

The Acquisition of English Articles by Arabic L2-English learners: A Semantic Approach

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the acquisition of English articles by Arabic second language (L2) learners of English as a function of different linguistic contexts contrasted based upon two semantic notions: *definiteness* and *specificity*. The participants in this study are 30 adult learners of L2 English whose first language (L1) is Arabic. The data for this study consist of the participants' responses to a forced-choice elicitation task targeting the use of articles in English. The results show that the learners were more accurate in terms of their article usage in definite contexts than in indefinite contexts regardless of specificity. While advanced learners performed native-like and converged to the target system of articles in English in all of the semantic contexts, low proficiency learners and intermediate learners made several errors, the most common of which was article omission in obligatory contexts. Moreover, the results show that the low proficiency learners fluctuated between definiteness and specificity in the two crucial mismatching semantic contexts: [+definite, -specific] and [-definite, +specific], overusing the indefinite article in the former context and overusing the definite article in the latter context. Unlike the low proficiency learners, the intermediate learners did not fluctuate between definiteness and specificity. The study proposes a development model for the acquisition of the English article system by Arabic learners of L2 English incorporating the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH) and drawing on the available sources of linguistic knowledge in second language acquisition (SLA).

Keywords: Arabic, articles, definiteness, English, fluctuation, specificity

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Introduction and Theoretical Background

A great amount of second language acquisition (SLA) research has reported that the acquisition of the English article system (and article systems in other languages) is problematic for learners of English as a second language (L2) or foreign language (FL), especially for those learners whose first language (L1) lacks an article system or determiners (Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004; Avery & Radišić, 2007; Zdorenko & Paradis, 2007, 2008 and 2012; White, 2008; among several others). The problems L2 learners of English have with the use of English articles fall into different linguistic types, demonstrate various error patterns, and come from a variety of sources.

Ionin (2003) and Ionin et al. (2004) report that two types of errors are commonly committed by English language learners and repeatedly documented in SLA research: article omission and article misuse or substitution; the latter is typically characterized by the overuse of the definite article *the* to incorrectly replace the indefinite article *a* (in contexts that require the use of the indefinite article).

In their review of the literature on the acquisition of articles in L2 English, Zdorenko and Paradis (2007, 2008) notice that adult L2-English learners omitted articles in both definite and indefinite linguistic contexts (i.e., used bare nouns) and incorrectly substituted one article in the context of another, especially *the* for *a*, and that it is not before late stages of acquisition that adult L2-English learners reach native-like performance on articles and determiners in general, if ever. White (2008) report three kinds of problems with the acquisition of articles: dropping articles in obligatory contexts, incorrect substitution of one article for the other, especially *the* for *a* in English, and ‘oversuppliance’ of articles in indefinite plural contexts, where a zero-article (i.e., bare noun) is required.

There is no unanimous agreement as to what causes the difficulty which L2-English learners have with articles (Zdorenko and Paradis, 2007). However, a few accounts have been suggested to explain the source(s) of this difficulty. In their review of the possible accounts for adult second language learners’ problems with the acquisition of articles, Avery and Radišić (2007) group the sources of difficulty into three major areas: L1 influence, Universal Grammar (UG), and L2 influence (or interference). On the other hand, White (2008) attribute the article errors which L2 learners commit to problems with certain linguistic representations, reporting syntactic, phonological, and semantic accounts. The present study is interested in investigating the third account i.e., the semantic mismatch between L1 and L2 in terms of how two notions are encoded: definiteness and specificity.

Two Semantic Notions: Definiteness and Specificity

Ionin et al. (2004) provide informal discourse-related definitions of *definiteness* and *specificity*. For them, the semantic feature [+definite] refers to the state of knowledge shared between the speaker and the hearer, whereas the semantic feature [+specific] refers a state of knowledge held only by the speaker. Clearly, both definitions place an emphasis on the uniqueness of the referent. The following informal definitions are quoted from Ionin et al. (2004, p. 5):

- 1) If a Determiner Phrase (DP) of the form [D NP] is ...

- a. [+definite], then the speaker and hearer presuppose the existence of a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP.
- b. [+specific], then the speaker intends to refer to a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP and considers this individual to possess some noteworthy property.

In order to illustrate the semantic distinction between *definiteness* and *specificity* and to explain how these notions interact with each other, see the following examples from Lyons (1999, p. 167).

- 2) Joan wants to present the prize to **the** winner
 - a) ... but he doesn't want to receive it from her. (definite, specific)
 - b) ... so she'll have to wait around till the race finishes. (definite, non-specific)
- 3) Peter intends to marry **a** merchant banker
 - a) ... even though he doesn't get on at all with her. (indefinite, specific)
 - b) ... though he hasn't met one yet. (indefinite, non-specific)

The Article Choice Parameter (ACP)

In order to account for the variability in the acquisition of articles by L2-English learners, Ionin et al. (2004) propose a semantic parameter – the Article Choice Parameter (henceforth ACP) with two settings as in the following formulation (Ionin et al., 2004, p. 12):

- 4) The Article Choice Parameter (for two-article languages)
 A language that has two articles distinguishes them as follows:
 The Definiteness Setting: Articles are distinguished on the basis of definiteness.
 The Specificity Setting: Articles are distinguished on the basis of specificity.

According to Ionin and colleagues, a language, which has two articles, will have one value or the other: *specificity* or *definiteness*. Ionin and colleagues argue that articles are distinguished on the basis of one – and only one – of these two settings. English has only the *definiteness* setting of the ACP. English uses the article *the* for definite nouns and the article *a* for indefinite nouns regardless of *specificity*. In other words, definiteness functions independently from specificity in English in terms of article choice as the “conditions on specificity can be satisfied, or not satisfied, in both definite and indefinite contexts.” (Ionin et al., 2004, p. 9) The following two examples from Ionin et al. (2004) show a definite specific article (Sentence 5), and a definite non-specific article (Sentence 6).

- 5) I'd like to talk to **the** winner of today's race – she is my best friend!
- 6) I'd like to talk to **the** winner of today's race – whoever that is.

As clear from the above two examples, definiteness is the only crucial factor in the article choice in English. Although Sentence (5) and Sentence (6) differ in terms of specificity (being specific and non-specific, respectively), the appropriate article is the same, namely the definite article *the*.

Table 1
Article Grouping by Definiteness

	+definite	-definite
+specific		
-specific		

Table 2
Article Grouping by Specificity

	+definite	-definite
+specific		
-specific		

Article grouping by definiteness in languages like English (Table 1) and by specificity in languages like Samoan (Table 2)
(Quoted from Ionin et al. 2004, p. 13)

The Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH)

The Fluctuation Hypothesis (henceforth FH), as formulated (the concept of ‘fluctuation’ was first proposed in Ionin, 2003) by Ionin et al. (2004), provides an account for acquisition issues and predicts errors in SLA, incorporating the concept of ‘full access to UG’ and the ‘optional adherence to parameter-settings’ (i.e., the fluctuation between two settings of the same parameter at the same time). In its broad formulation, the FH states:

7) The Fluctuation Hypothesis

- a. L2 learners have full access to UG principles and parameter-settings.
- b. L2 learners fluctuate between different parameter-settings until the input leads them to set the parameter to the appropriate value.

(Ionin et al., 2004, p. 16)

In the context of the acquisition of L2 article system, the FH makes specific predictions to account for the inappropriate (i.e., ungrammatical or non-target) use of articles in L2 (particularly the misuse of articles) taking L1 background into account in its most recent version. The FH for L2 English article choice states, similar to the Full Transfer/Full Access (FT/FA) hypothesis, that L2 learners have full UG access to the two settings of the ACP (*definiteness* and *specificity*), and that L2 learners fluctuate between the two settings (hence, they would go back and forth between the use of *the* and the use of *a*) until the input (once sufficient) guides them to set this parameter to the target system value (i.e., *definiteness* for English).

8) The FH for L2 English article choice:

- a. L2 learners have full UG access to the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter in ([2]).
- b. L2 learners fluctuate between the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter until the input leads them to set this parameter to the appropriate value.

(Ionin et al., 2004, p. 17)

According to Ionin et al. (2004), there are two possible scenarios in the FH: fluctuation overriding transfer for both [+article] and [-article] L1 L2-English learners regardless of whether their L1s are [+article] or [-article], OR transfer overriding fluctuation only for [+article] L1 English L2 learners. The FH is similar to the FT/FA in that it incorporates the concepts of L1 transfer, full access to UG, and parameter-setting and resetting; however, the FH predicts

fluctuation in article choice for early L2 learners, especially when their L1 lacks articles and L2 has them. So, while the FH makes an explicit prediction about the use of articles by [-article] L1 learners (fluctuation in the absence of L1 transfer), it leaves the door open for two possibilities with [+article] L1 learners: L1 transfer or fluctuation between the two UG-instantiated parameter settings.

Ionin et al. (2004) investigated the acquisition of articles by L1 Russian and L1 Korean (both languages are article-less) intermediate and advanced L2 learners of English using a forced-choice elicitation task and a written production task. Ionin and colleagues did not predict L1 transfer since these two languages lack article systems but rather proposed – according to the FH – that both the L1 Russian and L1 Korean L2-English learners had access to both parameter settings: *definiteness* and *specificity*. Assuming that the learners did not know which setting is appropriate for English articles, the prediction was that the learners will fluctuate between the two possibilities until the input guides them to the target setting of the ACP (*definiteness* for English). The results confirmed their prediction of fluctuation, revealing two types of errors: overuse of the article *the* with indefinites especially in [-definite, +specific] context and overuse of *a* with definites, especially in [+definite, -specific] context. Ionin et al. (2004) attribute the committed errors – hence the fluctuation – to an occasional (optional) association of the article *the* with the feature [+specific] instead of the feature [+definite] and the article *a* with the feature [-specific] rather than the feature [-definite]. Ionin et al. (2004) concluded that errors in article choice in L2 English are not random but rather reflect “L2 learners’ access to the universal semantic distinctions of definiteness and specificity.” (p. 41)

Snape (2005) examined the acquisition of articles by L1 Japanese (a language that lacks articles) and L1 Spanish (a language that has articles) intermediate and advanced learners of L2 English using the same forced-choice elicitation task from Ionin et al. (2004). Snape predicted that the Japanese learners of English will overuse the definite article in all indefinite specific contexts because their L1 does not have an article system (i.e., fluctuation will override transfer). The results were similar to those of Ionin et al. (2004) in that the intermediate/advanced Japanese learners overused *the* in the singular and plural [-definite, +specific] contexts but not in the indefinite mass (non-count) noun contexts. The Spanish learners were more accurate and demonstrated less fluctuation. Therefore, Snape (2005) concluded that the Japanese learners fluctuated between definiteness and specificity.

Reid et al. (2006), as cited in Snape et al. (2006), tested 14 intermediate Japanese and nine intermediate Spanish L2-English learners in both the [-definite, +specific] and [+definite, -specific] contexts using the same forced choice elicitation task from Ionin et al. (2004). The results showed that the Japanese learners overused *the* in [-definite, +specific] contexts and overused *a* in [+definite, -specific] contexts, meaning that these participants fluctuated between definiteness and specificity as predicted by the FH. By contrast, the Spanish learners did not fluctuate and were as much accurate as the native controls.

In Hawkins et al. (2006), the intermediate L1 Japanese L2-English learners fluctuated between definiteness and specificity in [-definite, +specific] singular and plural count noun contexts by oversupplying the definite article *the* instead of the correct articles (*a* for indefinite singular nouns and the zero-article for indefinite plural nouns). In the same study, the L1 Greek

(a language with *definiteness* articles) L2-English learners did not fluctuate between definiteness and specificity but rather used the correct articles.

Zdorenko and Paradis (2007) report longitudinal data from child learners of English, with both [+article] L1s (Spanish, Romanian, and Arabic) and [-article] L1s (Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Japanese). In the early stages of acquisition, the [-article] L1 group omitted articles in obligatory contexts more frequently than the [+article] group did, suggesting that L1 transfer was in progress. Moreover, the results showed that the participants from the [-article] group overused the article *the* in [-definite, +specific] contexts. This behavior (the overuse of *the*) was not uncommon for the participants from the [+article] group, an observation that caused Zdorenko and Paradis (2007) to question the validity of the FH.

In White (2008), the L1 Mandarin learners of L2 English oversupplied the definite article *the* (to replace *a*) with indefinite specific nouns, demonstrating a fluctuation behavior that was predicted by the FH. There were no sufficient contexts of the type [+definite, -specific] in her experiment to examine the other direction of fluctuation – namely the overuse of the indefinite article *a*.

Jaensch and Sarko (2009) examined the use of English articles by L1 Arabic learners of English. Their results showed that the Arabic L2-English learners used the definite article *the* very accurately in definite contexts, suggesting a transfer of the semantic feature ‘definiteness’ from their L1 (Arabic). However, the same learners fluctuated between the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a* in indefinite specific contexts, a pattern that was not observed for the Japanese learners of L2 German in the same study.

In summary, the findings of several studies of the use of articles by L2-English learners demonstrated fluctuation between the two values of ACP by beginner and/or intermediate learners, whose first language lacks articles. This fluctuation behavior is characterized with the overuse (i.e., oversuppliance) of the definite article *the* in [-definite, +specific] semantic context and, to a lower degree, the overuse of the indefinite article *a* in [+definite, -specific] context. Very few studies examined the use of articles by English language learners whose first language is Arabic. The significance of examining learners with L1 Arabic background comes from the article system of Arabic. Despite being an article language that encodes definiteness, Arabic does not have a morphologically-marked article for indefinite nouns; hence it is not a truly two-article language. Therefore, the present study examines the use of English articles by L1 Arabic learners of English of varying levels of proficiency. In the following section, I briefly review the article system in Arabic.

Articles in English and Arabic

As pointed out earlier, English is an article language with two articles that encode definiteness (definite vs. indefinite) but not specificity (specific vs. non-specific). On the one hand, the article *the* is used with definite singular and plural count nouns and mass nouns regardless of specificity (see examples 2a and 2b). On the other hand, the indefinite article *a/an* is used with indefinite singular count nouns regardless of specificity (see examples 3a and 3b).

Arabic, just like English, has only the *definiteness* setting of the ACP. In other words, Arabic has a grammaticalized way of encoding definiteness but not specificity. This is true for

both Standard Arabic and the vernaculars. Similar to English, definiteness is marked morphologically in Arabic (Watson, 2002). The definite article *al-* is prefixed to common singular or plural nouns and mass nouns to mark definiteness as the following examples show.

9) al-baytu kabeerun
the-house big
'The house is big.'

10) al-baytu al-kabeer
the-house the-big
'the big house'

While Arabic does not have a morpheme for the indefinite article, indefiniteness is marked phonologically (only in Standard Arabic) at the end of the indefinite noun. In most Arabic vernaculars (including Jordanian Arabic), indefinite nouns are unmarked morphologically or phonologically. The following example sentences (11, 12) show how Standard Arabic encodes indefiniteness.

11) Baytun_{indef.} kabeerun
a house big
'a big house'

12) yaskunu fi baytin_{indef.} kabeerin
he lives in a house big
'He lives in a big house.'

The following two examples demonstrate how *definiteness* operates independently from *specificity* in Arabic. While example (13) features a definite non-specific noun, example (14) includes a definite specific noun. In both cases, the noun is marked with the definite article (*al-*) regardless of specificity.

13) uriidu an atakallama ma' al-fa'izi ayyan kan
1st person want to 1st person talk with def-winner whoever
'I want to talk to the winner whoever he is.'

14) uriidu an atakallama ma' al-fa'izi huwa Sadiiqi
1st person want to 1st person talk with def-winner he is my friend
'I want to talk to the winner; he is my friend.'

Empirical Study: Elicitation Study Of L2 English Article Choice

The present study examined cross-sectional data from English L2 adults from an [+article] L1 background (Arabic) to address the following research questions (some of the questions were adapted to adult L2 acquisition from Zdorenko and Paradis, 2007).

- 1) How does English proficiency affect the use of English articles? Will advanced learners reach native-like performance?

- 2) What type of errors will L1 Arabic L2-English learners make when using English articles? What errors are more common: overuse of *the*, overuse of *a*, or article omission?
- 3) Will fluctuation override transfer or will transfer override fluctuation? In other words, will the participants transfer definiteness from their L1 (Arabic) into their L2 English? Or will they fluctuate between the two settings of the ACP?
- 4) If fluctuation takes place, does it result in the same errors reported by Ionin et al. (2004) for [-article] L1s, namely, misuse of *the* in [-definite, +specific] contexts, and misuse of *a* in [+definite, -specific] contexts? This study predicts to see this error pattern at least for the low proficiency L2-English learners.
- 5) How do the different semantic contexts interact with the accuracy of article use? In other words, is there any specific semantic context where the L2-English learners are more likely to make errors?

Participants:

The participants in this study were 30 adult L1 Arabic L2-English learners. All of them were native speakers of Jordanian Arabic (an [+article] language). All of the participants were ungraduated students in the Department of English Language and Literature at Yarmouk University at the time of the study. Therefore, all of the participants were bilinguals in Arabic and English with a length of English language exposure that ranged between 12 years and 14 years. None of the participants stayed in an English-speaking country for more than three months. In order to determine their proficiency levels, all of the participants in this study were asked to complete a 50 multiple-choice-item written proficiency test that was modified from the *Examination for the Certificate of Proficiency in English (ECPE) 2003-2004* in the English Language Institute in the University of Michigan. The following ECPE grade thresholds were identified for the purpose of classifying the learners into low proficiency (beginner), intermediate, and advanced learners: (≤ 40 = low proficiency, $40 <$ intermediate ≤ 80 , $80 < =$ advanced).

Material and procedures:

The experiment elicited the participants' use of articles using a forced-choice elicitation task developed after Ionin et al. (2004) and Ju (2000). The task consisted of 50 short English-language dialogues in total (40 experimental and 10 fillers). The target sentence in each dialogue had a missing article. The participants were asked to read the short dialogues and circle the item which they thought to be more grammatical out from three possible items: the indefinite article, the definite article, and the null article (a, the, $__$) based on the preceding context. Proper names were excluded from being target nouns (DPs) in the task to avoid the grammatical occurrence of null articles. All of the target DPs were singular and all the target items were always in object position. The elicited data from the task were coded. The analysis targeted article use (instances of *a*, *the*, and \emptyset) in all contexts.

Item Types from the Forced-Choice Elicitation Task

The task included the following four types of contexts as a result of the interaction of the following conditions: definite/indefinite, specific/nonspecific. The following are examples of the four semantic contexts. For the complete list of items, see Ionin et al. (2004).

[+definite, +specific]

Conversation between two police officers

Police Officer Clark: I haven't seen you in a long time. You must be very busy.

Police Officer Smith: Yes. Did you hear about Miss Sarah Andrews, a famous lawyer who was murdered several weeks ago? We are trying to find (a, the,—) murderer of Miss Andrews—his name is Roger Williams, and he is a well-known criminal.

[+definite, -specific]

Conversation between a police officer and a reporter

Reporter: Several days ago, Mr. James Peterson, a famous politician, was murdered! Are you investigating his murder?

Police officer: Yes. We are trying to find (a, the, —) murderer of Mr. Peterson—but we still don't know who he is.

[-definite, +specific]

In an airport, in a crowd of people who are meeting arriving passengers

Man: Excuse me, do you work here?

Security guard: Yes.

Man: In that case, perhaps you could help me. I am trying to find (a, the,—) red-haired girl; I think that she flew in on Flight 239.

[-definite, -specific]**Indefinite, narrow scope, no speaker knowledge**

In a children's library

Child: I'd like to get something to read, but I don't know what myself.

Librarian: Well, what are some of your interests? We have books on any subject.

Child: Well, I like all sorts of things that move – cars, trains. . . . I know! I would like to get (a, the, —) book about airplanes! I like to read about flying!

Results and Discussion

In this section, the results of the present study are presented and discussed. The results are first reported for the whole group of participants across all proficiency levels and all semantic contexts. After this, the result presentation and discussion are broken down by proficiency level and semantic context.

Overall, the results show that the participants were accurate in 73% of the cases (879 correct article choices out of 1,200 possible choices) in terms of their article choice. In other words, the participants made errors in about 27% of the cases (= 321 incorrect choices). As shown in Figure 1, the most common error was article omission (15%) followed by the overuse (i.e., misuse) of *the* (7%) in indefinite contexts and the overuse of *a* (6%) in definite contexts.

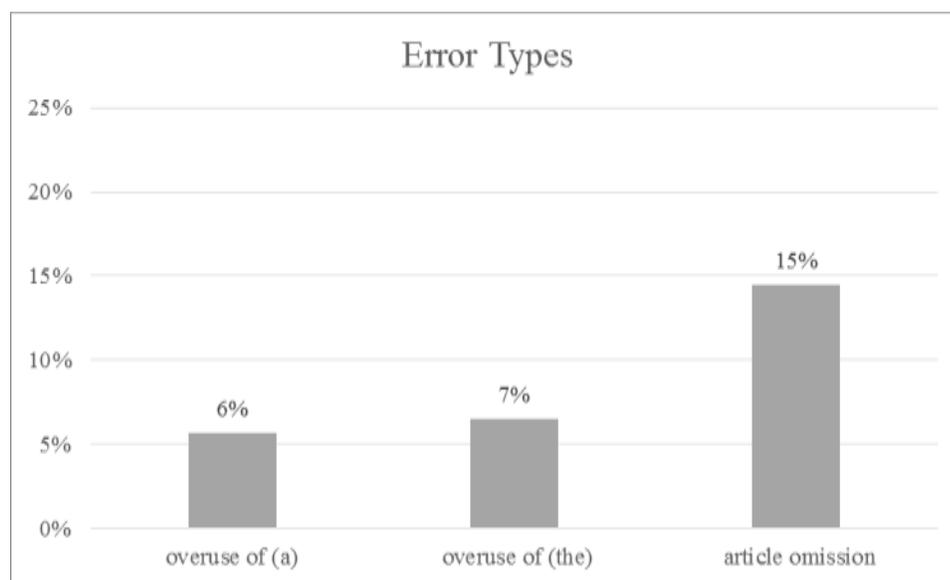


Figure 1 Error Types (rounded values)

In terms of semantic context, the participants were more accurate in the definite contexts ([+definite, +specific], [+definite, -specific]) than in the indefinite contexts ([-definite, +specific], [-definite, -specific]) as shown in Table 3 below. The lower accuracy with the article use with indefinite nouns may be attributed to the fact that Arabic, whether Standard Arabic or the vernaculars, does not mark indefinite nouns morphologically.

Table 3 Article Accuracy per Semantic Context (across all proficiency levels)

Semantic Context	[+definite, +specific]	[+definite, -specific]	[-definite, +specific]	[-definite, -specific]
Accuracy %	%83	%76	%59	%73

As predicted, there was a strong correlation between English proficiency and article accuracy: the higher the proficiency, the higher the accuracy in terms of article use. Overall, the advanced learners reached native-like performance on articles (96.5%) and were more accurate than the intermediate learners (74%), who in turn outperformed the low proficiency participants (49.5%). As shown in Table 4, this proficiency advantage was consistent throughout all semantic contexts. In other words, the more proficient the participant was, the more accurate he/she was in terms of the use of English articles regardless of the semantic context: ± definite, ± specific.

Table 4 Article Accuracy (%) per Proficiency Level and Semantic Context

	[+definite, +specific]	[+definite, -specific]	[-definite, +specific]	[-definite, -specific]
Advanced	100.0%	96.7%	87.5%	100.0%
Intermediate	85.0%	80.0%	57.5%	71.7%
Low	65.0%	51.7%	32.5%	48.3%

Interestingly, the order of accuracy was the same for the low proficiency and intermediate learners: [+definite, +specific], [+definite, -specific], [-definite, -specific], and [-definite, +specific], from the most accurate to the least accurate. Two generalizations can be captured about all of the participating learners across all proficiency levels. First, the learners were more accurate in the two definite contexts than in the two indefinite contexts. Second, the semantic context [-definite, +specific] was the most problematic for all of the learners. The low accuracy of article use in this semantic context – especially by the low proficiency learners (32.5%) and the intermediate proficiency learners (57.5%) – seems to support the FH, suggesting that the learners may have fluctuated between *definiteness* and *specificity* in this context resulting in the high rate of errors. The other crucial context for fluctuation ([+definite, -specific]) was problematic as well – though to a lesser degree than the [-definite, +specific] context – for the low proficiency learners (51.7%) and the intermediate learners (80%). However, this context was more problematic for the learners than the context [-definite, -specific], a context in which fluctuation is not predicted according to the FH. Therefore, we need to examine the distribution of errors (misuse of *the*, misuse of *a*, and article omission) in all contexts before we can make any conclusions about whether fluctuation took place or not.

We now turn to the analysis of the different types of article errors for the different levels of proficiency per each semantic context. As shown in Table 5 below, the advanced learners, who performed at a native-like level, committed no errors in the following two semantic contexts: [+definite, +specific] and [-definite, -specific], and they made very few errors in the semantic context [+definite, -specific], where they slightly overused (3%) the indefinite article instead of the target article (*the*). For the advanced learners, the least accurate context was the [-definite, +specific] context, in which they made errors in 13% of the times: 5% overuse of the definite article and 8% article omission. These results indicate that the semantic context [-definite, +specific] was the only (slightly) problematic context for the Arabic advanced learners of English.

Table 5. Error Type (%) per Proficiency Level and Semantic Context

	[+definite, +specific]			[+definite, -specific]			[-definite, +specific]			[-definite, -specific]		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Advanced	0%	n/a	0%	3%	n/a	0%	n/a	5%	8%	n/a	0%	0%
Intermediate	8%	n/a	8%	8%	n/a	12%	n/a	8%	35%	n/a	13%	15%
Low	10%	n/a	25%	33%	n/a	15%	n/a	33%	35%	n/a	22%	30%

1 = overuse of *a*, 2 = overuse of *the*, 3 = article omission (n/a refers to the target article context)

Unlike the advanced learners, the intermediate learners and the low proficiency learners made several article errors in all semantic contexts. The intermediate learners omitted articles in 16.5% of the cases (total = 66 omissions in all contexts), with 70% of these articles being omitted in the two [-definite] contexts. The low proficiency learners omitted articles in 25.5% of the cases (total = 102 omissions in all contexts), with 63% of the omitted articles being in the two [-definite] contexts. In other words, the low proficiency learners and the intermediate learners together were responsible for about 97% of the article omission errors in the data. As

pointed out earlier, the high rates of article omission by the low proficiency and the intermediate learners in the indefinite contexts may be attributed to the lack of a morphological marker of indefinite nouns in Arabic. In other words, the high rate of article omission errors in indefinite contexts by these learners suggests an L1 transfer, whereby the learners transfer the absence of a morphological marker for indefinite singular nouns from their L1 Arabic into their L2 English.

In one of its two scenarios, the FH predicts fluctuation in the [+definite, -specific] and [-definite, +specific] semantic contexts (but not in the [+definite, +specific] and [-definite, -specific] contexts) as a result of the interference between the UG notions of *definiteness* and *specificity*. To put this in more concrete terms, the prediction was that the learners will overuse the article *a* in the [+definite, -specific] context and will overuse the article *the* in the [-definite, +specific] context. Indeed, the results show that the low proficiency learners overused the indefinite article in 33% of the [+definite, -specific] contexts but overused the same article in only 10% of the [+definite, +specific] contexts, suggesting that the indefinite article *a* was occasionally associated with the feature [-specific]. Similarly, the low proficiency learners overused the definite article in 33% of the times in the [-definite, +specific] contexts but overused the same article in only 22% of the times in the [-definite, -specific] contexts, suggesting that the definite article *the* was occasionally associated with the feature [+specific].

The fluctuation was less pronounced, if any, for the intermediate learners, who overused the indefinite article equally (8%) in each of the two definite contexts: the [+definite, +specific] context and the [-definite, -specific] context, suggesting that *specificity* (\pm specific) did not play a role in the article choice at this level of proficiency. As for the indefinite contexts, the intermediate learners overused the definite article in only 8% of the [-definite, +specific] contexts and in about 13% of the [-definite, -specific] contexts, again showing a very little influence of *specificity*.

A further interesting result of this study is the high rate of article omission errors in the low proficiency and intermediate learners' data. Not only did these learners – unlike the advanced learners – omit articles in all semantic contexts, but they also omitted articles more frequently in the [-definite] contexts than in the [+definite] contexts. On the one hand, the low proficiency learners omitted articles in 35% of the times in the [-definite, +specific] context (but only in 25% of the times in its definite counterpart context: [+definite, +specific]) and in 30% of the times in the [-definite, -specific] context (but only 15% in its definite counterpart context: [+definite, -specific]). On the other hand, the intermediate learners omitted articles in 35% of the [-definite, +specific] contexts (but only in 8% of the definite counterpart contexts: [+definite, +specific]) and in 15% of the [-definite, -specific] contexts (but 12% in the definite counterpart contexts: [+definite, -specific]). These results reveal that the feature specification of *definiteness* (+definite vs. -definite) rather than *specificity* (+specific vs. -specific) is the crucial factor in article omission. As pointed out earlier, the high rates of article omission errors in the indefinite contexts compared with the omission rates in the definite contexts suggest a strong L1 (Arabic) influence whereby the learners transfer the zero-article for indefinite singular nouns from Arabic into their interlanguage English.

Conclusion

This study examined the acquisition of the English article system by Arabic L2-English learners in four linguistic contexts contrasted based on the semantic features: \pm definite and \pm specific. The theoretical framework of this study was the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FA), which

incorporates the Article Choice Parameter (ACP). The most important results of this study are summarized below.

There was a strong correlation between English language proficiency and the use of English articles by the Arabic learners with the advanced learners almost having converged to the target system of articles in English in all of the semantic contexts examined in this study. The low proficiency learners fluctuated between definiteness and specificity in the two crucial mismatching semantic contexts: [+definite, -specific] and [-definite, +specific], overusing the indefinite article in the former context and overusing the definite article in the latter context. However, the intermediate learners did not fluctuate between definiteness and specificity. Contrary to the results of previous studies (e.g., Snape, 2005), article omission in obligatory contexts – and not article overuse – was the most common error among the low proficiency and intermediate learners. The fact that Arabic beginner and intermediate learners of English omitted many articles in the indefinite contexts, regardless of specificity, provides evidence in support of L1 transfer or, to use Ionin et al.'s (2004) term, that L1 transfer overrode fluctuation.

The fluctuation behavior of the low proficiency learners and the L1-driven omission of articles in obligatory contexts by both the low proficiency and intermediate learners – combined together – suggest a development model for the acquisition of English articles by Arabic L2-English learners. This model makes use of the three available sources of linguistic knowledge in SLA – namely, L2 input, L1 transfer, and UG (see Ionin et al., 2008 for a discussion of the interplay of these sources). Early in this acquisition path, I propose, fluctuation and L1 transfer operate simultaneously, resulting in two types of errors: *a/the* overuse (source is UG-based fluctuation) and article omission (source is L1 transfer), hence the poor performance on articles by beginner learners. This stage is followed by a stage where the input starts guiding the learners to the appropriate value of ACP – hence they stop fluctuating (resulting in fewer overuse errors) but still omit articles in obligatory contexts. The final stage is one where the fine input processing guides the learners to reach target-like performance.

The pedagogical implications of these results point to the importance of incorporating the concept of *specificity* alongside the concept of *definiteness* in English language teaching curricula, especially for early learners. Classroom input should provide learners with comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981) through meaningful contexts (similar to the pragmatic contexts in this study) in order to trigger the setting of the ACP to the target value in English (i.e., definiteness). Finally, classroom input should provide learners with sufficient input about the use of indefinite articles with indefinite singular count nouns in order to trigger a shift from the use of a zero article with such nouns.

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