Implicit Learning of Definiteness - a Comparative Study with the Native Speakers of Norwegian, English and Polish.

Research project objectives
The project aims to explain why the correct use of definite and indefinite articles in languages such as English ('the' and a') poses such a notorious challenge for second language (L2) learners, including Polish ones, even at very advanced levels of proficiency. Often conscious awareness of the rules does not correspond with a reliably good performance. Why is it so? The project also aims to verify the explanations for these difficulties proposed within the leading theoretical frameworks – generativism and emergentism.

1. Is it because Polish does not mark definiteness in any way, therefore first language (L1) influence is decisive? Generative approaches stress the importance of this factor.
2. Is it due to the fact that articles are not perceptually prominent enough, therefore easy to miss in the input? Emergentist approaches stress the importance of this factor. A system with double marking of definiteness, such as the one in Norwegian, may turn out to be easier to acquire than the English system, with just the articles.
3. Or is conceptual salience (the salience of a referent in discourse context) the key? The role of this factor has only recently been shown (Trekic & Pongpairoj, 2013), but not yet compared with the other factors.

Research methodology
The project will investigate implicit learning, that is learning occurring without intention to learn anything particular and without awareness of what it is that is being acquired. Focusing on implicit processes will allow us to address the knowledge that the participants will have actually, naturally acquired, instead of whether they came up with relevant rules or mnemonics, which would be the case in deliberate, explicit learning. Experiments will be conducted online. The author has shown that the experiments of this kind produce equivalent results to lab-based ones. Participants will include the native speakers of three languages: Norwegian, English and Polish due to their different marking of definiteness. Norwegian, as mentioned above, has cases of double marking of definiteness, indicating that the feature should be particularly salient in the minds of its speakers. English, only marks definiteness on the articles, and Polish does not mark it at all. The project proposes to expose these groups to semi-artificial languages which include novel markers of definiteness, either single, as in English, or double, as in Norwegian. It will be examined to what extent speakers of these different L1s acquire the functions of novel markers of definiteness. Predicted differences between the groups in their acquisition of the semi-artificial language systems will lead to better understanding of the cognitive mechanisms underlying L2 acquisition.

Reasons for choosing the topic
Modern technological advances enabling researchers to conduct experiments remotely, via the internet, as well as, most importantly, methodological developments which took place in psychology over the last decade, which prove that it is possible to measure unconscious learning processes, offer unprecedented opportunities to study language acquisition. In applied linguistics, so far most studies addressed conscious, explicit learning, which we engage in, for example, before a test. Yet, the conscious and the implicit knowledge differ, and it is the implicit one that forms the basis of our native language. To what extent similar processes of implicit learning and development of implicit knowledge take place in second language acquisition? The author believes that through studying implicit processes we have an opportunity to, ultimately, gain deeper understanding of the reasons why second language acquisition is so different to first language acquisition.