

THE ACQUISITION OF SECOND LANGUAGE GRAMMAR: A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF PERSIAN AND ENGLISH ARTICLES

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to investigate whether Persian learners of English are able to utilize English definite and indefinite articles accurately especially the definite article “the”. Moreover, this research specifically aims to explore the degree to which Persian learners of English have problems concerning English definite article as it is based upon the contrastive analysis of aforementioned languages. According to this paper, Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners, in the case of English indefinite articles, demonstrated remarkable mastery, nevertheless, they came across various problems in the use of English definite article “the”. In order to collect data, two questionnaires (both in English and Persian) were given to the subjects. The final statistical analyses of language learners’ performance were as follows: First, English and Persian items were analyzed, then both of them were compared with one another and finally their competence/proficiency levels were compared. The results of this study showed that a considerable difference was observed among language learners in terms of their proficiency levels regarding the correct use of definite article “the” in English samples. Furthermore, it turned out that unlike the high number of article errors, Persian EFL learners mostly misused the articles rather than omit them.

Keywords: Definite and indefinite articles, Persian EFL learners, omission, misuse.

INTRODUCTION:

When it comes to language with different patterns of definiteness and indefiniteness making, EFL learners would have a hard time to make a distinction between them. The present research tries to depict these variations in article systems of both English and Persian languages; then by comparing and marking these differences, it will be demonstrated whether Persian students can make a correct choice between English definite and indefinite articles regarding the fact that they have already acquired their native language article marking system.

Learning L2 article system, EFL learners would most probably benefit from their mother tongue article system; that is to say L1 features could be transferred to the context of L2. Having encountered these intricacies among Persian learners encouraged me to dig out and scrutinize potential problems of Persian learners of English in using English article system.

In terms of English articles, a large number of L2 learners normally come across rather difficult barriers and it takes them quite a while to be proficient at making a correct choice between articles. What is more, no matter learners' L1 lacks or includes using articles, it would be equally intricate for them to specify definite article (Won Ho Yoo, 2009).

As a whole, with respect to the concept of definiteness, several definitions and tenets have been proposed (Hawkins, 1978). As Halliday and Hasan (1976: 71) put: not only does definite article lack content, but it also accounts for a particular as well as determinable entity about which there is usually available information so as to identify it.

In addition, Geranpayeh asserts that Persian EFL learners usually fail to determine English definite article since Persian and English are of two diverse and separate definiteness mechanisms (2000: 47).

Ionin (2003) states that L2 learners are not able to decide on accurate English articles due to their permanent entanglement with two language article systems which implies that English learners cannot help making errors about articles because of either the overuse of "a" or the overuse of "the" with specific indefinite nouns.

According to (Dabaghi & Tavakoli, 2009), among 20 million English words, the most frequent word is definite article "the", while indefinite articles are in the fifth place. Definite and indefinite articles (the, a, an) in English have different applications. While the former takes into account the previous knowledge and the familiarity of a word by the reader or hearer, the latter shows unfamiliarity of reader or hearer with a given word or topic (Power & Martello, 1986). For instance, Power and Martello (2008) explain that when a speaker or a writer talks about a referent such as "rabbit", he/she has to take into consideration whether to use definite or indefinite articles, therefore if listener or reader is confronted with this word for the first time, they use indefinite articles, and when the listeners or readers are familiar with this word, definite article "the" is used in the text.

Having realized that Persian and English possess rather exclusive article systems, we come up with the notion that it is substantial to know how Persian EFL learners utilize and translate articles mutually across two languages. Moreover, Faghah (1997) investigated 105 Persian substantives with their English equivalents. Besides, he stated that definiteness in Persian is not as transparent and tangible as it is in English; consequently, Persian learners of English encounter some difficulties with regard to the learning and application of English definite article. However, the main problem in distinguishing and applying definite and indefinite articles in Persian and English seems to be focused on the lack of appropriate equivalences for definite and indefinite articles in Persian (Ansarin, 2004). Recognition of definite article "the" is problematic for Iranian EFL learners (Mobini & Tahririan, 2007), although they may learn it before indefinite articles. Some researchers believe that learners' innate tendency is to learn and distinguish specificity before non-specificity (Dabaghi & Tavakoli, 2009).

A controversial matter regarding article use lies in the fact that either it is lacking in L1 syntax or there might be some other peripheral issues such as preferring particular linguistic features involved in singling out the correct articles which, in turn, could be exclusive to L1 (Thomas, 1989, and Huebner, 1983). To illustrate, the reason why many Persian EFL learners commit errors on the application of English definite article is due to its lack in this language; nonetheless, Persian does include equivalents for English indefinite articles (Faghah & Hosseini, 2012). In general, when it comes to Persian indefiniteness, both spoken and written modules follow roughly the same markedness strategy that is to say there are three different ways in Persian to mark indefiniteness. Firstly, the numeral derivational morpheme 'ye' goes before NP as in: 'ye ketab' meaning 'one book'. Secondly, the suffix 'i' is added after NP; for example: 'ketabi' meaning 'a book', and thirdly, both of the above mentioned indefinite markers can also be integrated in a single NP, i.e. NP is preceded by 'ye' and followed by 'i' such as 'ye ketabi' meaning (a/one book). In the meantime, as we move further, I am going to dig into this article function mechanism.

PERSIAN ARTICLES:

As far as Persian is concerned, the definite and indefinite articles are added (with restrictions, of course) as morphemes. The indefinite article ‘-i’ seems to have more freedom in what it can bind to than the definite article ‘-ra’. An interesting phenomenon occurs when definite and indefinite nouns are coordinate in a conjunction. The morpheme only appears on the last noun, however its property is attributed to the other ones. (Givy & Anvary, 1379)

For example, the indefinite article is denoted by the suffix ‘-i’

- qalam-i	qalam	- ketab-i	ketab
- pen-indef	pen [def]	- book-indef	book [def]
- ‘a pen’	‘the pen’	- ‘a book’	‘the book’

When indefinite nouns are adjoined by a conjunction, the indefinite article only appears on the last noun:

Ketab va medad va qalam-i be man dad
Book and pencil and pen-indef to I give 3rd. sg.pst

‘He / she gave a book, a pencil, and a pen to me’

Although the indefinite article only appears on one noun, it is attributed to all the previous ones in Persian. A similar thing can be seen in English if we just paraphrase the sentence above:

‘He/she gave a book, pencil, and pen to me.’

Similarly, this attribution is seen when definite nouns are the direct object of a verb and adjoined by a conjunction, this time by the suffix ‘-ra’ on the last noun of the conjunction:

Ketab va medad va qalam-ra be man dad
Book and pencil and pen-def. art. marker to I give 3rd.sg.pst

‘He / she gave a book, a pencil, and a pen to me’

Note: qalam-ra
pen-def
‘the pen’

Unlike the indefinite articles, the definite suffix cannot be added unless the noun is the direct object of a verb. Once again, in English a similar phenomenon is seen when we paraphrase:

‘He/she gave the book, pencil, and pen to me.’

The major difference here is, the definite and indefinite articles in English are not morphemes but free words. In Farsi, there seems to be a discrepancy between the meaning (all the nouns having the same article) and the structure (only the last noun has the morpheme for definite/indefinite).

According to Anzali (1985), Persian does not necessarily include any definite article which is not to say that Persian lacks definiteness, but it is realized as a morpheme. Additionally, as Ghomeshi (2003) stipulated, Persian definite article is manifested in informal speech. She illustrates this by the following example:

Dokhtær-e amæd = Girl- Def come. Past. 3SG = ‘The girl came.’

Admitting that Persian consists of two types of articles, Anzali (1985) and Ghomeshi (2003) are of the opinion that Persian indefinite articles (‘i’ and ‘yek’) can not only be used individually, but also come together before and after a NP respectively. The examples below would shed light on this point:

dær khiyaban mærdi didæm = In street a man-Indef see-Past-1SG
dær khiyaban yek mærd didæm. = ‘In street one man see-Past-1SG

It is also worth noting that Persian indefinite article is mostly eliminated as in :

Ou yek filmi tamasha kard = s/he a movie watch-Past-3SG = ‘s/he watched a movie.’

ENGLISH ARTICLES:

Definiteness in English is marked by adding ‘the’ before NP and indefiniteness is realized via preceding NP by ‘a/an’. However, when it comes to specific or non-specific contexts, both definite and indefinite articles can go

before NPs. Plus, English definite article refers to an entity or category which is known to the interlocutors. The definite marker in English is *the*. For Persian speakers, it is difficult to use *the*, because in Persian, if the whole concept of the noun is meant, not its single meaning, no article is applied such as: */ketab saergaermiye xubi aest.* / (Book (reading) is a good hobby.) (cf. Jafarpur, 1973:18).

Unlike Persian, English normally requires an article with a singular count noun as a complement; e.g. *Kurosh is a teacher*

Kurosh is the teacher

The second sentence is semantically correct only in the case of one engineer living in the society. In Persian zero article, is used in the above cases, so the equivalent to both the sentences is: */Kurosh moallem aest.* / (lit: Kurosh is teacher.) Using article with count nouns as complements is one of the other ambiguities for Persian speakers. “In this regard, Persian speakers make mistake facing the expectations of article use. As Quirk defines there are four cases in which noun is definite: (a) immediate situation, larger situation, anaphoric reference (direct) and cataphoric reference (indirect)” (cf. Jamshidian, 1990: 266).

To put it differently, Lambton (1953: 3) Claims: “there is no definite and indefinite articles in Persian. Broadly speaking, a noun becomes indefinite by the addition of /i/ “ye””. Consider the following:

/ketab/ (book)

/ketabi/ (a book)

/miz/ (table)

/mizi/ (a table)

In the preceding example, the words */ketabi/* (a book) and */mizi/* (a table) are indefinite and unknown. The cases in which nouns in Persian are indefinite include:

In Persian, unlike English, general nouns are used only in singular forms.

/ketab duste xubi aest. / (Book is a good friend.)

/sedaqaet neshaneye iman aest. / (Honesty is a sign of faith.)

In Persian, for the above example, there is no distinction between */ketab/* (book) and */sedaqaet/* (honesty) in case of article use, whereas in English, *book* is a count noun and it has to follow an article whereas, honesty is a mass noun and there is no need to use an article before it.

Last but not least, definite and indefinite articles exist both in Persian and English; more importantly, what differentiates the use of articles is not uniqueness but definiteness.

This study will tackle with the following questions:

- 1- Do Persian speakers transfer their L1 knowledge of articles to L2 learning setting?
- 2- Is Persian EFL learners' proficiency level a determining factor at the accurate application of English articles?
- 3- Why do they misuse or overuse English definite article?
- 4- Is there any difficulty for Persian speakers in the production and recognition of English articles?

It should be noted that the major hypothesis of this study was knowing Farsi articles would facilitate Persian EFL learners' learning of English articles.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE:

Both philosophers (Christophersen, 1939; Hewson, 1972; Kramsky, 1972; Russell, 1973) and linguists (Jespersen, 1933/1966; Perlmutter, 1970) as well as psychologists have put forward a variety of theories and ideas considering article system which highlight the significance of it in linguistic and non-linguistic areas. What is more, ESL studies deal with education and acquisition. In addition to previous major surveys implemented by Christophersen(1939) and Jesperson (1949), one of the most outstanding works was carried out by Bickerton (1981) which opens a new horizon to the application and mechanism of English articles. (Liu and Gleason 2002).

Moreover, as for the L1 positive transfer to L2 setting, Guella, Déprez, and Sleeman (2008) conducted a study on 35 Dutch subjects learning Arabic as their L2. Besides, it is important to stipulate that both Arabic and Dutch include overt definite articles. Nevertheless, Arabic lacks indefinite article; additionally their investigation examined, in particular, these learners so as to work out if the Dutch learners' L1 article transfer to learn Arabic was positive or negative; that is to say whether they were unable to make a correct choice between definiteness and specificity. Finally the research results revealed that Arabic articles were acquired as lexical units by Dutch learners based on specificity rather than definiteness.

Faghih (1997) believes the context in which the article is utilized elucidates the meaning of discourse. For instance, depending on the context, the Persian word ‘Medad’ may cover the meaning of both ‘pencil’ or ‘the pencil’. He also asserts that Persian has no precise and particular equivalent for the English definite article that is why Persian EFL learners find ‘the’ baffling to learn. Furthermore, on the acquisition of article order, an investigation was carried out by Khoshgowar and Ekiert (2010) among twenty Polish adult EFL participants out of whom ten were EFL and ten were ESL learners along with a control group of five native English speakers; the non-English subjects were classified according to their number and levels of three beginners, three intermediates as well as four advanced ones. Having applied a cloze test of seventy-five omitted compulsory items for definite, indefinite and zero articles taken from Huebner (1983:70) and Thomas (1989: 32), they realized that in three various levels all the participants including advanced ones committed errors. Study results also indicated that zero articles were overused by intermediate and advanced candidates; nevertheless, as for English definite and indefinite articles, intermediate learners overgeneralized them far more than their advanced counterparts. Ultimately, regarding Markedness Differential Hypothesis, despite English which is of article system, Polish is not, which justifies Polish EFL learners’ obstacles for learning English articles (Khoshgowar, 2010).

Another similar study was conducted by Jaensch and Sarko (2009) on a group of Arab EFL learners. It indicated that in Arabic unlike the absence of an overt indefinite article, there is a covert feature for marking indefiniteness. Also, simple nouns are regarded as indefinite in this language. Furthermore, just like English, it is of an overt definite article. By the same token, it could be anticipated from the investigation that as result of positive L1 transfer to the L2 milieu for Arab learners of English, they will be able to apply English definite article correctly; however, the same would not hold true of the indefinite one since their L1 does not include this syntactic feature. The research also concluded that definiteness and not specificity determines Arab EFL learners’ accurate use of articles.

METHODOLOGY:

PARTICIPANTS:

This study was conducted among 20 Iranian senior high school students in Istanbul who have not yet completed their school program. Furthermore, the survey included both boys and girls ranging in age from 17 to 19 years old whose mean age was 18. Additionally, they had been taught English for a specific period of time. As the researcher found out, the majority of the participants had begun to learn English during their junior high school. Furthermore, three of the male students had TOEFL degrees with overall band of 76, 83 and 86 respectively and one of them was IELTS degree holder (general module) with the overall score of 6 and also two of them passed SAT exam with scores of 1145 and 1300 respectively. To proceed the testing process, subjects were first assigned a bio-data questionnaire; then they were asked to specify precisely for how long they had been taught or exposed to English; moreover, they were given two various questionnaires, both in English and Persian, the first of which included 29 English items out of which 17 were multiple choices and 12 were fill-in –the-blank ones. The second questionnaire, however, incorporated 17 more Persian multiple-choice questions that have been attached to the appendix. What is more, in order to do placement test on subjects, the researcher applied the online test which is available at <http://www.transparent.com/learn-english/proficiency-test.html>. To elucidate, the participants who got below 60 were placed at elementary level, those who gained 61-70 were recognized as pre-intermediate candidates, the ones between 71 and 80 were given intermediate level, subjects whose scores were between 81 and 90 were grouped as upper- intermediate, and finally for those who got over 90 , advanced level was designated. Nevertheless, after the placement test, none of the subjects achieved a score of below 60 and over 90 that is to say elementary and advanced levels were eliminated from the study. Table 1 illustrates this as follows:

Table 1: Participants’ levels and scores

Level	Score
Elementary	-60
Pre-intermediate	61-70
Intermediate	71-80
Upper-intermediate	81-90
advanced	+90

Finally, out of 20 subjects, 4 candidates were determined as pre-intermediate, 9 as intermediate and 7 as upper-intermediate ones as in the following:

Table 2: Data Collection

Level	Number	Age Range
Pre-intermediate	4	17-19
intermediate	9	17-19
Upper-intermediate	7	17-19
Total	20	

PROCEDURE:

Participants were initially given the bio-data to fill in. After receiving two questionnaires, both in English and in Persian, the subjects were asked to complete them. In addition, they answered the English items in approximately 30 minutes; however, it took roughly 15 minutes for them to do the Persian questionnaire. What is more, the testing process was conducted at Iranian Fajr school language laboratory, which aimed at figuring out frequently made errors by Persian EFL learners concerning the English articles. To achieve this goal, a group of Iranian senior high school students were examined whose results are reported in detail and conclusion is drawn on the basis of the findings of the test conducted.

DATA ANALYSIS:

In this study, the data analysis is categorized into three sections: the first part deals with findings descended from English module which are also divided into three groups including correct, incorrect and overuse/omit. Second section scrutinizes the Persian module data by classifying them into the same groups. Finally the third part will tackle both English and Persian languages through making an analogy between them. Moreover, the mean scores of each group were calculated by applying SPSS program.

To begin with, the data were analyzed with respect to correct, incorrect and overuse/eliminate categories respectively. As can be seen from the following table, subjects in three different levels along with their types of responses and regarding three types of English articles have been presented numerically as follows:

Table 3: Distribution of three types of English articles

Responses	Pre-intermediate			intermediate			Upper-intermediate		
	a/an	the	Zero article	a/an	the	Zero article	a/an	the	Zero article
Correct	4	2	1	6	4	3	7	9	6
Incorrect	4	3	6	3	3	4	2	-	2
overuse/eliminate	2	5	2	1	3	2	1	1	1
Total	10	10	9	10	10	9	10	10	9

According to **table 3**, three different types of responses: correct, incorrect and overuse/eliminate depending on three groups: pre-intermediate, intermediate, and upper-intermediate have been statistically analyzed via illustrating their numerical data for English definite, indefinite as well as zero articles. Having monitored the table, we can observe that the maximum number of correct answers in three various types of articles belongs to upper-intermediate students hitting 7, 9, 6 respectively for a/an, the and zero article; nevertheless, pre-intermediate candidates stand last in this category achieving 4, 2, 1 for the above mentioned articles which are still less than intermediate participants considering the same categories that is 6 for a/an 4 for “the” and 3 for “zero article”. Moreover, the same trend is true for these three-different- level participants with regard to their incorrect responses which obviously confirms the hypothesis that the more proficient students are, the fewer errors they make and vice versa. Finally, come to think of overuse/eliminate, the same conclusion can be drawn for the candidates regarding their levels.

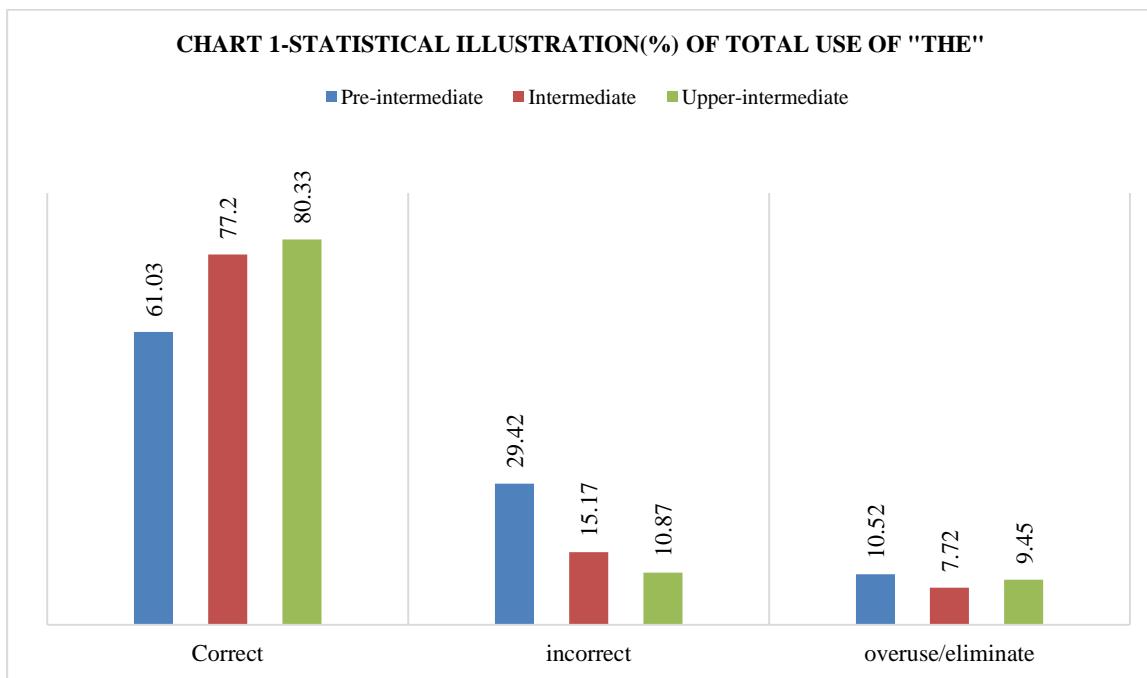


Chart 1 illustrates the percentage of participants' answers regarding whether they are correct, incorrect, or overuse/omit concerning the total application of "the". As can be observed, in the case of correct responses, pre-intermediate students are of the least rate of 61.03%; intermediate students stand second with roughly two times higher at about 77.20%. Finally, upper-intermediate students reach a peak of 80.33% between the other two. When it comes to participants' incorrect responses, the trend becomes the other way round considering the percentage of three different levels compared to the previous bars of the correct answers; that is, here pre-intermediate participants have the maximum amount with 29.30% of incorrect answers. In addition, intermediate students' wrong responses diminish to 15.17% which is approximately two times less than those of pre-intermediate ones. The last figure belongs to upper-intermediate candidates with a percent of 10.87% which proves the minimum number of errors were made by upper-intermediate learners. As for the use of "the", The final bars represent the degree to which these participants have overused or eliminated total use of definite article "the" indicating again pre-intermediate students on top with 51% then intermediate students with 30.64% as the second and leaving the last position with minimum percentage of errors, 9.45, for the upper-intermediate ones. These results suggest that the upper-intermediate students group have, by far, performed better than those of the other two groups which is most likely related to their level of proficiency/ competence. Furthermore, comparing the overuse/omit percentage with that of the incorrect for upper-intermediate subjects we can observe roughly the same figure (9.45% to 10.87%) for these two categories among them.

To illustrate, the following table has delineated three different-level participants' responses in two categories, correct and misuse, for Persian definite and indefinite articles:

Table 4: The proportion of overall use of Persian definite article "ra"

Responses	Pre-intermediate		intermediate		Upper-intermediate	
	Definite - ra	Indefinite -i	Definite - ra	Indefinite -i	Definite - ra	Indefinite -i
Correct	7	5	8	6	8	7
Misuse	3	2	2	1	2	-
Total	17		17		17	

Table 4 includes the numerical data about the use of Persian definite "-ra" and indefinite "-i" articles in two diverse categories of correct and misuse among Persian EFL learners. As it has been illustrated, unlike the English definite articles "the" which indicated an imperceptible mastery of participants in accordance with their promoting level, here we come across a rather slight variation as for the appropriate application of "ra" with an

approximate average of 7.66 for both pre-intermediate and intermediate as well as upper-intermediate candidates. This demonstrates the fact that dividing participants in three different level groups in English module does not necessarily hold true for the Persian module. In other words, Persian learners, in the case of their mother tongue definite article, perform a lot better and are accurately cognizant of their errors.

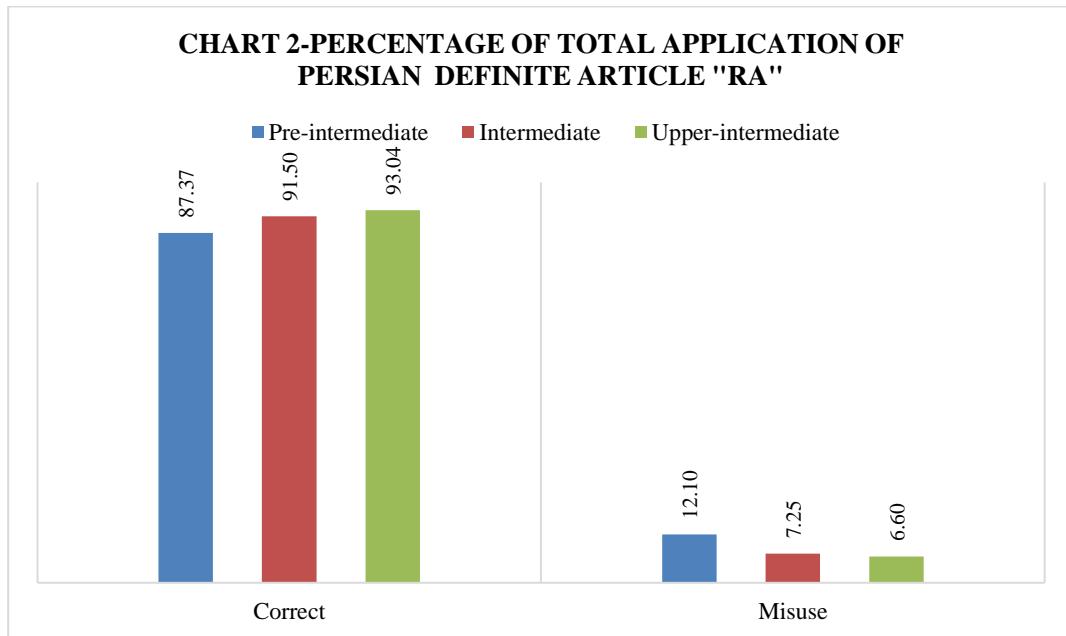


Chart 2 demonstrates the numerical data on the overall use of Persian definite article “ra” in only two different classifications: correct and misuse. Besides, it has been illustrated that pre-intermediate learners’ correct choice of Persian definite article has reached 87.37% which again climbs up to 91.50% for intermediate students and hits the zenith of 93.04% when it comes to upper-intermediate subjects. What is more, this upward trend shows that Persian EFL learners have an acceptable amount of knowledge on their language definiteness which is over the average. “Misuse” category, on the other hand, represents the downward trend beginning from 12.10% for pre-intermediate learners declining to 7.25% for intermediate participants and finally dropping down to 6.60% for upper-intermediate subjects; in the end, having taken both correct and misuse statistical descriptions into account, we realize that almost all three groups of students, regardless of their English module differences, are of rather the same level of mastery over Persian definiteness.

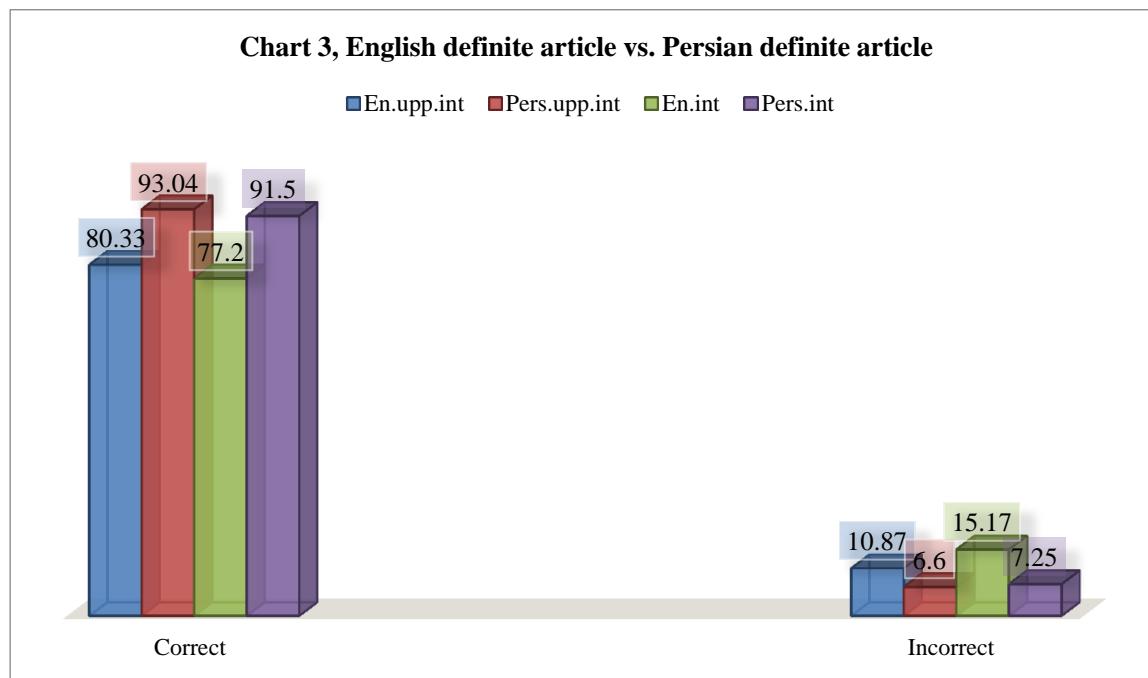


Chart 3 incorporates a statistical analogy of definiteness between English and Persian in both correct and incorrect categories. It goes without saying that considering English and Persian upper-intermediate and intermediate levels, Farsi speakers' performance at determining English definite article is lower than their ability to specify definite article in Persian. In other words, the number of errors committed by Persian EFL learners at recognizing English definite article "the" is, by far, more than those of theirs at Persian definite article. In a nutshell, turning to English definiteness, we realize that the higher proficiency level, the fewer errors at specifying article. Nonetheless, that is not totally the case for Persian definite article as it signifies very slight relevance between number of errors and proficiency level.

DISCUSSION:

Initially, a contrastive study was carried out about the potential difficulties of Persian EFL learners concerning English definite and indefinite articles. Moreover, the findings indicated that they are in line with the previous research results conducted by Janesch and Sarko (2009) on 25 Arab EFL learners which revealed that Arabic, like Persian, is of a covert indefiniteness marker not an overt one. In other words, neither Persian nor Arabic have explicit definite article marker. Furthermore, the current study results confirmed the findings of another investigation done by Guella, Deprez and Sleeman (2008) according to which, 35 Dutch learners of Arabic demonstrated that they acquired Arabic articles not by definiteness but via specificity as it is the case for Persian EFL learners. Nevertheless, in terms of the age range and the proportion of male participants to the female ones, some variations were observed. Additionally, this survey refuted the hypothesis that the more knowledge of Persian article mechanism would necessarily lead to the more accurate choice of English articles. It is also necessary to point out that this research was conducted under rather different circumstances; that is to say, despite the earlier studies which were done in Iran on Persian speakers, this survey focused on the same subjects, but in Turkey, some of whom were born or had been living in Istanbul for a different period of time. Last but not least, in response to the research questions posed earlier, the following results were achieved respectively: as for indefiniteness, Persian speakers, due to the positive transfer, replace their L1 features by those of the L2 which mostly comes true. Secondly, in the case of definiteness, the same principle does not hold true and Farsi EFL learners' proficiency level plays a decisive role. Finally, misusing the English definite article confirms the fact that Persian learners of English have serious difficulty as to the production of it.

CONCLUSION:

Having completed the research, we can figure out from the findings that the percentage of errors made by students to recognize the English definite article is relatively higher than those in Persian module which could be partly attributed to their L1 negative transfer and to some extent due to their insufficient English input.

However, Persian EFL learners are of decent knowledge of their mother tongue's syntactic features. Additionally, since Persian language does not have a precise equivalent for English definite article "The", the students' errors can be somehow justified; instead, Persian includes specific demonstrative pronouns so as to refer to definiteness. Last but not least, various levels of proficiency among Persian EFL learners might be the reason for their lower performance in the case of English definiteness. Since the present study was conducted on only 20 subjects, making generalizations would be rather intricate; therefore it is highly recommended future research be done on a large number of participants so as to achieve more accurate results. Moreover, if the upcoming studies utilize other different standard English proficiency tests and consider either male or female students with respect to their age, the investigation will be of more reliable and precise outcomes.

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