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Turkish ELT students' acquisition of the definite article: An analysis of four non-generic uses

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Abstract

The article system of English language is a linguistic form that is taken for granted by the native speakers of this language; however when it comes to the acquisition of it by non-native speakers, it turns out to be too complex to understand. This could stem from the differences between the mother tongue of the learners and the target langauge. Turkish context is an example for such cases since it consists of learners whose mother tongue does not include an article system and among the articles especially the definite one 'the' is problematic for Turkish learners of English because Turkish language has no definite article. Henceforth, this study aims to investigate the acquisition of the definite article in English by Turkish ELT students, namely the prospective teachers of English, focusing on only one aspect of it, that is, the various nongeneric uses of it. For the study, a grammaticality judgment test, adapted from Liu and Gleason (2002), was used. 80 students from the ELT department of a state university in Turkey participated in the study. 40 of the participants were 1st graders while the other 40 were the 4th grade students at the same department. The results of the study revealed that participants had problems in the application of correct uses of nongeneric *the*, especially in the cultural use of it. Also, there was no significant difference between the overall scores of the participants from different grades.
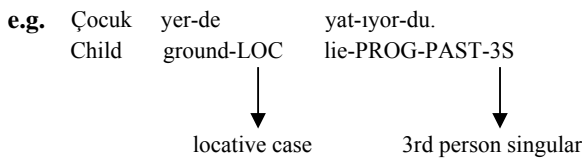
1. Introduction

Being highly complex and frequently used, the article system of English language constitutes one of the *most challenging grammatical structures for non-native learners of English*, either as a second or a foreign language.

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Master (2002) attributes this difficulty to the three distinctive features of the article system: First of all, the articles (a, an, the and Ø – zero article) are the most frequently occurring function words. Therefore, the conscious application of articles during sustained use of language, such as conversation, is a demanding task to perform. Secondly, since function words are normally unstressed, it is difficult for learners to notice them as input. Last but not least, the article system has multiple functions, which requires learners' great efforts to decide over the correct article to use for each case.

Considering the fact that there are learners of English whose mother tongue does not include an article system, the difficulty in relation to articles in English language becomes tremendous. Turkish context is one of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings consisting of such learners and among the articles especially the definite one **'the'** is problematic for Turkish learners of English because **Turkish language has no definite article**. Rather, definiteness in Turkish is conveyed through different factors including word order, stress, the use of an indefinite determiner and case marking, tense and modality (Dede, 1986). To start with word order, Turkish is a language that has a flexible word order due to its rich nominal and verbal inflection, and definiteness is an important pragmatic factor determining the word order (Erguvanlı, 1984).

e.g. Çocuk   yer-de   yat-ıyor-du.
Child   ground-LOC   lie-PROG-PAST-3S

locative case   3rd person singular

'The child was lying on the ground.'

(Tura, 1973: 102)

As it is clearly seen in the above example, the noun 'çocuk', the English equivalent of which is a noun phrase with the definite article 'the child', is used at the beginning of the sentence purposefully to create the image of a 'known' child in the mind of the hearer or the reader. If the same noun were put just before the verb of the sentence, the meaning created by this noun would be 'an unknown child', as the following example shows:

e.g. Yer-de   çocuk   yat-ıyor-du.
Ground-LOC   child   lie-PROG-PAST-3S
'A child was lying on the ground.'
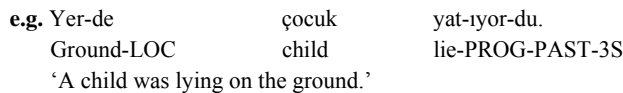
(Tura, 1973: 103)

Henceforth, the choice of a certain word order influences whether the noun phrases (NPs) in the sentences are definite or not.

Another pragmatic factor creating definiteness in Turkish is the use of accusative Determiner Phrases, in which nouns take an accusative case suffix when they are definite.

e.g. Öğrenci   saat-i-   bul-muş.

Student   watch - ACS   find-PAST-HEAR-3S

accusative
case suffix
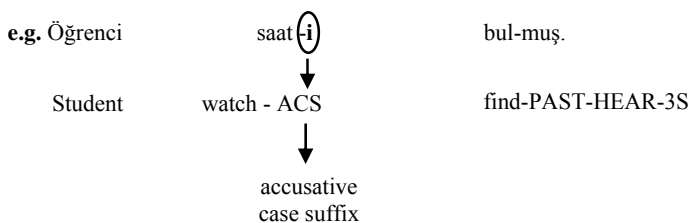
'The student found **the** watch.'

(Tura, 1973: 135)

The noun saat 'watch' accompanied by the accusative case suffix [–i] indicates that it is a specific object known by both the speaker and the hearer. But, without the accusative case suffix, the noun would lose its specificity or definiteness and therefore the sentence would mean the following:

e.g. Öğrenci   saat   bul-muş.
        Student   watch   find-PAST-HEAR-3S
        'The student found a watch.'

(Tura, 1973: 135)

The Turkish language, having such a system for definiteness, differs greatly from English and thus seems to lead to difficulties for L1 Turkish learners of English. Henceforth, this study aims to investigate the acquisition of the definite article - 'the'- in English by Turkish *ELT* students, namely the prospective teachers of English, focusing on only one aspect of it, that is, the various *nongeneric uses* of it.

2. Theoretical background

Since this study focuses on the non-generic uses of *the,* in this part of the present paper, these usages of the definite article will be mentioned. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), the definite article in English is used either in a **generic** or **non-generic** way. The **generic** use of 'the' refers to *all or most members of a set, a species, a race, etc*. And when it is used with singular nouns it makes the noun formal or abstract.

e.g. The <u>computer</u> has changed modern life.
                singular

Since the word *computer* is a singular noun, what is meant by it is simply the invention of computer, which is rather *abstract* than the object of computer itself. On the other hand, when the generic 'the' is used with a plural noun, it creates a sense of *collectivity*.

e.g. The <u>Germans</u> are supposed to like sausage and beer.
                plural

In the above sentence, *the* is used to make a noun phrase, noun part of which consists of the plural noun *Germans* making it refer to all the German people. All other uses of *the* are considered **nongeneric,** which makes its use much wider and more frequent than the generic use (Parish, 1987; Tarone & Parish, 1988; Whitman, 1974). It is virtually **the non-generic use of definite article which is mostly practiced and more complex, therefore more problematic for EFL learners**. So let us have a deeper look at the non-generic uses of *the.*

Hawkins (1978) developed *The Location Theory* to explain the various uses of *nongeneric the*. Basically, when an individual uses *the*, s/he invites the listener or reader to **locate the referent by using provided or assumed known cultural, situational, structural, or textual information**.

Based on *Hawkin's Location Theory*, Liu and Gleason (2002) classified non-generic uses of *the* as four categories:
1. *Cultural use,* where *the* is used with a noun that is a unique and well-known referent in a speech community
     e.g. **The White House**
2. *Situation use,* where *the* is used when the referent of a first-mention noun can be sensed directly or indirectly by the interlocutors or the referent is known by the members in a local community
     e.g. Are you coming to **the pub** for a drink?
3. *Structural use,* where *the* is used with a first-mention noun that has a modifier
     e.g. **The** movies that are shown here now are really old-fashioned.
4. *Textual use,* where *the* is used with a noun that has been previously referred to
     e.g. Fred bought **a car** on Monday. On Friday he crashed **the** car.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research questions

The present study aims to explore whether non-generic uses of 'the' have different levels of difficulty for prospective English language teachers in Turkey. More specifically, the following research questions will be answered:
1. Are the non-generic uses of *the* a problem for the participants?
2. Is there a difficulty order in the acquisition of four non-generic uses of the definite article by the participants?
3. Can any variation in the difficulty hierarchy of the four categories be observed according to the grades of students?

3.2. Setting and participants

This study was conducted at the ELT department of a state university in Turkey. In this setting, based on purposeful voluntary basis sampling, 1st and 4th grade students, namely freshman and senior students, were invited to participate in the study. There are plenty of freshman students who volunteered to participate in the study, however as for the seniors the case was not the same. Thus, having 40 seniors volunteered, only 40 of the freshman students were included in study to achieve homogeneity among the participants.

3.3. Instrument

For the study, **a metalinguistic knowledge test**, in the form of grammaticality judgment task and adapted from Liu and Gleason (2002), was used. The test consists of 91 sentences. In 51 items there appears 60 deleted obligatory uses of the and there are 15 items for each category of use. In Table 1, the categorization of items in the test is presented. Also, 40 items are used as distracters, which means *the* is not allowed in these items. Again, for each category equal number of items are available.

Table 1. Categorization of the items in the test

Items	Cultural Use	Situation Use	Structural Use	Textual Use	
51	15	15	15	15	Obligatory Uses total: 60
40	10	10	10	10	Control Items

As Liu and Gleason (2002) states, the items in the instrument were written based on Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999); and Hawkins (1978), and then the obligatory uses of the which was aimed to be tested by the authors were deleted from these sentences. As for the test format, there are no blanks available for the missing obligatory uses. Rather, the participants were simply asked to read the sentences and insert the wherever they thought it is necessary. The rationale for not including blanks was to avoid unreliable data coming from 'lucky guessing'.

3.4. Data analysis

For the analysis of the data gathered from the participants through the grammaticality judgment test, the researcher first counted every obligatory use *the* they failed to use and then computed the subtotal for each of the four types of use. At this stage, each subject received four scores. In addition to the obligatory uses, participants' overuse and misuse cases were also counted and therefore they got two more scores. Later on, all these scores were

typed in the statistical analysis program called *SPSS 21*. Through this program, statistical analyses were run on the data, which helped the researcher find out answers of the research questions.

Table 2. Mean scores of the participants for diffirent uses of *the*

N = 62	Cultural	Situational	Structural	Textual	Misuse	Overuse	Zero Article
Mean	6.22	9.98	10.77	10.59	19.27	16.01	25.46
Std. Deviation	3.27	3.31	3.41	2.39	9.87	10.40	9.33

3.5. Findings and discussion

3.5.1. Research question 1: Are the non-generic uses of the a problem for the participants?

In order to answer this research question, mean scores for each category were computed. For the four non-generic uses of *the,* namely cultural, situational, structural and textual uses, the participants were supposed to get maximum 15 per category. However, as it is clearly seen in Table 2, besides the fact that their mean scores were close to the maximum value only in textual and structural categories (*M=10,59* and *M=10,77* respectively), high means in misuse and overuse categories with their high levels of standard deviation show that the incidents when the participants misuse or overuse the four categories of non-generic the are commonly seen. Therefore, **the non-generic uses of *the* constitute a problem for Turkish learners of English, who are prospective English teachers.**

3.5.2. Reserach question 2: Is there a difficulty order in the acquisition of four non-generic uses of the definite article by the participants?

In order to answer this research question again the percentages of the correct uses of four non-generic uses of *the* were computed. As it is seen in the following table, the most difficult category for the participants is the cultural one, with a rate of 40 % correct answers. It is followed by the situational category (66 %). As for the structural and textual one, they have the same percentages, which is 73 %; but, since the standard deviation rate of the textual one is smaller, it can be claimed that it is less difficult for the participants. The difficulty hierarchy among the four categories of non-generic uses of *the* is presented in Figure 1.

Table 3. Difficulty order among the four nongeneric uses of *the*

N = 62	Cultural	Situational	Structural	Textual
Mean	6.22	9.98	10.77	10.59
Std. Deviation	3.27	3.31	**3.41**	**2.39**
Percentage	**40 %**	**66 %**	**73 %**	**73 %**

**From most difficult
to least difficult**

Cultural

↓

Situational
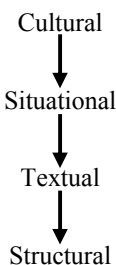
↓

Textual

↓

Structural

Fig 1. The difficulty hierarchy among the four categories of nongeneric uses of *the*

3.5.3. Research question 3: Can any variation in the difficulty hierarchy of the four categories be observed according to the grades of students?

For this research question, independent samples t-test was conducted and the results are presented in Table 4:

Table 4. Independent samples t-test results of the participants

	Grade	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Cultural	1stgrade	31	5.83	3.22	**.356**
	4thgrade	31	6.61	3.32	**.356**
Situational	1stgrade	31	10.03	3.25	**.910**
	4thgrade	31	9.93	3.42	**.910**
Structural	1stgrade	31	10.67	3.32	**.825**
	4thgrade	31	10.87	3.55	**.825**
Textual	1stgrade	31	10.29	2.35	**.318**
	4thgrade	31	10.90	2.44	**.318**

As the table shows, there is no significant difference between two groups of participants in relation to the four non-generic uses of the. Accordingly,

    for cultural use   : 1st grade M=5.83, SD=3.22, **p= .356**
                   4th grade M=6.61, SD=3.32, **p= .356**
    for situational use: 1st grade M= 10.03, SD=3.25, **p= .910**
                   4th grade M= 9.93, SD= 3.42, **p= .910**
    for structural use : 1st grade M= 10.67, SD= 3.32, **p= .825**
                   4th grade M= 10.87, SD= 3.55, **p= .825**
    for textual use   : 1st grade M= 10.29, SD= 2.35, **p= .318**
                   4th grade M= 10.90, SD= 2.44, **p= .318**

Although in the literature, studies on the acquisition of the non-generic *the* have been done with ESL and EFL learners, not with the prospective teachers of English, they have yielded similar results with the present study.

Accordingly, Liu and Gleason (2002) investigated whether four non-generic uses of the English definite article present different levels of difficulty for low, intermediate and advanced level ESL learners. They came up with the conclusion that:

- The four non-generic uses pose different levels of difficulty and the hierarchy of difficulty found was (from most difficult to least difficult): cultural, textual, structural and situational.
- The participants' performance on the suppliance of *the* in obligatory contexts for all four uses improved significantly with proficiency level.

As a replication of their study, Garcia Mayo (2008) investigated the same issue in an EFL context composed of low, intermediate and advanced level Spanish learners of English. She validated the same difficulty hierarchy in addition to the fact that the participants' performance in the overuse of *the* was improved significantly with proficiency level.

Due to the linguistic differences between the languages in question, which are Turkish as L1 and English as a foreign language in the case of this study, learners depend on three sources for linguistic knowledge to express definiteness while acquiring the target language:

- L2-input (which may be naturalistic and/or classroom-based);
- The structures of their native language (L1);
- Innate linguistic knowledge not obviously traceable to either L1-transfer or L2-input.

(Ionin et al., 2008)

It is an undeniable fact that the first source, exposure to the target language, plays a key role in the acquisition of definiteness. However, the second and third sources are also important if we consider internalized L1 knowledge to be closely related to the L2 in terms of universal grammar, which then leads to L1 transfer (Odlin, 1989; Gass and Selinker, 1992; Schwartz, 1998). Accordingly, the current study reflects the difficulty faced by Turkish learners of English, whose mother tongue does not include any definite article. Similarly, since the participants do not have the access to the natural L2 input extensively, they have difficulty especially in the cultural use of the, with a rate of 40 % of correct uses and this difficulty is reported to be the same for the learners from different grades. Thus, the non-generic uses of the, especially the cultural use, constitute a problem for the Turkish learners of English, who are prospective English teachers.

4. Conclusion

The present study was on an aspect of one of the most difficult structural elements for ESL/EFL learners, which is the four non-generic uses of definite article in English. In fact, articles in general have often been considered hard grammar, very difficult if not impossible to teach and learn (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). Moreover, a survey conducted by Covitt (1976) ranked the teaching of English article usage first among difficult tasks for ESL instructors. Therefore, a better understanding of the acquisition process of *the* would lead to more effective learning and teaching of this difficult article.

Accordingly, the ease with which native speakers use articles can lead L2 learners to ignore the complexities of the system and often be unaware of their importance to English syntax (Lipski, 1978, p.13). Hewson (1972, p.132) has called the English article system a "**psychomechanism**", through which native speakers use articles correctly but unconsciously. This unconscious nature of article use makes the case hard to grasp for L2 learners therefore poses difficulty in the learning/acquisition processes of them. Furthermore, since errors in the use of articles generally do not impede communication, many learners may feel that the effort involved in learning the system correctly doesn't worth the benefits gained (Master, 1997, p.216).

This study has confirmed the fact, drawn by the other studies in the literature mentioned above, that the four non-generic uses of the definite article *the,* especially the cultural use, constitute a '*psychomorphological*' problem for ESL and EFL learners since the participants of this study are also a sample from this population. The participants of this study are advanced learners of English as a foreign language, yet considering the natural order of article acquisition this aspect of language could be a problem from the early stages of language learning, which must be taken into account for both classroom teaching practice and instructional material writing. Although it does not mean we should not teach cultural use or structural use of *the* to beginning EFL students, it certainly makes sense not to focus on these more difficult types of use at early stages. Instead, one should start with situation use. In doing so, we can follow the natural sequence of the acquisition of *the* undergone by both native speakers as suggested by Lyons (1999) and nonnative speakers, as shown in this study, and conform to a widely believed language-teaching principle—that is, to begin with things that students can see, touch, and hear. It is a principle that *the Natural Approach* (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) and *the TPR approach* (Asher, 1982) follow closely. In teaching the situation use of the, the teacher can make full use of the objects readily available in class. In teaching cultural use, especially those in idiomatic expressions, the lexical approach (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992) may be very helpful because these expressions are best treated as frozen lexical items. In short, we need classroom teaching practice and instructional material on English articles that reflect the natural acquisition order.

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