

## Interpretation of definite and demonstrative descriptions in L2 English

This study investigates how L2-English learners interpret plural definite descriptions (e.g., *the pens*) and demonstrative descriptions (*those pens*). Plural definite and demonstrative descriptions express the same semantic concept of maximality, referring to a maximal set of relevant entities. However, the domain where maximality must be computed is always limited to the immediate salient situation for demonstrative descriptions. But for definites, the domain is the broader discourse. An experimental study, Ionin et al. (2012) confirmed that native English speakers flexibly set the relevant discourse for definites. When presented with the picture-based comprehension task, simplified in (1), native English speakers interpreted *the apples* in line 2 as either all the six apples in the entire discourse or the two apples, identified at line 1 (i.e., the immediate salient situation). On the other hand, only the latter interpretation obtained when *the* in line 2 was replaced with the demonstrative *those*. Ionin et al. also reported that L1-Korean L2-English learners consistently computed maximality in the immediate salient situation, regardless of the determiner type. Ionin et al. accounted for this as L1 transfer, explaining that because the L1 (Korean) lacks articles but has demonstratives (*ku* ‘that/those’), the learners relied on their L1 demonstrative semantics to interpret the L2 (English) definite descriptions. However, it remains unclear whether this phenomenon really represents L1 transfer or can generally be seen with L2 learners. To address this question, the present study replicates Ionin et al. by targeting L2-English learners with different L1s: Japanese, which is an article-less language with demonstratives (*sorerano* ‘those’), and Spanish, which has both articles (*el/las/la/las* ‘the’) and demonstratives (*esos/esas* ‘those’). That is, if L1 transfer occurs, Japanese speakers should behave like Korean speakers, always computing maximality in the immediate salient situation, whereas Spanish speakers should allow both the discourse and immediate situation as the domain, like English speakers.

Thirty-seven L1-Japanese and 40 L1-Spanish L2-English learners completed a picture-based comprehension task replicated from Ionin et al. (2012), along with 25 native English controls. The participants were instructed to look at objects and draw geometric shapes on them. Each item included two types of six objects accompanied with four lines of text. The task included 40 items, 12 of which were critical items distributed into three conditions of ‘demonstrative’, ‘definite’, and ‘indefinite’, as exemplified in (2). The indefinite condition (2c) was mainly used to check whether participants paid attention to determiners (otherwise, their responses should be similar across the conditions). Responses were grouped into three types: ‘same’ (i.e., the target noun in line 2 refers to the same two objects as line 1), ‘all’ (i.e., the target noun refers to all the relevant objects in the picture), and ‘different’ (i.e., all the other responses except for number and object errors), as illustrated in Figure 1.

The results are summarised in Figure 2. All the groups predominantly gave target responses in the demonstrative (‘same’) and indefinite (‘different’) conditions. In the definite condition, however, while the native control and L1-Spanish groups clearly showed both ‘same’ and ‘all’ responses, the L1-Japanese group provided ‘same’ responses almost invariably. The responses in the definite condition (‘same’ vs ‘all’) (other types of responses were removed) were modelled with a mixed effects logistic regression with a fixed effect of L1 (Native vs L2; Japanese vs Spanish). This model provided evidence that the L1-Japanese and L1-Spanish responses were significantly different; a follow-up analysis on L2 data found no effect of L2 proficiency (measured with a cloze task), yet the L1 effect remained significant (Table 1). These results testify that L1 influences L2 interpretation of definite descriptions and that the consistent ‘same’ interpretation of definite nouns is not an L2-general phenomenon, which supports L1-transfer models of L2 acquisition such as the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere, 2009).


- (1) Here are six apples.  
 1. Please draw arrows below two apples.  
 2. Now, circle the apples.  

- (2) a. Demonstrative condition  
 Here are six pens and six balloons.  
 1. Please draw arrows above two balloons.  
 2. Now, please draw triangles around those balloons.  
 3. Now, please draw stars on two pens.  
 (objects are not shown here due to space limitations)
- b. Definite condition  
 Here are six cars and six books.  
 1. Please draw arrows above two books.  
 2. Now, please draw circles around the books.  
 3. Now, please draw lines below two cars.
- c. Indefinite condition  
 Here are six knives and six cars.  
 1. Please draw arrows below two cars.  
 2. Now, please draw stars on some cars.  
 3. Now, please draw a square around one knife.

Figure 1. Example responses in definite condition (2b)

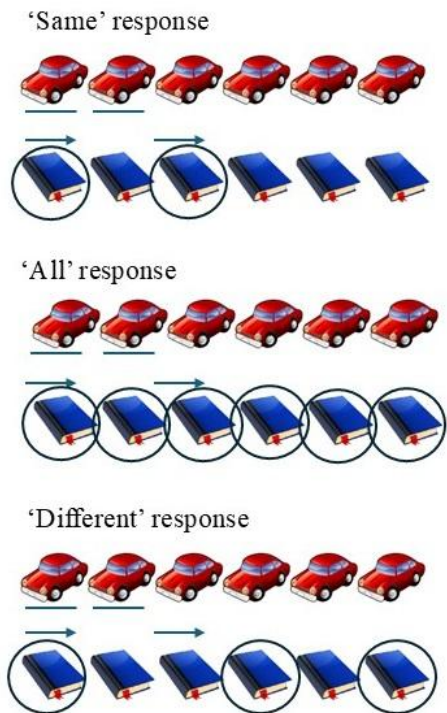


Figure 2. Picture-based comprehension task results

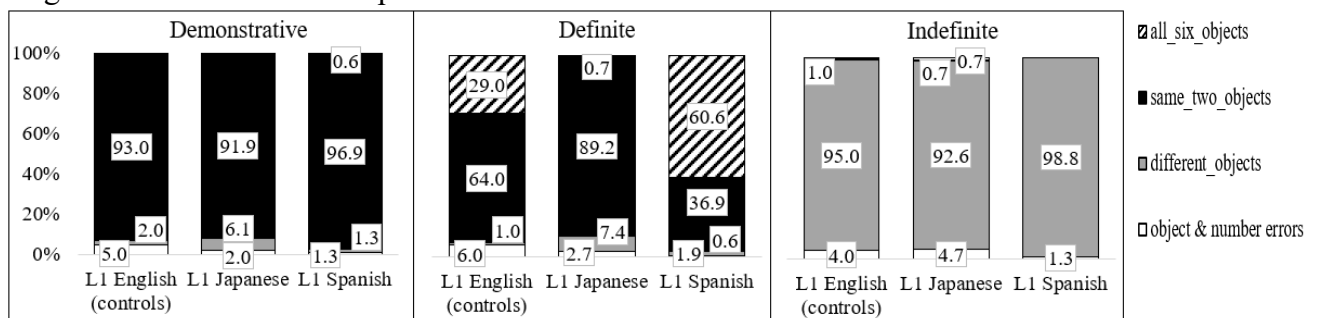


Table 1. Results of mixed effects logistic regression models for definite condition responses

fixed effects	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Omnibus model</i>		
L1: Native vs L2	0.425	.671
L1: Japanese vs Spanish	4.360	<.001*
<i>L2-only model</i>		
Proficiency (mean-centred cloze scores)	1.331	.183
L1: Spanish	-2.864	.004*

**References:** Ionin, T., Baek, S., Kim, E., Ko, H., & Wexler, K. (2012). *That's not so different from the*: Definite and demonstrative descriptions in second language acquisition. *Second Language Research*, 28(1), 69–101. Lardiere, D. (2009). Some thoughts on the contrastive analysis of features in second language acquisition. *Second Language Research*, 25(2), 173–227.