USE OF ENGLISH ARTICLES BY SPEAKERS OF TURKISH
IN THE EFL SETTING[*]

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Abstract: This study mainly investigates L1-Turkish speakers' article choice in L2-English. In the study participants' answers were analyzed on the basis of the following semantic features: *definiteness*, *specificity* and *partitivity*. This study also examines whether the article choice of the participants varies according to their proficiency levels in L2-English. The data collection instrument adopted in this study was a fill-in-the-blanks test which included six types of sentences. The test was administered to 30 low-proficiency and 30 high-proficiency level participants. The results of the fill-in-the-blanks test showed that accuracy rates in six types of sentences were higher than the overuses. In other words, the participants of the study did not associate article *the* with [+specific] contexts and *a* with [-specific] contexts. It was also found that the overuse of article *the* did not reach its maximum level in [+partitive, +specific] contexts. Considering that this study also investigates the article choice of the participants of different proficiency levels, it is clear that the results of the current study are in the line with the previous literature which evidences the role of proficiency in the article choice in L2-English.

Key words: English articles, article choice, definiteness, specificity, partitivity.

Özet: Bu çalışma başlıca Türkçe anadil konuşucularının ikinci dil olarak edindikleri İngilizcedeki tanımlık tercihlerini incelemektedir. Katılımcıların yanıtları belirlilik, özgüllük ve tikellik olan anlamsal özellikler açısından analiz edilmiştir. Bu çalışma ayrıca katılımcıların tanımlık tercihlerinde ikinci dil olarak edindikleri İngilizcedeki yeterlilik seviyelerine göre farklılık gösterip göstermediğini araştırmaktadır. Bu çalışmada kullanılan veri toplama aracı altı tip cümleyi içeren boşluk doldurma testidir. Test 30 düşük-yeterlilik ve 30 yüksek yeterlilik seviyesindeki katılımcılara uygulanmıştır.Boşluk doldurma testinin sonuçları altı tip cümledeki doğruluk oranlarının aşırı kullanımlardan yüksek olduğunu göstermiştir. Başka bir deyişle, çalışmanın katılımcıları *the* tanımlığını [+özgül] bağlam ile; *a* tanımlığını ise [-özgül] bağlam ile ilişkilendirmemiştir. Ayrıca *the* tanımlığının aşırı kullanımının [+özgül, +tikel] bağlamda en üst seviyeye ulaşmadığı da bulunmuştur. Bu çalışmanın farklı yeterlilik seviyelerindeki katılımcıların tanımlık kullanımlarını da incelediği düşünüldüğünde, mevcut çalışmanın sonuçlarının yeterliliğin ikinci dil olarak edinilen İngilizcedeki tanımlık tercihlerindeki rolünü kanıtlayan önceki alanyazın ile aynı doğrultuda olduğu görülür.

Anahtar sözcükler: İngilizce tanımlıklar, tanımlık tercihi, belirlilik, özgüllük, tikellik.

Introduction

The acquisition of English article system by the speakers of other languages has been investigated for many years. The popularity of the topic arises from several reasons one of which is that English articles are among the free morphemes that occur most frequently in English (Master, 1997). This study mainly focuses on the acquisition of English article system which defines *definiteness*, *specificity* and *partitivity* as semantic features. The definitions of these semantic features were adopted from Ionin and Wexler (2002), and Ko et al. (2008). *Definiteness* is defined by Ionin and Wexler (2002:150) as the following:

… a DP is definite iff its referent is known to both speaker and hearer, and is unique in the contextually relevant domain. Otherwise, the DP is indefinite.

According to the definition proposed by Ionin and Wexler (2002:150), the knowledge of a definite NP (Noun Phrase) is shared by the speaker and the hearer. In (1a) the speaker and the hearer share the knowledge of a unique *film*. Thus the NP receives *the* which marks *definiteness* in English. However in (1b) the referent is not salient to the speaker and the hearer. Therefore, *indefiniteness* of the NP is marked by *a*.

(1) a. They are watching *the* film right now- It is an alien invasion film.
     b. They are watching *a* film right now- I don't know when they started to watch it.

Ko et al. (2008:119) define *specificity* as follows:

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

While *definiteness* is marked by using *the*, *a* and *zero article*, *specificity* is not encoded in English. In (2a) the speaker and the hearer share the knowledge of a salient *book* and this referent has a noteworthy property. Therefore, the referent is specific. However, in (2b) noteworthiness and uniqueness of a referent are not provided, thus it is interpreted as non-specific. As seen in the sentences given below, *specificity* is not marked in English. No matter they are specific or not , they receive an article on the basis of *definiteness*.

(2) a. My brother is looking for *a* book- It is on archaeological ethics.
    b. My brother is looking for *a* book. I don't know what it is about.

Presuppositionality is the other semantic feature defined by Ko et al. (2008:120). They made the definition of *presuppositionality* based on Enç (1992) and Diesing (1991) as the following.

If DP of the form [D NP] is [+presuppositional], then the speaker assumes that the hearer shares the presupposition of the existence of a unique individual in the set denoted by NP.

They asserted that *presuppositionality* is established either by introducing a set that the referent belongs to or by mutual world knowledge. In their study, Ko et al. (2008:120) they defined the first type of *presuppositionality* as *partitivity* which is similar to previous-mentioned *definiteness* except for uniqueness. In (3), *hat* belongs to a set that includes *bikinis*, *hats*, *towels*, *suncreams* and this set was introduced before; thus it has a partitive reading.

(3) Before going to beach trip she had to buy many things: bikinis, hats, towels, sunglasses and suncreams. But she was able to buy *a* hat as she was nearly broke!

One of the hypotheses proposed by the researchers on the article use is Ionin et al.'s (2003: 248) *The Article Choice Parameter* which is a classification of languages on the basis of *definiteness* and *specificity*. According to *The Article Choice Parameter, Setting I* denotes articles which are distinguished in terms of *specificity* while Setting II denotes articles distinguished on the basis of *definiteness*. Ionin et al. (2003) illustrate the settings with Samoan and English. Samoan is a language marking *specificity* while English is a language that marks *definiteness*. Having proposed a parameter on languages on the basis of *specificity* and *definiteness*, Ionin et al. (2003:248) claimed that the L2-learners have access to both

settings. However, the lack of the input causes fluctuation between *Setting I* and *Setting II*. Ionin et al. (2003) predicted the use of articles as the following:

When L2-English learners adopt Setting I, they use *the* with definites and specific indefinites, and *a* with non-specific indefinites. When they adopt Setting II, they use *the* with definites, and *a* with all indefinites (specific and non-specific).

As noted above, according to *The Article Choice Parameter* L2-English learners are expected to use *the* with definites and *a* with specific and non-specific definites. However, the fluctuation is observed in specific indefinites.

Literature Review

As mentioned before English article choice by the speakers of other languages has been the focus of study for years. In this section, the studies which made use of a similar test instruments and the ones which included L1-Turkish participants were briefly mentioned.
Upon the proposal of Article Choice parameter, Ionin et al. (2003) carried out a research that included 50 L1-Russian and 38 L1-Korean learners of English. The tasks they used were a fill-in-the-blanks test and a proficiency test. The results of the study showed that the intermediate and advanced L2-English learners used *the* with definites and *a/some/zero article* with non-specific indefinites. However, they used *the* and *a* interchangeably in specific indefinites. The results supported the hypothesis which predicted that L2-English learners fluctuate between the two settings of the *Article Choice Parameter.*

Ko et al. (2006) investigated the *partitivity* effect in L2-English of L1-Korean speakers. The task used was a forced-choice elicitation task which was administered to 20 participants who were asked to choose an article (*the*, *a* and *no article*) for the blanks provided in the target sentences in each dialogue. According to the findings of the study, participants overused *the* in partitive sentences. They concluded that the L2-learners' errors reflected a systematic access to *definiteness*, *specificity* and *partitivity.*
In 2008, Ionin et al. examined the sources of linguistic knowledge in second language acquisition of English articles. They investigated the role of three factors: the L2-input, the structures of L2-English learners' native language and the innate linguistic knowledge (2008:554). The participants were 23 adult speakers of Russian and 24 adult speakers of Spanish. The instrument adopted was a fill-in-the-blanks test including 60 dialogues. The results of the study showed that the speakers of the [+ART] (ARTICLE) language (Spanish in the study) were able to transfer the article semantics from their L1 to their L2. However, the speakers of [-ART] language (Russian in the study) were not able to transfer the article semantics from their native language to their L2. Ionin et al. (2008: 574) concluded that a combination of UG-access and input processing play role in their learning.
The *partitivity* effect and the role of L1 in L2-English were investigated by Ko et al. (2008). A forced-choice elicitation task was administered to 30 adult L1-Serbo-Crotian speakers and 20 adult L1-Korean speakers. The results of the study showed that the participants overused *the* with indefinites when the context was [+partitive] or [+specific] and they overused *the* at the maximum level in [+partitive, +specific] context. Additionally, they found that *specificity* was accessible for Korean speakers while it was weak or non-existent for Serbo-Crotian speakers. Considering the fact that both of the languages lack article system, Ko et al. (2008) concluded that the difference stemmed from the overall L2-proficiency between two groups.
There are few studies carried out on the acquisition of English article system by the speakers of Turkish which were administered similar test instruments.Yılmaz (2006) investigated the role of L1 in the interlanguage of Turkish speakers. She administered picture description,

writing and fill-in-the-article tasks to two groups of participants which included 20 beginner and 20 advanced level students. According to the findings of Yılmaz's (2006) study, Turkish learners of English could make semantic distinctions among different contexts. Yılmaz (2006) concluded that there was not clear evidence for persistent L1 effect in the use of the English article system.

In another study including L1-Turkish participants, Önen (2007) investigated the effect of context and task type on the use of English article. Önen (2007) administered two tests: a multiple choice task and written production task. The participants of the study were 30 Turkish students who were at beginner, intermediate and advanced levels of English. Önen's (2007) study also revealed that the proficiency level of participants, the contexts of NPs and the task types were effective in the use of the English article system.

Research Questions

This study aims to examine the choice of English article system by the speakers of Turkish to compare with the previous studies. The participants' article choice is also taken into consideration on the basis of proficiency levels. The current study addresses the following research questions:

    a. How do L1-Turkish speakers mark [+specific] and [-specific] contexts?

    b. How do L1-Turkish speakers mark [+partitive, +specific] contexts?

    c. Does accuracy of article use vary in all types of sentences with respect to proficiency level?

Method

Participants

The participants of the study were L1-Turkish speakers of L2-English. They were college students studying at an English-medium university in Turkey. The test was administered to two proficiency groups which were low- and high-proficiency groups, each including 30 participants. The mean age of all participants is 20.45 and the groups included 27 males and 33 females.

The low-proficiency level group consisted of participants who started to study at the preparatory school at their university and took DBE (Department of Basic English) 101 Beginner's level course. On the other hand, the high-proficiency level group consisted of participants studying at various departments such as Chemistry, Psychology and Elementary Mathematics Education. All participants took part in the study on a voluntary basis; none of them was paid or received academic credit for participating.

Test Instrument

The data collection method adopted in this study is a kind of short-answer test. Due to the fact that short answers tests prevent learners from recognizing the answer from selected-response items (Holt and Kysilka, 2006) and answering correctly by merely guessing (van Blerkom, 2009), a fill-in-the-blanks test was administered to participants.

The fill-in-the-blanks test was modeled after the one used in Ionin et.'s (2009) study. The number of the items used in the current test was 40, which included 30 critical items and 10 fillers. The 30 critical items represented 6 semantic contexts which were embodied in 5 test items for each. These semantic contexts are [+definite, -partitive, +specific], [+definite, -partitive, -specific], [-definite, -partitive, +specific], [-definite, -partitive, -specific], [-definite,

+partitive, +specific] and [-definite, +partitive, -specific]. The contexts which are [+definite], require *the* while all other contexts require *a* as they are [-definite].

The test items included a short dialogue which included a blank. Some of the test items were introduced by the context in which the dialogue took place. Filler items of the test targetted a range of words such as pronouns, auxiliaries.

The procedure followed to adminster the test was initiated by the permission sought to apply the test. On the test day, the participants were told to have a fill-in-the-blanks task which tested certain structures in English and the data they provided would be used in a research study. The participants were told to complete the personal details at the very beginning of the test, then the researcher read the instructions loudly to the class. When asked, explanations in Turkish were provided for low-proficiency group. The participants were told to fill in the blanks with the most appropriate word that they thought was grammatically correct or with a dash (-), if they thought the sentence needed no change. The participants were not allowed to use dictionary and time alloted to the participants was approximately 25 minutes.

The Data Coding

The coding process was started by marking sentence types and fillers in the test. The 6 sentence types defines 6 semantic contexts which are Type 1 sentences [+definite, -partitive, +specific], Type 2 sentences [+definite, -partitive, -specific], Type 3 sentences [-definite, -partitive, +specific], Type 4 sentences [-definite, -partitive, -specific], Type 5 sentences [-definite, +partitive, +specific] and Type 6 sentences [-definite, +partitive, -specific].

The statistical analysis of the test was made by using SPSS 11.5 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Answers elicited from participants were coded in four labels which are 1.00 = "the", 2.00 = "a/an", 3.00 = "dash" and 9.00 = "other". The variables of the test were also included sex, age, proficiency level of English, department, foreign language and proficiency level in this language.

Results

In order to analyze the use of English articles by the speakers of Turkish, the frequency distribution of the articles supplied by the participants was given.

Table (1) Accuracy rates of six sentence types

Context	Target Article	Accuracy Rate
Type 1 *[+definite,-partitive, +specific]*	the	73.0%
Type 2 *[+definite, -partitive, -specific]*	the	70.0%
Type 3 *[-definite, -partitive, +specific]*	a/an	69.33%
Type 4 *[-definite,- partitive, -specific]*	a/an	74.66%
Type 5 *[-definite,+partitive,+specific]*	a/an	68.66%
Type 6 *[-definite,+partitive, -specific]*	a/an	74.33%

At the beginning of the analysis process, the reliability coefficient of the test, Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20), was calculated and it came out to be 0.85, which means the test can be considered reliable.Validity studies of the sentence types were also performed and found that except for one item (0.26), which may need a change in further studies, all items can be considered valid.

As seen in Table (1), the participants of the study provided *the* at a rate of 73.0% in Type 1 sentences, *the* at a rate of 70.0% in Type 2 sentences, *a/an* at a rate of 69.33% in Type 3

sentences, *a/an* at a rate of 74.66 % in Type 4 sentences, *a/an* at a rate of 68.66 % in Type 5 sentences, *a/an* at a rate of 74.33 % in Type 6 sentences.

To examine the effects of proficiency level on the article choice, the Mann-Whitney measures were conducted. A significant difference between high-proficiency and low-proficiency groups was found in all types of sentences.

Sentence types which are [+specific] are Type 1 [+definite, -partitive, +specific], Type 3 [-definite, -partitive, +specific] and Type 5 [-definite, +partitive, +specific] sentences in this study. Apart from Type 1 sentences which evidently receive *the* as the NP is definite, Type 3 and Type 5 sentences were taken into consideration. In Type 3 sentences, the participants of the study provided *the* at a rate of 10.0% (30 uses out of 300) and *a/an* at a rate of 69.33% (208 uses out of 300). The words -apart from the articles- provided by the participants constituted 7.33% (22 uses out of 300) of the responses. The rate of missing slots in the test was 10.0% (30 uses out of 300). Similarly, the participants of the study supplied the target article *a/an* at a rate of 68.66% (206/300) in Type 5 sentences which include partitive and specific NPs. The participants substituted *the* at a rate of 14.66 % (44/300), *zero article* at a rate of 3.0% (9/300) and other words at a rate of 4.33% (13/300).

In this study the sentence types which include [-specific] NPs are Type 2 [+definite, -partitive, -specific], Type 4 [-definite, -partitive, -specific] and Type 6 [-definite, +partitive, -specific] sentences. Given that Type 4 and Type 6 sentences naturally receive *a/an* as they are indefinite, Type 2 sentences were taken into consideration. According to the results of the study, participants' use of article *the* for Type 2 sentences amounted to 70% (210 uses out of 300 contexts). The participants used the article *a/an* at a rate of 5.33% (16 uses out of 300 uses) and *zero article* at a rate of 7% (21 uses out of 300 uses). The participants produced answers which were coded as "other" at a rate of 7.33% (22 uses out of 300 contexts) and left sentences unanswered at a rate of 10.33% (31 slots out of 300) contexts.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the current study are partly in line with the previous studies. Firstly, the article choice of the participants of this study is similar to the ones observed in the studies which focused on the article choice of L1-Turkish speakers. Yılmaz (2006) concluded that semantic distinctions among different contexts could be made by Turkish learners of English. She also suggested that L1-Turkish learners could acquire the English article system despite the absence of an article system in their native language. Similarly, Önen (2007:102) found that the accuracy of article use varied in respect to proficiency levels and task types. The current study supports the evidence that semantic distinctions are discriminable by the speakers of Turkish.

Secondly, on the basis of article choice in L2-English by the speakers of different levels of proficiency, the present study showed notable similarities to previous studies. According to these studies, there is a significant difference in article choice between proficiency levels (Master, 1997; Thomas, 1989; Yoon, 1993; Murphy, 1997; Mizuno, 1999; Robertson, 2000; Lu, 2001; Goto-Butler, 2002; Jarvis, 2002; Liu & Gleason, 2002; Ekiert, 2004; among others).

Thirdly, according to the *specificity* distinction proposed by Ko et al. (2008), the L2-English learners were expected to overuse *the* in [+specific] contexts and *a* in [-specific] contexts. In

their study they supported the hypothesis with the evidence by L1-Serbo-Croatian and L1-Korean learners of English. However; in the current study the participants' overuse of *the* in Type 3 [-definite, -partitive, +specific] and Type 5 [-definite, +partitive, +specific] sentences did not outnumber the rate of accuracy. Similarly, Ko et al.'s (2008) hypothesis predicting the overuse of *a* in [-specific] contexts was not supported by the results of this study. The accuracy rate in Type 2 [+definite, -partitive, -specific] sentences was found higher than the overuse of *a*.

As the current study aims to investigate the role of proficiency on article choice, the article uses of the two proficiency levels were also analyzed on the basis of Ko et. al.'s (2008) hypothesis. According to the results of the current study, neither the low- nor the high-proficiency level participants' overuse of *the* and *a* were found higher than the accuracy rates in Type 3, Type 5 sentences and Type 2 sentences, respectively. However, when looked at the performance of proficiency levels, it is seen that there is a significant difference between the low- and the high-proficiency level participants on the basis of providing *a/an* to Type 3 [-definite, -partitive, +specific] and Type 5 [-definite, +partitive, +specific] sentences and the to Type 2 [+definite, -partitive, -specific] sentences. The results showed that the high-proficiency level participants were more successful than the low-proficiency participants at providing the correct articles to [+definite] and [-definite] contexts.

Fourthly, Ko et al.'s (2008: 123-124) prediction on the maximal use of *the* with indefinites in [+partitive, +specific] contexts was also analyzed. In the current study, Type 5 sentences define [-definite, +partitive, +specific] context in which the maximal overuse of *the* was expected. However, according to the results of the study participants used *a/an* more frequently than of *the* in [-definite, +partitive, +specific] context. Additionally, the findings on the perfomance of the proficiency levels revealed that high-proficiency level participants performed better at providing *a/an* to Type 5 sentences.

This study was conducted to investigate the article choice in L1-Turkish learners' L2-English. It can be said that the limitations of this study may have affected the interpretation of the results. Further research which adopts test instruments of both spoken and written performance may produce different results concerning article use in L2-English of L1-Turkish speakers. This might especially be true if the test instruments include more test items per task, and if a greater number of participants are included in the study.

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