$, two-tailed

The means for definite article usage between the groups were also analyzed weekly to explore the possibility of continuous usage difference or for changes if fossilization exists. The weekly means and test statistics of NNS's definite article usage and those of NS's are described in tables 7 and 8. Between weeks 2 and 6, the means from the NNS group are higher than those of the NS group and means from the NS group are higher than those of the NNS group between weeks 7 and 9. However, the mean differences between the groups are not statistically significant at .05 level.

TABLE 7

Descriptive Statistics and Wilcoxon Ranks on the Definite Article in OF

Week	Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Week 2	NS	4	5.84	1.55	8.75	35.00
	NNS	12	5.85	1.18	8.42	101.00
Week 3	NS	4	4.83	1.56	8.25	33.00
	NNS	12	4.96	1.27	8.58	103.00
Week 4	NS	4	4.56	.77	8.25	33.00
	NNS	12	5.30	2.34	8.58	103.00
Week 5	NS	4	4.60	1.64	7.25	29.00
	NNS	12	5.36	2.25	8.92	107.00
Week 6	NS	4	4.90	1.58	8.00	32.00
	NNS	12	5.56	2.81	8.00	88.00
Week 7	NS	4	5.76	1.74	10.75	43.00
	NNS	12	4.71	.87	7.75	93.00
Week 8	NS	4	4.21	.41	8.33	25.00
	NNS	12	4.05	1.23	7.92	95.00
Week 9	NS	4	6.66	1.52	8.00	24.00
	NNS	12	6.32	1.39	7.36	81.00

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TABLE 8

Test Statistics of the Definite Article Weekly Usage in Online Forum

	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	W8	W9
M-W U	23.00	23.00	23.00	19.00	22.00	15.00	17.00	15.00
Wil. W	101.00	33.00	33.00	29.00	88.00	93.00	95.00	81.00
A Sig.	.903	.903	.903	.544	1.00	.275	.885	.815

$p<.05$, two-tailed

After comparing means for definite article usage per week, the total mean frequency for the definite article was calculated by adding and sorting all weekly postings. The mean differences are not statistically significant at .05 level either. As seen in the tables 7 through 10, there is no statistically significant mean difference between the groups in terms of definite article usage.

TABLE 9

Ranks of Wilcoxon Rank-Sum on the Definite Article Usage in Integrated OF

Category	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Week Total 'the'	NS	4	7.75	31.00
	NNS	12	8.75	105.00

TABLE 10

Test Statistics of the Definite Article Usage in Integrated OF

	Week Total 'the'
Mann-Whitney U	21.000
Wilcoxon W	31.000
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.716

Huebner (1983, 1985) reported that his low level participants overused the definite article and Kharma's (1981) and Master's (1997) advanced level participants avoided using the indefinite article. The current NNS participants' overall means for definite article usage are higher than the NS participants, and the NNS's overall means for indefinite article usage are lower than the NS's. However, there is no statistically significant difference between the groups in the integrated online forums.

2. Mean Comparisons between the Tasks

To examine the differences for indefinite article usage and for definite article usage in term papers (TP) and in online discussion forums (OF), the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to compare the mean differences between the tasks in each group, while the Wilcoxon rank-sum test was used to compare mean differences in term papers between the groups.

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TABLE 11

Mean Differences between TP and OF in the NNS Group

		N[1]	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
'a': TP-OF	Negative Ranks	4	4.50	18.00
	Positive Ranks	5	5.40	27.00
'the': TP-OF	Negative Ranks	3	4.00	12.00
	Positive Ranks	6	5.50	33.00

TABLE 12

Test Statistics between TP and OF in the NNS Group

	'a': TP-OF	'the': TP-OF
Z	-.533	-1.244
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.594	.214

p<.05, two-tailed

The NNS's mean for the indefinite article in online forum (OF) is 2.05 and that in term papers (TP) is 2.16. The mean for the definite article in OF is 5.30 and that in TP is 5.99. The means in term papers for both articles are higher than those in online forums but tables 11 and 12 show that there are no statistically significant differences at .05 level in terms of English article usage in the NNS group. It is concluded that their article usage patterns in term papers and in online forums was similar; the task types did not affect NNS's article usage patterns.

TABLE 13

Mean Differences between TP and OF in the NS Group

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
a: TP-OF	Negative Ranks	3	2.67	8.00
	Positive Ranks	1	2.00	2.00
the: TP-OF	Negative Ranks	1	2.00	2.00
	Positive Ranks	3	2.67	8.00

TABLE 14

Test Statistics between TP and OF in the NS Group

	a: TP-OF	the: TP-OF
Z	-1.095	-1.095
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.273	.273

p<.05, two-tailed

[1] The numbers of NNS participants in online forums and in term papers are different because three participants did not send the researcher their term papers. Term papers and online forums of nine participants excluding the participants with the missing data are compared.

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The NS's mean for the indefinite article in online forum (OF) is 2.47 and that in term papers (TP) is 2.16. The mean for the definite article in OF is 5.13 and that in TP is 6.21. Interestingly enough, the NS participants differently used the definite article depending on task type as well. However, tables 13 and 14 show that there are no statistically significant differences at .05 level in terms of English article usage in the NS group. In summary, neither group in this research showed differing tendencies in using English articles depending on task type.

To examine whether there was a mean difference in term papers between the groups, the Wilcoxon rank-sum test was used. Tables 15 and 16 show the test results for the indefinite article usage and tables 17 and 18 show the results for the definite article usage between the groups.

TABLE 15

Ranks of Wilcoxon Rank-Sum on the Indefinite Article Usage in TP

Category	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
TP 'a'	NS	4	7.50	30.00
	NNS	12	6.78	61.00

TABLE 16

Test Statistics of the Indefinite Article Usage in TP

	TP 'a'
Mann-Whitney U	16.000
Wilcoxon W	61.000
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.758

p<.05, two-tailed

Their mean differences for the indefinite article usage in term papers are not statistically significant at .05 level as seen in tables 15 and 16. In term papers, indefinite article usage patterns from both groups are similar.

TABLE 17

Ranks of Wilcoxon Rank Sum on the Definite Article Usage in TP

Category	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
TP 'the'	NS	4	7.25	29.00
	NNS	12	6.89	62.00

TABLE 18

Test Statistics of the Definite Article Usage in TP

	TP 'the'
Mann-Whitney U	17.000
Wilcoxon W	62.000
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.877

p<.05, two-tailed

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The NNS's mean for definite article usage in term papers is 5.99 and that of the NS's is 6.21. The differences are not statistically significant at .05 level either as seen in tables 17 and 18. In summary, the mean differences for both articles between the groups are not statistically significant in either task. Therefore, it is concluded that NNS in this study did not overuse the definite article nor did they avoid using the indefinite article.

However, error analysis in the online forum shows that the NNS participants made indefinite article errors, 10.23 % in the first course and 9.28% in the second course (Lee, 2008), by not using any article or intentionally using the zero article when the indefinite article was required. They also made definite article errors, 5.41% in the first course and 4.24% in the second course, by not using any article or using the zero article. In conclusion, even though there is no statistically significant difference between the groups in terms of indefinite and definite article usage, the NNS participants' tendency not to use the articles needs to be further examined qualitatively.

3. Overgeneralization

Selinker (1972) suggests overgeneralization of target language as one of the reasons for fossilization. To examine whether a participant overgeneralized in using an article, each data was examined by hand. Three NNS participants, two Koreans and one Chinese, used the definite article much more than the other NNS and NS participants. Their means are the highest among the NNS participants. The mean for the definite article from the NS group in online forum (OF) is 5.13 and that in term papers (TP) is 6.21. These three participants' mean in OF is 6.4 and that in TP is 7.34. The mean differences between the three participants and the NS participants in OF are statistically significant at .05 level, whereas those in TP are not. Regardless of the statistically significant results in OF, the overuse tendency was limited to three participants and not to every NNS participant. Another interesting result is that their means for indefinite article usage are below the average even though their means for definite article usage are higher than the other participants. However, this tendency does not seem to be related to their English proficiency or their first language as their TOEFL score was higher than the average. These three participants showed both avoidance and over-generalization, but a different strategy is used depending on an article type.

Another three participants, two Chinese and one Turk, used the indefinite article more than the other participants both in TP and in OF. The mean differences between the three participants and the NS group in both tasks are not statistically significant, and their means are more similar than the other NNS. The NS's mean for the indefinite article usage in OF is 2.47 and that in TP is 2.16. The three participants' mean for the indefinite article in OF is 2.44 and that in TP is 2.74; these are higher than the other NNS participants. Again, the

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tendency was limited to three participants and not to every NNS participant, and their means for the definite article usage are similar to other NNS.

Through the comparison of overgeneralization, the NNS participants showed an interesting phenomenon. When some of them were identified as a participant with a higher mean score for an article, they used only one of the articles more instead of using both articles more than the other participants. Once they showed a tendency to use one article more than the other participants, the task type did not affect their usage tendency. It is concluded that learners used a different strategy depending on article type.

L1 did not affect mean differences among the NNS participants either; there is no statistically significant mean difference between the Korean group and NS, the Chinese group and NS, and Korean and Chinese. The avoidance strategy was not used, regardless of their L1, and the higher usage pattern for the definite article was found among three participants from two different countries: Korea and China.

In this study, the participants' article usage in two different types of writing was compared and it is concluded that the task type did not affect avoidance strategy. However, differences between writing and speaking, as indicated by interview data from the participants, which were not reported in this paper, suggest that there is a statistically significant difference in terms of article usage. One of the three interviewed participants barely used the definite article or the indefinite article when interviewed. Further comparison between writing tasks and speaking tasks is for future research.

V. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

According to previous research, NNS tend to overuse the definite article and tend to avoid the indefinite article, even when the NNS participants' proficiency level is high. In this study, the NNS participants' overall means for the definite article usage were higher than the NS participants, and the NNS's overall means for the indefinite article were lower than the NS's. However, there was no statistically significant difference at .05 level both in discussion forums and in formal papers.

Liao and Fukuya (2004) claimed that language learners' proficiency level, the type of target language form and the task type affected language learners' avoidance strategy use. However, the different types of English articles and the task types did not affect the participants' avoidance strategy usage here, and neither the differences between their native languages and the target language nor the difficulties of learning the target grammatical feature influenced the strategy usage.

The results imply that the current NNS participants' proficiency level is much higher than participants in Hinkel's (2003) or any previous studies. However, these highly

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advanced level students still did not use the indefinite article as frequently as NS even when they used the definite article similarly to the NS group. More research concerning indefinite article usage may highlight the nature of these differences. On the basis of the results, language teachers are encouraged to promote learners to use the indefinite article and not to overuse the indefinite article when they are unsure of proper article usage by informing them correct usage of English articles.

This study was limited by the small number of participants and the unequal number of participants between the groups. The non-parametric statistical tests were used to provide more meaningful data, but a larger number of participants could provide different results. The main obstacle to finding more participants was that it was unrealistic to find a larger number of appropriate participants at this highly advanced level, and for longitudinal observation. Therefore, with a view to future research, the recommended main research focus would be in investigating environments where NNS show avoidance tendency in article production, and when they do so. Even though there were no statistically significant differences here, there was an obvious avoidance tendency of the indefinite article. A qualitative study is needed in order to explore the patterns.

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Examples in: English
Applicable Languages: English
Applicable Level: Advanced Adult Learners

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