

Acquisition of English Article System by Turkish Learners in an EFL Setting

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to examine the ability of Turkish learners of L2 English to acquire parameter values in the target article system that are not present in their native language (Turkish). To test the Fluctuation Hypothesis proposed by Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004), this study adopted a forced choice elicitation test and a written production task adapted from the study mentioned. The results indicate that (a) Turkish EFL learners' use of English article system varies depending on the task type, (b) there is a considerable difference between the rates of errors observed in the elicitation test and the written productions of Turkish EFL learners, (c) there is a difference between the types of errors observed in the elicitation task and written productions of Turkish EFL learners, (d) although learners showed fluctuation in the elicitation test, the occurrence of various types of errors in both of the task types makes Turkish EFL learners' errors in the use of English articles random; not systematic.

Keywords: The English article system, Turkish learners of L2 English

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Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı, İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrencilerinin hedef dilin tanımlık sisteminin anadillerinde var olmayan parametre değerlerini edinebilme yetisini araştırmaktır. Ionin, Ko ve Wexler (2004) tarafından önerilen Fluctuation (Dalgalanma) Hipotezini test etmek üzere bu çalışmada veri toplamak için sözü edilen çalışmadan adapte edilen bir zorunlu seçmeli test ve bir yazılı anlatım ödevi kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar göstermektedir ki: (a) İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin İngilizce tanımlık sistemi kullanımları ödev/test tipine göre farklılık göstermiştir; (b) İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin hata oranlarının zorunlu seçmeli testte ve yazılı anlatımlarında kayda değer farklılıklar gösterdiği gözlemlenmiştir; (c) İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin zorunlu seçmeli testte ve yazılı anlatımlarındaki hata tiplerinde farklılıklar gözlenmiştir; (d) öğrencilerin zorunlu seçmeli testte dalgalanma göstermelerine rağmen her iki test/ödev tipinde çeşitli tiplerdeki hataların yapılması, İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrencilerin İngilizce tanımlık sisteminde yaptıkları hataların sistematik değil tesadüfi olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İngilizce tanımlık sistemi, İngilizce öğrenen Türk öğrenciler

1. Introduction

Research has accepted The English article system as one of the most challenging structural elements for learners to acquire in both second language (ESL) and foreign language (EFL) settings (e.g. Master, 2002; Trenkic, 2008; Ekiert, 2004). The accurate use of English articles seems to be difficult even for those who have a good mastery of the language. Master (2002: 332) puts three principle facts about the article system that can lead to this difficulty: (1) the articles (a, an, the, and Ø zero article) are among the most frequently occurring function words in the language which make continuous conscious rule application difficult over an extended discourse; (2) function words are normally unstressed and consequently very difficult for a learner to distinguish as input in the spoken mode; and (3) the article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme, which causes a considerable burden for the learner, who generally looks for a one-form-one-function correspondence. These features of English article system and the difficulty in acquiring it has made the English article system a point of interest to many researchers in the field. The present study attempts to investigate the acquisition of English article system by Turkish learners of L2 English in a foreign language setting. With this aim, the study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. Does Turkish EFL learners' use of English article system vary depending on two different task types: the forced choice elicitation task and the written production task?
 - a. Is there a difference between the *rates of errors* observed in the forced choice elicitation task and the written productions of Turkish EFL learners?
 - b. Is there a difference between the *types of errors* observed in the forced choice elicitation task and written productions of Turkish EFL learners?
2. Do Turkish EFL learners “fluctuate” (in Ionin, Ko, and Wexler’s (2004) terms) between the two notions of English article system, specificity and definiteness, in their interlanguage grammars?

On the ground of the previous research, this study owns the assumption that errors of the learners in using English articles would be systematic rather than random in nature.

1.1.The English Article System: Definiteness and Specificity

There are parametric differences among languages and articles are one of the areas that are treated differently depending on the different semantic features encoded in individual languages. (Ionin, Ko, and Wexler, 2004). In this study, the focus is on the features *definiteness* and *specificity* in the English

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article system and the terms are defined as they are operationalized in Ionin et al. (2004).

Based on the definition by Fodor and Sag (1982, in Ionin et al. 2004), Ionin et al. (2004; 5) informally define definiteness and specificity as:

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

- a. [+definite], then the speaker and the 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.

Definiteness and specificity are discourse related concepts; definiteness adds the dimension of hearer perspective while specificity adds speaker's intension to refer (Trenkic, 2008). As stated by Dağdeviren (2010), definiteness is marked by using *the*, *a*, and *zero article* while specificity is not encoded in English. Ionin et al. (2004: 8) illustrate the situation as follows:

- (a) I'd like to talk to the winner of today's race – she is my best friend!
- (b) I'd like to talk to the winner of today's race – whoever that is; I'm writing a story about this race 92ord92he newspaper.

They explain that in (a), the speaker is intending to refer to a particular individual who is the winner of today's race and who has the noteworthy property of being the speaker's best friend. In (b), however, the speaker is not intending to refer to a particular individual but simply wants to talk to whoever happens to be the winner of today's race. Therefore, the [D NP] in (a) is specific and the [D NP] in (b) is non-specific. And, as obvious in the examples, the specificity distinction is independent of the definiteness distinction; no matter they are specific or not they receive an article on the basis of definiteness.

On the other hand, Turkish is an [-article] language. That's to say, it doesn't have an article system to mark definiteness and specificity and, as stated by Atay (2010; 25), "it encodes these semantic universals by some other alternative ways such as case morphology, 92ord order, stress, and tense aspect-modality." However, a deeper explanation of the representation of definiteness and specificity in Turkish is beyond the scope of this paper (see Öztürk, 2005 for more detailed information).

1.2.Error Types in the Acquisition of English Articles

As mentioned earlier, most of the L2 English learners have difficulty in acquiring the article system of that language. Those difficulties result in erroneous uses of English articles even by high proficiency learners. The rate of both accurate and erroneous uses of the articles vary depending on the learners' L1. It was found that learners from an [+article] L1 background are more successful in choosing the right article. On the other hand, learners from an [-article] L1 background are reported to have more article errors in fill-in-the-

article tests or free production tasks. This is because “they cannot find a corresponding structure in their already set and existed native language” (Atay, 2010: 9) and “generally look for a one-form-one-function correspondence” (Master, 2002: 332).

To account for the right choice of the articles for two-article languages and to explain the nature of the article errors made by L2 English learners, Ionin et al. (2004) proposed the Article Choice Parameter (ACP) and the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH).

Ionin et al. (2004; 12) explain that, according to the Article Choice Parameter, a language that has two articles distinguishes them as follows:

- (a) The Definiteness Setting: Articles are distinguished on the basis of definiteness.
- (b) The Specificity Setting: Articles are distinguished on the basis of specificity.

Therefore, in English, the possible pattern for article grouping is (a) the definiteness setting. Samoan is another language that is given as an example for (b) the specificity setting.

On the other hand, FH of Tania Ionin (2003, as cited in Ionin et al. 2004) proposes that, L2 English learners can access both settings of the target structure through UG and fluctuate between those two settings (the definiteness setting and the specificity setting) until sufficient input lets them set the correct parameter for the right choice of articles. What the hypothesis proposes further is that, the errors made by the L2 English acquirers are systematic, not random. Therefore, the learners, fluctuating between the definiteness and the specificity, sometimes choose the articles on the basis of definiteness and sometimes on the basis of specificity, which results in going back and forth between *the* and *a*. The predictions of the FH for article choice in L2 English are shown in table below (source: Ionin et al., 2004: 19):

	+definite (Target: <i>the</i>)	-definite (Target: <i>a</i>)
+specific	correct use of <i>the</i>	overuse of <i>the</i>
-specific	overuse of <i>a</i>	correct use of <i>a</i>

Concerning the source of overuse of article errors, Trenkic (2008; 7) states that “in contexts where the values of definiteness and specificity clash (when one is positive and the other is negative), article substitution errors are expected.” Thus, *the* overuse occurs in [-definite, +specific] contexts and *a* overuse in [+definite, -specific] contexts. On the other hand, overuse of the articles *the* and *a*, are not predicted to occur in contexts where the features definiteness and specificity have the same value. That’s to say, in [+definite, +specific] contexts, definite article *the* should be triggered for learners of L2

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English, while in [-definite, -specific] contexts indefinite article *a* should be triggered.

2. Background To The Study

Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH) has been tested in various contexts by different researchers so far. This section presents studies that tested FH in foreign language vs. second language environments (Ekiert, 2004), on learners from [+article] vs. [-article] L1 backgrounds (Ionin, Zubizarreta, and Maldonado, 2008), child learners vs. adult learners (Zdorenko and Paradis, 2008), and learners from various L1 backgrounds such as Japanese, Chinese, Turkish, Russian, Spanish, Polish, etc (Robertson, 2000, Dağdeviren, 2010; Atay, 2010; Butler, 2002 among others).

L1 Japanese learners are among the group that has been investigated in terms of L2 English article acquisition. Kubota (1994) investigated 141 L1 Japanese learners' acquisition order of English articles through a fill-in-the-blanks test and a written composition test and found, in parallel with the previous research, that the definite article was overproduced more (113 times) in [-definite, +specific] contexts rather than in [-definite, -specific] contexts (43 times), which is because of the association of *the* with specificity. He also found no account of task-related variation.

Robertson (2000), in his study, examined the use of English articles in oral productions of 18 L1 Chinese learners. He mostly focused on the tendency of learners to omit the articles and evidenced unsystematic variation (which he uses the term *optionality*) in the use of articles, which is hypothesized as being due to the difficulty in acquiring the correct mapping from the surface features of definiteness and referentiality (i.e. specificity).

Ekiert (2004) investigated the acquisition of English articles by Polish speakers, which is an [-article] language, in ESL and EFL settings. The study reported earlier and more accurate control of *a* in nonreferential contexts independent of the setting. Second, the sharpest increase in levels of accuracy occurred in referential definites (definite article *the*) in both settings and the correct use of *the* increased as the proficiency level increased. As for the erroneous uses, overuse of the *zero* article was common to all proficiency levels with the highest percentage rates; overuse of *the* was observed most with the intermediate level participants; and overuse of the indefinite article *a* was the least observed phenomena with all proficiency levels, which was also consistent with the finding about more accurate control of *a*.

Ekiert (2004) also summarized research on L2 acquisition of English articles examined in different contexts from 1976 to 1997. The studies summarized provided common evidence on (a) higher accuracy of *the* before *a*, (b) developmentally earlier emergence of *the* and later emergence of *a* in learner

language, (c) overgeneralization of *the* resulting in *the*-flooding, and (d) higher overproduction of *zero* in [-article] L1 groups.

Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004) investigated learners from [-article] L1 backgrounds: L1 Russian and L1 Korean learners' acquisition of L2 English articles and the results of the study revealed the learners' fluctuation between definiteness and specificity and supported the Fluctuation Hypothesis. They also accounted for the Article Choice Parameter that constraints learners for the right choice between the two settings of the UG.

Dağdeviren (2010), in her study investigating L1 Turkish speakers' article choice in L2 English, found that (a) accuracy rates were higher than overuses in the fill-in-the-blanks-test, (b) the participants didn't associate *the* with [+specific] contexts and *a* with [-specific] contexts, which may be the reason for higher accuracy rates, and (c) there is evidence for the role of proficiency (between low proficiency and high proficiency learners) in the article choice in L2 English. However, the finding (b) seems to be in contrast with much of the research in which learners from [-Article] L1 background were found to associate *the* with [+Specific] contexts and *a* with [-Specific] contexts (e.g. Kubota, 1994; Ionin et al., 2004; Ekiert, 2004) resulting in overuse of the two articles.

There has been research conducted to investigate the acquisition of L2 English articles by children compared to adults. In their study investigating the acquisition of English article system by [+article] and [- article] L1 background children, Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) found out that (a) children in both groups were more accurate with *the* in definite contexts than with *a* in indefinite contexts; (b) *the* misuse was the dominant error type for both the [+article] and [- article] groups and article omission was a common error type specific to the [-article] group; and (c) all learners demonstrated a fluctuation pattern in their article choice and little L1 influence. They also concluded that, when compared to adults in the previous research, child learners converged faster.

Another dimension brought to the topic under scrutiny by Ionin, Zubizarreta, and Maldonado (2008) is the sources of linguistic knowledge in the acquisition of L2 English. In their quintessential study, the researchers investigated three sources of knowledge - L1 transfer, L2 input, and Universal Grammar (UG) - by examining L1 Russian (an [-article] language) and L1 Spanish (an [+article] language) learners. What they found was that L1 transfer is the source of knowledge for L1 Spanish learners, since they rely on the semantics of Spanish articles and thus categorize English articles on the basis of definiteness, which results in higher accuracy rates compared to L1 Russian learners. They argue that, in the absence of L1 article semantics to transfer, source of knowledge for L1 Russian learners is UG and L2 input. They have direct access to semantic universals but cannot reach a certain conclusion about

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which semantic universal to choose for the use of correct article in English and thus fluctuate between definiteness and specificity. At that time, L2 input provides them with the basis to recognize which article specifications are accurate for the target language.

With an additional point of view, Master (1988, 1997, 2002) carried out studies on English article pedagogy. In his early work (1988), he examined L2 English learners from three L1 [-article] languages, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian and two L1 [+article] languages, Spanish and German, and found out that learners from [+article] L1 background had the highest accuracy rates while learners from [-article] L1 background had the lowest accuracy rates. He also concluded that *a* is acquired at a slower and more gradual rate compared to *the* and *zero*. In his later study, Master (1997) attempted to link the acquisition of the English article system to pedagogy. For beginner learners, he advocated no focus on rules of English article system since their L2 mental lexicon has not fully developed yet and decontextualized general rules would remain obscure to them. Instead, he suggested presenting vocabulary with articles to help the formation of a concept of articles in learners' mind. With the intermediate proficiency learners, Master is in favor of more cognitive methods of teaching through tasks to encourage both comprehension and application of the article system. Master indicated that advanced proficiency learners appear to learn articles best as lexical items in context so a lexical approach rather than a syntactic approach would be more facilitative. In another leading study, Master (2002) described three principle facts for the difficulty in acquiring the English article system and reviewed some pedagogical methods for teaching, which are using information structure as an overarching framework, using a traditional expression of article use, and no instruction. His review showed that the information structure framework was the most effective one and consequently, he suggested the language teachers to use this framework for learners to determine the appropriate article for any noun.

Butler (2002), motivated by a similar reason with Master, examined the metalinguistic knowledge used by 80 Japanese students with the aim of guiding teachers to understand learners' problems as well as indicate areas where instruction can be made more effective. Butler (2002) asserted that learners have three hypotheses based on the treatment of the NP context: (a) context-insensitive hypotheses, (b) hypotheses that show sensitivity to the wrong contexts, and (c) hypotheses that show sensitivity to a range of relevant contexts. Additionally, she found that referentiality (i.e. specificity) presented the greatest number of problems for the Japanese learners.

In this section, substantial findings from the research on the acquisition of L2 English article system are presented. The next section will focus on the

present study and provide information on the method including the participants, procedures, and analysis of the data.

3. Method

The present study is a partial replication of the research study by Ionin et al. (2004) conducted in order to examine the L2 English learners' ability to acquire parameter values in the target article system that are not present in their native language. To test the Fluctuation Hypothesis proposed by the authors, this study adopted a forced choice elicitation test and a written production task from the study mentioned.

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study include 26 Turkish EFL learners who are from an [-article] L1 background and are freshman students at the Department of English Language Teaching of a state university in Turkey. The learners can be said to have a high proficiency level in English since the department they are enrolled in is English-medium. Moreover, they are going to be teachers of English after graduation from this department, which requires a good mastery of the language. Their age ranges between 18 and 20 and they had not been instructed in the use of English articles in their freshman year until the time the data were collected. Participation to the study was on a voluntary basis.

3.2. Measurements and Procedures

In this study, two types of task are used to measure the acquisition of L2 English articles by L1 Turkish learners: a forced choice elicitation test and a written production task (see Ionin et.al (2004) for the tasks). The forced choice elicitation test is a fill-in-the-article test that involves 40 items in total. Each item has a blank for the learners to fill in with *a*, *the*, or *zero article*; and each blank is provided in a conversation that “allowed the investigator maximal control over the contexts” (Ionin et al., 2004; 21). The items are distributed according to different contexts: four definite and for indefinite context types. The items also show variety according to being [+specific] definites, [-specific] definites; and [+specific] indefinites, [-specific] indefinites. Items for each different context type are illustrated below:

(a) [+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 Andrew, 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.

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As mentioned before, definiteness is concerned with the hearer knowledge and specificity is concerned with the speaker knowledge or a noteworthy feature of the referent. In the item (a), the NP followed by a description has a noteworthy feature on the side of the speaker of being a well known criminal and so it is definite and specific.

(b) [+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're trying to find (*a, the, -*) murderer of Mr. Peterson – but we still don't know who he is.

The item (b) involves a NP which the speaker doesn't have knowledge of the referent and so it is a non-specific definite.

(c) [-definite, +specific]

Phone conversation

Jeweler: Hello, this is Robertson's Jewelry. What can I do for you, ma'am? Are you looking for some new jewelry?

Client: Not quite – I heard that you also buy back people's old jewelry.

Jeweler: That's correct.

Client: In that case, I would like to sell you (*a, the, -*) beautiful silver necklace. It's very valuable – it has been in my family for 100 years!

The NP in the item (c) lacks hearer knowledge but it has a noteworthy feature of being very valuable on the side of the speaker. Therefore, it is an indefinite specific NP.

(d) [-definite, -specific]

In a school

Student: I am new this school. This is my first day.

Teacher: Welcome! Are you going to be at the school party tonight?

Student: Yes. I'd like to get to know my classmates. I'm hoping to find (*a, the -*) new good friend! I don't like being all alone.

Being an indefinite non-specific context, item (d) involves denial of the hearer and speaker knowledge; it also has no noteworthy feature.

Data from the elicitation test were collected in a classroom setting. The learners were not restricted in terms of the time allotted for the task. However, they all completed the test in 25 minutes. On the other hand, the written production task involves five questions addressed in order to elicit English articles in similar contexts. The learners were required to answer those questions with three to five sentences. The time allotted for this task was 20 minutes.

3.3. Analysis of the Data

Learners' answers to the items in the forced choice elicitation test were checked according to the correct answers provided by Ionin et al. (2004) in their

article. Then, correct and incorrect uses of articles were counted. A further classification was done on the incorrect answers in terms of the error type. As the last thing, the number of accuracy and misuse of the articles in terms of error types were calculated for frequency and percentage rates.

As the second phase of the analysis, data elicited through the written production task were coded in terms of definite and indefinite contexts as well as specific and non-specific features. The accurate and inaccurate uses of the articles were counted as it was done earlier for the elicitation test. Frequency and percentage rates were calculated in terms of accuracy, misuse, and types of errors.

4. Results And Discussion

In this section, the results of the codings and calculations are presented under two subsections: the elicitation test and the written production task.

4.1. Forced Choice Elicitation Test Data

Analysis of the elicitation data shows that there are accurate uses of articles as well as misuse of them. The results are summarized in the table below.

Table 1: Distribution of the use of articles in the elicitation data

	<i>f</i>	%
Accurate use of the articles	911	88
Misuse of the articles	129	12
Total use of the articles	1040	100

As obvious from the table, the accuracy rate is much higher with an 88% than the rate of misuse with a 12% value. Keeping in mind that the learners participated in this study have a high proficiency level in L2 English, the results can be said to show that they have a good mastery of the English article system.

Moreover, three learners who made no misuse of the articles at all in the elicitation test, performed in a target-like manner. The finding of learners' higher accuracy rates find support from the literature (Butler, 2002; Atay, 2010; Dağdeviren, 2010 among others) in that, in most of the studies carried out, it was found that the higher proficiency learners made more accurate use of the English articles than their lower proficiency counterparts.

As for the types of errors made by the learners, the table summarizes the distribution below.

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Error Type	f	%
Overuse of <i>a</i> in [+def, -spe] contexts*	12	9
Overuse of <i>a</i> in [+def, +spe] contexts	25	19
Overuse of <i>the</i> in [-def, +spe] contexts*	42	33
Overuse of <i>the</i> in [-def, -spe] contexts	18	14
<i>Total</i>	97	75
Omission of <i>a</i> in [-def, -spe] contexts	5	4
Omission of <i>the</i> in [+def, +spe] contexts	15	12
Omission of <i>the</i> in [+def, -spe] contexts	12	9
<i>Total</i>	32	25

Results indicate that overuse of the article errors (75%) have a higher rate than the omission errors (25%). With a deeper look into the overuse errors, we can see that learners overuse *the* in [-definite, +specific] contexts and overuse *a* in [+definite, -specific] contexts (indicated by an * in the table; with a total rate of 42%), which means that learners associate specificity with *a*, and definiteness with *the* as predicted by the Fluctuation Hypothesis. However, the learners also overuse *a* in [+definite, +specific] contexts and overuse *the* in [-definite, -specific] contexts (with a total rate of 33 %), which makes the learners' errors in the use of English articles random rather than systematic.

On the other hand, omission errors make 25% of the whole errors. This finding is supported by research in the literature that “learners from an [-article] L1 background (like Turkish, Chinese, Japanese, etc.) have a marked tendency to omit the article where native speakers of English would use one” (Robertson, 2000: 135).

4.2. Written Production Data

Analysis of the production data shows that there are different types of misuse of articles by the learners. The results are summarized in the table below.

Table 3: Distribution of the use of articles in the written production data

	f	%
Accurate use of the articles	88	68
Misuse of the articles	40	32
Total use of the articles	128	100

As seen from the table, the learners have an accuracy rate of 68% while they have a misuse rate of 32%. The accuracy rate appears to be higher in the production data as well. Besides the learners' high proficiency in L2 English, one of the reasons for the higher accuracy rate may be explained through ‘avoidance’ of learners to use articles in NPs. In the data, it is observed that the

learners used different determiners than articles in the D NPs. As Butler (2002: 456) states, in the production tasks learners tend to avoid usages of which they are unsure and so production data alone may not provide us with an accurate picture of learners' performance. The learners' avoidance strategy may be exemplified in the sentences they provided below:

- (1) I spent much of my time with my cousins ...
- (2) When I first arrived at campus, I looked my environment ...
- (3) I spend this money for poor children. Because I didn't get that money by studying ...
- (4) My room in my flat is quite small ...
- (5) I had my funniest and enjoyable friends at high school ...
- (6) I mostly played computer games while waiting my university entrance exam results ...

In (1) to (6), the tendency of learners to use other structures such as *my*, *this*, and *that*, where one of the articles may have been used, is obviously seen. Distribution of the misuse of articles according to the error types is summarized in the table below.

Table 4: Distribution of the misuse of articles according to the error types

Error Type	f	%
Overuse of <i>the</i> in [-def,+spe] contexts	4	3.5
Overuse of <i>the</i> in [-def,-spe] contexts	2	1
Omission of <i>the</i> in [+def,+spe] contexts	4	3.5
Omission of <i>a</i> in [-def,+spe] contexts	30	24

Omission of *a*, with a 24% rate, is the mostly occurring error type in the production data. In his taxonomy of NP environments, Robertson (2000: 148) identifies the 'existential use' of an indefinite NP environment, "where the existence of the NP is asserted in an existential predication." In this type, the indefinite article is introduced by the use of the phrase *there is* or the verb *have*. Parallel to Robertson's (2000) taxonomy, the written production data in this study include similar occurrences. As answers to questions (a) and (c), learners produced sentences using *there is* and *have*, which required the use of indefinite article *a*. Some of the learner productions are illustrated in (1), (2) and (3) below:

- (1) I **have** a computer, *wardrobe, *table ...
- (2) In my room, **there is** a bed, *carpet, *bookshelf and *table. I like ...

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- (3) My room is large and ... It **has** a bed and *library also *wardrobe. It **has** a table for my study.

However, in most of the learner production to these two questions (with a frequency rate of 30 and percentage of 24%), the learners omitted indefinite *a* in various NPs (indicated with an * in the illustrations). This kind of article omission is explained by Robertson (2000: 163) as:

a linguistic ‘determiner drop principle’ analogous to the ‘pro-drop’ principle, whereby the article may be dropped if it is within the scope of the determiner of an immediately preceding and coreferential NP.

Robertson (2000: 161-162) suggests that “it is common to find that second and subsequent occurrences of coreferential NPs often lack articles where the first mention has an article.” As obviously seen in (1), (2), and (3) above, the learners omitted the articles of the subsequent NPs in the chain, most probably thinking that they are coreferential with the head NP of the chain.

5. Discussion

The discussions related to whether there is task variance and whether the results support Fluctuation Hypothesis are discussed under the two research questions below.

1. *Does Turkish EFL learners’ use of English article system vary depending on two different task types: the forced choice elicitation task and the written production task?*

Results revealed that in both of the task types –the forced choice elicitation task and the written production task- accuracy rates are much higher than the rates of misuse. However, in the elicitation test, the learners appear to be more successful with a much bigger proportion of accurate uses than in the production task. Besides, as mentioned earlier, in the elicitation data three of the learners showed target-like performance with no article misuse at all, but in the production data all the students had misuse of articles. Therefore, Turkish EFL learners’ use of English article system varies depending on the task type. Thus, Kharma (1981), and Mizuno (1985) advocate “collecting data from a variety of tasks, in addition to production tasks such as oral interviews and essay writing, is important for examining different types of article use by L2 learners” (as cited in Butler, 2002: 455).

- a. *Is there a difference between the rates of errors observed in the forced choice elicitation task and the written productions of Turkish EFL learners?*

The rates of errors, just as the accuracy rates, differ from one task to the other. The learners showed a lower error rate in the elicitation test; the number

of misuse is one seventh of the number of correct uses. On the other hand, in the production task the number of misuse is nearly half of the number of the correct uses. Thus, there is a considerable difference between the rates of errors observed in the elicitation test and the written productions of Turkish EFL learners.

b. Is there a difference between the types of errors observed in the forced choice elicitation task and written productions of Turkish EFL learners?

The findings on the error types indicate that there is a variety based on the task type. Overuse of *a* in [+definite, -specific] contexts, overuse of *a* in [+definite, +specific] contexts, and omission of *a* [-definite, -specific] contexts are observed only in the elicitation test while omission of *a* in [-definite, +specific] contexts is observed only in the production task. The learners, similar to Ionin et al.'s (2004) findings, overused only *the* in the production task but they overused both *the* and *a* in the elicitation test. Therefore, there is a difference between the types of errors observed in the elicitation task and written productions of Turkish EFL learners.

2. Do Turkish EFL learners "fluctuate" (in Ionin, Ko, and Wexler's (2004) terms) between the two notions of English article system, specificity and definiteness, in their interlanguage grammars?

The results reveal that learners fluctuated between definiteness and specificity and assigned *the* for specificity and *a* for definiteness in 42% of the total misuses in the elicitation test. And, in the production data the learners only assigned *the* for specificity in 3.5% of the misuses, but did not assign *a* for definiteness as the counterpart. Therefore, learners showed fluctuation in the elicitation test but not in the production task. However, in contrast with much of the previous research and the prior predictions of the present study, the occurrence of various types of errors in both of the task types makes learner errors in the use of English articles random; not systematic. This result of the present study finds support from Robertson (2000). Although he conducted his study in search for evidence of systematicity and to account for this systematicity, he pointed out the learners' optionality (i.e. variability) in the choice of English articles and ascribed that to indeterminacy in the interlanguage grammars.

6. Conclusion

The present study attempts to investigate whether Turkish EFL learners' use of English article system vary depending on two different task types - the forced choice elicitation task and the written production task – in terms of the rates and types of errors and whether Turkish EFL learners fluctuate between the two notions of English article system, specificity and definiteness, in their interlanguage grammars. The conclusions drawn from the study are as follows:

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(a) Turkish EFL learners' use of English article system varies depending on the task type, (b) there is a considerable difference between the rates of errors observed in the elicitation test and the written productions of Turkish EFL learners, (c) there is a difference between the types of errors observed in the elicitation task and written productions of Turkish EFL learners, (d) although learners showed fluctuation in the elicitation test, the occurrence of various types of errors in both of the task types makes Turkish EFL learners' errors in the use of English articles random; not systematic. However, further research is needed to be able to fully account for the acquisition of English articles by L1 Turkish learners. An additional set of data in the form of follow-up interviews is needed on metalinguistic knowledge and strategies learners use to find correct productions of articles, and whether they associate definite article with a specific referent [+SR] or with [+HK]. By this way, research would be provided with more sound information on the sources of error types learners make in the use of English articles. This information may also shed light on what kind of instruction can be helpful for L2 English learners in foreign language settings like Turkey, where there is a lack of sufficient input necessary for L2 parameter setting for the accurate use of English article system.

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