The Age Factor in the Acquisition of the English Article System by Bulgarian Learners of English

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Abstract: The paper explores the role of the age factor in the acquisition of the English article system. It presents and analyses a corpus of errors of Bulgarian learners of English at primary school and at university level. Based on the cross-linguistic comparison of the Bulgarian and English article systems and on the corpus of errors, the paper justifies the idea that not the age of learners but the influence of L1 syntax is what influences the ultimate attainment of the target language.

Key words: English article system, age factor, L2 acquisition, Bulgarian learners of English, young learners

INTRODUCTION

The question of whether age plays an essential role in the acquisition of a second language is a topic which attracts wide interest and generates intense debate. The main concern of age related research is whether the age at which someone starts either learning a second language (L2) in the classroom or is exposed to it in a natural environment affects the acquisition of that language in any way. Some linguists claim that the human capacity for language learning is constrained by a *critical period* which starts at the age of two and ends around puberty. Others consider that adults are better language learners than children and that they are at disadvantage only in a limited number of areas, especially phonology. A third group is convinced that young learners attain higher level of proficiency in L2 compared to adults.

The present paper will review in brief relevant research work on the age factor and its effect on L2 acquisition and will present data from a survey of the acquisition of English articles by Bulgarian primary school pupils (aged 9 – 11) and by Bulgarian university level students.

THE AGE FACTOR AND GRAMMAR ACQUISITION

In the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century numerous research studies have been conducted to examine the age differences in second language acquisition of different aspects of linguistic competence. The outcomes of those studies show that older learners have accelerated rate of L2 acquisition at the initial stages of language learning but "achieve significantly poorer ultimate attainment in the L2 compared to younger learners" [4, p.61].

These results are particularly relevant to the recent findings concerning the acquisition of L2 syntax and morphology – two areas that together comprise grammar and knowledge of which has been considered as a reliable measure for L2 proficiency. This conclusion has been supported by Johnson and Newport (1989) who studied native speakers of Chinese and Korean who had been first exposed to English before puberty (15 years and younger) or after puberty (17 years and older). The two researchers applied a grammatically-judgment test to measure the different rule types of English grammar used by the subjects. Johnson and Newport argued that the results from the test supported the idea that there was a critical period of maturation – the higher the age of the subjects, the lower their score on the test. Moreover, they stated that: "early in life, humans have a superior capacity for acquiring languages … [which] disappears or declines with maturation" [3, p. 64].

The same conclusions have been reached by Johnson *et al.* (1996) who have applied the same methodology used by Johnson and Newport (1989) to test the determinacy of L2 grammar in adult learners of English. In their research Johnson *et al.* established that the younger learners performed better on both tests and achieved very high results while the

older learners showed a significant improvement on the re-test, which was considered as an indication of the fact that they have not mastered the L2 as well as young learners.

Another research which is consistent with the idea of the existence of a critical period hypothesis has been conducted by Weber-Fox and Neville (1996). They collected data from standardized tests of knowledge of English grammar and concluded that younger learners were faster than adult learners in detecting semantic anomalies.

Although these three studies have clearly proved the assumption that older learners' proficiency in a L2 is below that of young learners, other research works confirm the idea that age-related effects occur only for some grammatical structures but not for all. Bialystok and Hakuta (1999) argued that the results obtained by Johnson and Newport (1989) discarded the view of a biologically determined critical period of language acquisition because the scores on the grammaticality-judgment test showed a great variation among adult learners. This, according to them, was a solid proof that the age of the L2 learners did not play a crucial role in the acquisition of the target language.

A different study by Birdsong (1992) was based on the assumption that older learners who had been exposed to the L2 after the closure of the hypothesized critical periods could reach native-like proficiency in the L2. To prove this Birdsong used a grammaticality-judgment test on French which compared the performance of adult native speakers of French to that of near-native speakers of various L1 backgrounds. He observed that some of the near-native speakers performed much better than the native speakers which showed that older learners of L2 could achieve native-like mastery of the foreign language regardless of the fact that they had started acquiring the language at a late age.

So far, we have presented evidence showing that, on average, older learners tend to perform poorly on morphosyntactic tests when compared to young learners. Still, there is a small proportion of adult learners who manage to reach near native L2 proficiency. It should be pointed out that the bulk of research carried out in the age issue presents results from studies of L2 learning situations where the second language is in active use within the target language community (i.e. learning English in the UK or USA, learning French in France etc.). The reported situations have very little to do with the L2 learning in the foreign language classroom where the foreign language is taught only in class and is not available in the world outside (e.g. learning English in Bulgaria, Spanish in Russia etc.).

The research study discussed in this paper aims to partially fill the gap in this field. Its purpose was to examine the relationship between age and the level of acquisition of the English article system by Bulgarian learners of English of different age groups. Our main research questions were the following: *Are there any age-related differences in the use of the English articles by Bulgarian learners of English?* and *Do the differences in the use of English articles support early age L2 learning as a positive factor?.*

METHODOLOGY
The Subjects
The subjects of this study were 602 Bulgarian learners of English: primary school pupils (age 9 – 11) from three state schools in the town of Ruse and university students (age 19 – 21) from the *Primary School Pedagogy with a Foreign Language* programme at the University of Ruse. The profile of the study participants is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Subjects of the study

Study groups	Age groups	No of students	Hours of instruction	Level
Group A	8 – 9 year old	184	36	Grade 2
Group B	9 – 10 year old	184	36	Grade 3
Group C	10 – 11 year old	192	96	Grade 4
Group D	19 – 20 year old	22	60	Year 3 students
Group E	20 – 21 year old	20	60	Year 4 students

The period of instruction at which we analyzed our subjects is six months – October 2009 to March 2010.

Instruments

All errors in the use of English articles were excerpted from written texts in the English language notebooks and workbooks of young learners and from course assignments of the university students. The total number of collected errors is 573.

Results

The excerpted errors which would be presented and discussed in the paper can be divided in the following types of categories:

- *L2 errors in the use of English articles based on the transfer of L1 grammar knowledge* – 68% of all excerpted errors*;*
- *L2 errors in the use of English articles based on inadequate L2 grammar knowledge* – 32 % of all excerpted errors.

Due to the constraints of the current paper, we will discuss only the first category of errors.

The semantic universals that have determining effects on the article choice in any language are *definiteness* and *specificity.* The English language, like the Bulgarian language, chooses the *definiteness* setting for its article choice. Based upon this, articles in English and in Bulgarian are divided into *definite* and *indefinite*.

The feature [+ definite] is morphologically marked in English through the definite article *the* and the feature [- definite] – through the indefinite article *a* (Table 2).

Table 2: Semantic features of the English articles

English article	Semantic feature	Function	Example
Indefinite article *(a / an)*	[- definite]	The hearer does not have a shared familiarity with the speaker about the referent.	*I need to buy **a** new dress.* *He wants **a** sandwich for lunch.* *She gave him **an** apple.*
Definite article (the)	[+ definite]	The hearer and the speaker are familiar with the referent of the sentence because it's previously mentioned or presupposed.	*I bought **the** dress which I saw yesterday.* *He wants **the** chicken sandwich for lunch.* *She gave him **the** red apple.*

The Bulgarian article system is more complicated as there are different morphemes that are used to mark the semantic features [+ definite] (Table 3).

Table 3: Types of inflections expressing definiteness in Bulgarian language

Grammatical Number	Semantic feature	Gender		
		Masculine	**Feminine**	**Neuter**
Singular	[+ definite]	-ът, -ят	-та	-то
		-а, -я		
Plural	[+ definite]	-те	-те	-те
		-та		-та

A specific problem for the Bulgarian learners of English is the use of the indefinite article *a* in cases when an entity is not presupposed or previously mentioned in a sentence. For example: *She saw **a** child. She gave **the** child a biscuit.*

In the first sentence the indefinite article is used because of the fact that the entity "child" is introduced to the context of the sentence for the first time. In the second sentence, the definite article is appropriate because the entity "child" has a previous discourse.

Contrary to English, where the notion of *indefiniteness* is expressed through the use of the indefinite article *a*, in contemporary Bulgarian language the semantic feature [- definite] is not expressed by means of the articles. It is marked by the words: "един" (for countable masculine nouns), "една" (for countable feminine nouns), "едно" (for countable

neuter nouns). For example: *Срещнах **една** жена. (I met **a** woman)* and *Търся **един** ученик. (I'm looking for **a** student)*

This difference in the functions of the English and Bulgarian articles leads to errors in the written or oral production of Bulgarian learners of English. Two main strategies are observed in the use of the target language indefinite article *a*: *Omission of the indefinite article* – 78 % and *Overuse of the indefinite article* – 22 %.

1. Omission of the English indefinite article

The lack of a marker for the semantic feature [- definite] in the L1 of the study subjects is the probable reason why Bulgarian young learners of English and the university level students omit the indefinite article *a* in the sentences they construct (Table 4).

Table 4: Omission of the English indefinite article

Research Subjects	Errors in the use of the English indefinite article		
Group A	- This is *lion. - This is *blue kite. - This is *picture. - It is * big and fat cat. - It's got * long tail. - It's * butterfly. - It's *elephant. - Is this *zebra? - Is this *bear? - This is *sofa.	- There is * rabbit behind *box. - There is *red train behind the doll. - There is *sofa in the room. - Have you got * pen? - Has he got *rubber? - I haven't got *elephant. - I've got *cat.	- He has got *computer. - Maria has got *dog. - He hasn't got *pen. - Mark's got *ball. - It's got big brown eyes and * long tail. - Amy's got *skateboard. - I can buy * ball and rubber.
Group B	- I see * cloud in the sky. - He is *bear. - It is * boy. - I am writing * picture. - He is flying *plane. - His mother is *doctor. - My father is *policeman. - Mark is * name of * boy.	- This is * tall man but this is *short man. - She's got *long tail. - I can ride *bike. - She can paint *picture. - He can sing *song. - I must write *letter. - This is *small bag.	- He wears blue trousers and *red T-shirt. - Do you want *burger? - Do you want *ice-cream? - We must make *puppet. - It's got * small body and small eyes.
Group C	- He wants *car. - They entered *small room. - Do you paint *picture? - There is *umbrella. - They saw *goat. - They saw *big house.	- There is *restaurant next to the bank. - There is *hole in the wing. - There is *white flower. - There isn't *plane. - Tomorrow I'll ride *bike in the park.	- He gave it *ball. - We gave her *guitar. - They gave us *book. - It's *thin book. - It's *oblong rubber. - Carol has *doll. - Tomorrow I'll play *computer game.
Group D	- Teacher asks *question. - Pupils write on * sheet of paper ... - Teacher sets *pre-listening task - To establish *link with the previous lesson... - Teacher asks pupils: "Has he got *bike?"	- The teacher starts the beginning of *sentence ... - Pupils have to say what they see in *picture. - The teacher sets * pre-listening task - The teacher shows pupils * picture of * animal - Let's play *game.	- The teacher gives pupils a picture of *family - The teacher asks *student to collect ... - Write *short sentence describing your best friend - Teacher asks for *correct answer.
Group E	* Volunteer comes to the board * Sentence is written on board - Teacher asks pupils: "Do you see * plane in the picture?" - The teacher chooses * spokesperson ...	- The teacher sets * pre-listening task - To establish * link with the previous lesson... - The teacher shows pupils * picture of * animal - Teacher asks pupils: "Has he got * bike?"	- Teacher asks pupils: "Is this * red ball?" - The cards are arranged in * straight line ... - Pupils must give *correct answer - Each pupil receives * card ...

The analysis of the excerpted errors shows that there is no considerable difference in the percentage of errors made by young learners and university students – 54 % of the errors in this category were made by the primary school pupils and 46 % – by the university students. This result clearly illustrates the fact that it is not the age of learners that plays a key role in the acquisition of the target language article system.

The errors summarized in Table 4 are an outcome of the interference of the L1 of the Bulgarian learners of English who faced with the semantic feature [-definite] choose to omit the L2 indefinite article *a* and construct sentences that follow the Bulgarian word order – e.g. *Майка му е лекар; Те ни дадоха книга; Има картина на стената.*

And that is not surprising because older learners (in our case these are the university students) who generally have a more sophisticated knowledge of the grammar system of their L1, tend to transfer it to the learning of an L2. Young learners, on the other hand, who are still developing their L1 knowledge and competences, experience less interference from their mother tongue but transfer their L1 learning strategies to the foreign language.

2. Overuse of the English indefinite article

The Bulgarian learners of English who are aware of the rule that in English the indefinite article is used before singular countable nouns that are mentioned for the first time in a certain context tend to extend the application of that rule to items that are excluded from that rule in the language norm. This leads to overuse of the English indefinite article. The most common type of errors are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5: Overuse of the English indefinite article

Research Subjects	Types of errors in the overuse of the English indefinite article		
	A. Insertion of the indefinite article *a* before a noun in plural or a noun phrase with a plural noun		
Group A	• * It's *a* trousers. • * It's *a* jeans. • * They aren't washing *a* dishes.	• * Are there *a* butterflies? • * Are these *a* lions? • * I've got *a* ten blue T-shirt and *a* twenty brown trousers.	• * These are *a* lorry. • * It's got *a* blue eyes. • * Have you got *a* pencils?
Group B	• * He likes *a* bananas. • * It's *a* three rulers.	• * I've got *a* books.	• * I often play *a* sports.
Group C	• * I can see *a* dogs. • * I paint *a* pictures.	• * He had *a* T-shirt and a trainers.	• * Do you paint *a* pictures?
Group D	• * Pupils have to make *a* sentences. • * They are *a* boys.	• * The pupils will practise *a* structures with the Present Continuous tense.	• * Pupils will be able to make *a* sentences with "he" and "she".
Group E	• * The teacher divides the class in *a* groups of four.	• The errors are presented in *a* groups of three.	• The pupils are divided in *a* groups of four.
	B. Insertion of the indefinite article before an uncountable noun		
Group A	• * I'm eating *a* breakfast.	• * She haves *a* lunch.	• * We're have *a* lunch.
Group B	• * He's got *a* long hair. • * She's got *a* short hair. • * I've got *a* brown hair.	• * I eat *a* healthy food. • * She wants *a* water. • * He's drinking *a* milk.	• * Can I have *a* water, please? • * Is this *a* sugar?
Group C	• * You have *a* temperature.	• * I often eat *a* healthy food.	* Have you got *a* temperature?
Group D	• * Some of pupils' errors require *a* particular attention	• * The lack of *a* precision and specificity in error categories ...	* Pupils lack *a* knowledge of the modals
Group E	• * Then ask another pupil out and say the words in *a* different order ...	• * Some of the pupils need *a* individual care ...	• The pupils do not have *a* linguistic competence.

Table 5: continued

Research Subjects	Types of errors in the overuse of the English indefinite article		
	C. Other errors that are a result of overuse of the indefinite article		
Group A	• * What's *a* colour is this? • What colour is this? - * It's a orange. • * It's *a* red.	• * It's *a* three o'clock. • * It's *a* ten to ten. • * Where is *a* box?	• * This is her *a* bike. • How many rulers has he got? –* He has got *a* one.
Group B	• * What's your *an* address? • * Mitko's car is *a* red. • * It's a green *a* pencil.	• * They are riding *a* their bike. • * It's *a* are plane • * I often play *a* sports.	• * The ruler is *a* 3 cm long. • * I watch *a* TV.
Group C	• * There is *a* one book. • * How well does she play *a* tennis? • * He isn't playing *a* basketball. • * She's playing *a* piano.	• * Mark plays *a* football. • * Will we go to *a* school tomorrow? • * I'm not *a* rides skateboard. • * He was *a* tall and thin.	• * I go to school by *a* car. • * She travels by *a* boat. • * He's drinking *a* juice.
Group D	• ... engaging more than *a* one child ...	• * [the] Two words are wrong because there is *an* insertion of letters.	• * Find words which end in *a* same sound
Group E	• * In *a* language teaching one possible strategy ...	• * The speaker pronounces the doubling of the letters as *a* one sound	• * The task is to establish the level of *an* interference of the L1.

Despite the fact that the examples systematized in Table 5 illustrate just a small part of the excerpted errors related to the overuse of the English indefinite article by the research study subjects, there are no significant differences in the types of errors made by the Bulgarian learners of English. This leads us to conclude that the age of the research study subjects does not favour the acquisition of the L2 article system. The reason for that is perhaps the lack of learners' grammatical competence in the target language and the desire to apply the L2 grammar rule that the indefinite article *a* is used to mention a singular noun for the first time in all cases when they use nouns in the sentences they construct in English.

CONCLUSION
The results of the current research study disagree with the studies of other researchers in finding a direct relationship between age and the acquisition of the English article system. The main conclusion to be drawn is that both younger and older Bulgarian learners of English face the same difficulties in the target language article system. Therefore, it is difficult to claim that there are maturational constraints concerning L2 grammar acquisition because although university level students are at a more advanced cognitive stage compared with young learners, their results exemplify the use of the same type of strategies employed by them when dealing with the target language articles.
It is to be hoped that subsequent data and analyses could help confirm and expand this conclusion.

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