L2 ENGLISH ARTICLE SUPPLIANCE AMONG TERTIARY LEVEL STUDENTS: THE IMPACT OF SPECIFICITY

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Abstract

The aim of this paper was to determine the role of specificity in the English article suppliance of L1 Serbian speakers. Its impact on the suppliance of the definite article (*the*), the indefinite article (*a/an*), and the zero article (*Ø*) was determined based on a 40-item questionnaire. The items were classified into four groups defined by the combinations of two semantic features: [±specific] and [±definite]. Differences in article suppliance were studied between a group of English and non-English language majors in order to take into account the level of L2 proficiency. The population of L1 Serbian/L2 English speakers was chosen since Serbian is an articleless language and is, unlike English, considered to code specificity. The results indicated statistically significant differences between the participants in terms of correct article suppliance and L2 proficiency in favor of the English language majors. However, no impact of specificity on article suppliance was noted for either group of participants.

Key words: specificity, L2 proficiency level, English article instruction, tertiary level education

УПОТРЕБА ЧЛАНОВА У ЕНГЛЕСКОМ ЈЕЗИКУ КОД СТУДЕНАТА НА ТЕРЦИЈАРНОМ НИВОУ СТУДИЈА: УТИЦАЈ СПЕЦИФИЦИРАНОСТИ

Апстракт

Циљ истраживања био је да се утврди утицај специфицираности на употребу чланова у енглеском језику на узорку испитаника чији је матерњи језик српски. Утицај овог фактора на употребу одређеног, неодређеног, и нултог члана анализиран је на основу одговора датих у упитнику који се састојао од 40 питања. Питања су даље подељена у четири групе дефинисане комбинацијом одлика [±специфициран] и [±одређен]. Разлике у употреби чланова испитиване су на узорку групе студената енглеског језика и групе студената са других студијских програма како би се у обзир узео и ниво познавања енглеског језика. Популаци-

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ja изворних говорника српског језика одабрана је због изостанка граматичке категорије члана у овом језику, и чињенице да се српски језик доводи у везу са одликом [±специфициран], а не [±одређен] као што је то случај у енглеском језику. Резултати су указали на статистички значајне разлике у тачној употреби чланова у корист групе студената енглеског језика, као и значајне разлике у нивоу познавања енглеског језика. Утицај специфицираности на употребу чланова у испитаној популацији није потврђен.

Кључне речи: специфицираност, ниво познавања енглеског језика, учење чланова у енглеском језику, терцијарни ниво образовања

INTRODUCTION

The English article system is not acquired with ease by L2 learners, due to its semantic complexity (Ionin et al. 2004; Ionin et al. 2008; Ionin et al. 2009; Ionin et al. 2011; Trenkić 2008; García Mayo 2009; Lopez 2017 inter alia) and its apparent imperviousness to long-term effects of instruction (Akakura 2012). Articles are non-salient or fragile features (Ellis 2006) for which exposure alone will not facilitate perception or acquisition. More advanced learners still struggle with article suppliance (Cowan 2008; Snape 2008; Umeda et al. 2017), which leads to persistent errors of article omission and article substitution.

The languages in which specificity and definiteness have been studied are numerous,[1] as are the morphosyntactic forms by which they are conveyed in various languages. The relationship between them is based on the identifiability of the referent. Specifically, if a referent is identifiable to both the speaker and the hearer, then a definite NP is required; if it is identifiable only to the speaker, or if there is referential intention on the part of the speaker, that is, if the referent possesses a feature considered noteworthy to the speaker, a specific indefinite NP is required (Givón 1978; Hedberg et al. 2009 inter alia); finally, if it is not possible to identify the referent, a non-specific indefinite NP is used (von Heusinger 2002: 249).

In some languages, referential relations are based on definiteness (English), while in others, they are based on specificity (Serbian). L2 learners are taught that definiteness is conveyed using the definite article in English, and indefiniteness by using the indefinite article. Yet, in the very same language, the feature '(non)specific' is used in relation to definites and indefinites alike (see examples (1)-(4)). Serbian relies on a variety of parts of speech and even word order to convey what is in other languages expressed

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[1] They include the African language of isiXhosa (Visser 2008), Russian and Korean (Ionin et al. 2004), Chinese (Lopez 2017), Samoan inter alia (Tryzna 2009), Japanese (Umeda et al. 2017), Abui (Kratochvíl & Delpada 2015), Spanish (Garcia-Mayo 2009), Turkish (Snape & Kupisch 2010), Turkish and Persian (Hedberg, Görgülü, Mameni 2009), and Croatian (Martinović & Balenović 2020), inter alia.

through the use of articles (see Đorđević (1989) and Trenkić (2002, 2004)). For L1 Serbian learners, the issue is further convoluted by the fact that Serbian is an articleless language, and by the fact that the material used for L2 article instruction in the Serbian linguistic environment makes no overt reference to specificity, as seen in Veličković (2021).

In some languages, specificity can be encoded in the article system, as in Samoan (Lyons 1999), or in affixes, as in Turkish (Enç 1991). When it comes to the Serbian language, specificity is said to be found in the aspect of adjectives. Trenkić (2004: 1045-1046) illustrated the distinction between *mudar čovek* and *mudri čovek*, where the latter refers to a specific wise man. Based on an analysis of further examples, the author concludes that what is at stake is the speaker's own ability to identify the referent as salient, without any indication of the status of the referent for the hearer. With the exception of Avery and Radišić (2007), Ko et al. (2008), Trenkić (2002, 2004), and Veličković (2018, 2019a, 2019b inter alia), the number of studies focusing on L1 Serbian speakers is limited. Thus, the L2 article suppliance of L1 Serbian learners of English of all levels still represents a fertile ground for study.

The paper is organized as follows. The first section provides a theoretical account of both specificity and definiteness, and an overview of selected previous studies. The next section presents the methodology and the results of this study, followed by a discussion section. The paper ends with concluding comments on the limitations of the study, and proposals for further research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Definiteness and Specificity: an Overview

Traditionally, definiteness has been linked to four features (Russel (1905), Christopherson (1939), Jespersen (1949), Donnellan (1966), Hawkins (1978, 1991), Lyons (1999), von Heusinger (2002) inter alia). First, there are identifiability and uniqueness, which indicate that the speaker assumes the referent to be 'uniquely identifiable' to the hearer (Givon 1978: 296). Second, there is familiarity, which is defined as a discourse pragmatic property usually ascribed to previously mentioned referents (von Heusinger 2002: 252). Finally, there is maximality, or totality, which refers to scope (Hawkins 1978, 1991).

Accounts of specificity date back to the 1960s, and are linked to theoretical concepts associated with definiteness, such as discourse anaphora, referential and attributive readings, or even referential and existential readings. Specificity is a term initially used to account for the use of indefinite NPs, but has, over time, evolved to include: Referential Specificity, Scopal Specificity, Epistemic Specificity, Partitive Specificity, Topical Specificity, Noteworthiness Specificity, and Discourse Promi-

nence (von Heusinger et al. 2011). They are illustrated, respectively, as follows (ibid, p. 1027-1028, comments added):

(1) Paula believes that Bill talked to an important politician. (existential entailment)

(2) If a friend of mine from Texas had died in the fire, I would have inherited a fortune. (escaping scope islands in conditional clauses)

(3) A student in Syntax 1 cheated in the exam. I know him: It is Jim Miller. (speaker's knowledge)

(4) 50 students entered the room. I knew two girls. (part of an already introduced set)

(5) Some ghosts live in the pantry; others live in the kitchen. (topical element)

(6) He put a 31 cent stamp on the envelope, and only realized later that it was worth a fortune because it was unperforated. (intention to refer to a noteworthy feature)

(7) There was a king and the king had a daughter and he loved his daughter … (referential persistence, introducing a referent that will be mentioned again).

Due to the distribution of either specificity or definiteness in the world languages, *the* or *a/an* will at times exemplify both features, neither, or a combination thereof. Examples include the following (Lyons 1999: 167, original emphasis):

(1) Joan wants to present the prize to **the winner** – but he doesn't want to receive it from her. [+definite, +specific]

(2) Joan wants to present the prize to **the winner** – so she'll have to wait around until the race finishes. [+definite, −specific]

(3) Peter intends to marry **a merchant banker** – even though he doesn't get on with her at all. [−definite, +specific]

(4) Peter intends to marry **a merchant banker** – though he hasn't met one yet. [−definite, −specific]

Ambiguity can and does occur, as can be seen from the example provided by Kratochvíl and Delpada (2015: 182):

(5) John would like to marry a girl his parents don't approve of.

If we were to provide a [+specific] reading, a claim would be made that the speaker has a particular referent in mind. And if John does have a partner, then that criterion would be satisfied. But if he has not yet met that person, and is merely looking, then the reading is marked as [-specific].

The link with definiteness implied here has to do with the established concepts of uniqueness or maximality, identifiability, and anaphora, as well as discourse prominence, a feature linked to the use of the definite article by Epstein (2001). Therefore, in light of the mutual relationship between the [±specific] and [±definite] features, their impact on L2

English article suppliance warrants further consideration. The question therefore is: how important is specificity for L2 article suppliance?

Previous Research

Numerous authors have weighed in on what in theory affects L2 article production: Ionin (2003) and the Article Choice Parameter Hypothesis; Goad et al. (2003) and the Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis; Trenkić (2002, 2004, 2007) and the Syntactic Misanalysis Account; White (2003, 2008) and White et al. (2012) and the definiteness effect (per Milsark, 1977); Avery & Radišić (2007) and the non-Uniformity Assumption, to name but a few.

Ionin (2003; Ionin et al. 2004; Ionin 2006; Ionin et al. 2008; Ionin & Montrul 2009) studied languages with and without an article system, which code either specificity or definiteness. Their proposed theoretical framework for L2 article use included the Article Choice Parameter and the Fluctuation Hypothesis.[2] These accounts are founded on the premise that the same article is used in both definite and indefinite contexts at the same time, and sometimes even by the same speaker. These mistakes, or fluctuations, in L2 article use are not random; they indicate how far the learner has come in attempting to mimic native speaker-like article production. The process, not being linear, leads to fluctuations between relying on definiteness or specificity in article choice.

Analyzing the possible combinations of the [±specific] and [±definite] features, Ionin et al. (2004) determined which combination could pose potential difficulties for correct L2 article suppliance among NNSs.[3] It was indicated that L2 English learners overuse *the* in [-d +s] contexts, correctly use it in [+d +s] contexts, and correctly use *a* in [-d +s] ones. A fourth combination of the features, [+d -s], was considered a problem for NNSs, and an overuse of *a/an* was predicted. Thus, an overuse of *the* with indefinites and an overuse of *a* with definites was determined in the study. Ionin et al. (2008) later explained that this occurrence is the result of definite NPs which can be described as having the [+specific] rather than the [-specific] feature being more likely to occur in the English language. As a result, they reached the conclusion that NNSs respond to specificity much more easily than to definiteness. It was also determined that advanced language learners tended to use articles more accurately in situations where fluctuation was expected, proving the impact of L2 proficiency on L2 article suppliance.

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[2] For more information on fluctuation and transfer see also Zdorenko & Paradis (2008).

[3] Note: the abbreviations used are uniform throughout the text, including the tables: [+d+s] - [+definite +specific]; [+d-s] - [+definite -specific]; [-d+s] - [-definite +specific]; and [-d-s] - [-definite -specific].

Veličković (2019a) analyzed whether two groups of L1 Serbian/L2 English speakers would follow the same pattern of overuse in the same measuring instrument used by Ionin et al. (2004). The subgroup of English language majors supplied *the* in the [-d +s] context, at a rate of almost 40%, while no such extensive use of *a/an* was noted in the [+d -s] context (5%). However, *a/an* were unexpectedly used in the [+d +s] context (20%). The subgroup of non-English language majors did use *the* more than expected, but in the [-d -s] context at a rate of 25%, and also used *a/an* in the [+d +s] one, at a rate of less than one-fifth of the responses. The results supported the 'miscellaneous pattern' of article suppliance, and also suggested that further analysis of the impact of the [±specific] feature was needed in the L1 Serbian population.

Based on the aforementioned, the following research question was formulated: does the [±specific] feature have an impact on the L2 article suppliance of the selected population?

METHODS

The Participants

The study was carried out on a sample of L1 Serbian/L2 English speakers, university level students majoring in various subjects at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš. The tertiary level of education was chosen since higher levels of language proficiency are expected, and because it provides a fertile ground for the study of a wide variety of aspects of the EFL learning and teaching process (cf. Bojović 2017; Danilović-Jeremić 2018; Lazarević 2020; Stojković 2021, inter alia). At the onset, the number of participants was N=89 (N=31, English language majors: G1; N=58, non-English language majors: G2). Twelve participants were excluded from the study as they failed to provide all the necessary data. Data analysis was ultimately carried out on N=77 participants (N=31, English language majors: G1; N=46, non-English language majors: G2).

The Measuring Instruments

Over a period of two weeks, the participants were asked to complete two questionnaires. The first was a forced-choice elicitation task (the measuring instrument used by Ionin et al. (2004)). It consisted of 40 items specifically designed to accommodate the [±specific] and [±definite] features: 12 [+specific +definite] contexts; 8 [+specific -definite] contexts; 8 [-specific +definite] contexts; 12 [-specific -definite] contexts.

Each context was presented in the form of a dialogue, with a multiple choice option of *the*, *a/an*, or the zero article *Ө*.

For statistical analyses, the items were divided into four groups to keep track of L2 article suppliance: the [+s +d], [+s -d], [-s +d], and the [-

s -d] group. The individual responses obtained from each participant were classified as: the correct response, as required, and three incorrect responses (incorrect *a*, incorrect *the*, and incorrect *Ө*). The percentage of correct and incorrect responses was calculated for both G1 and G2. Two more groups of items were formed for analysis, one containing twenty items with the [+specific] feature, and another with the [-specific] feature. For more details see Tables 2 and 3.

The second questionnaire was used to measure the participants' level of proficiency. It was the forced choice task of the grammar section of the Michigan test of L2-proficiency (as per Ionin et al. (2004)). The test format was multiple choice.

All of the data obtained were coded for analysis in the SPSS program. Descriptive statistics, a repeated measures method, and a correlation were calculated.

THE RESULTS

The results of the Michigan test of L2 proficiency determined G1 to be at the upper intermediate level, and G2 at the lower intermediate. A more detailed overview of these characteristics is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

Variables	English language majors		Non-English language majors	
	Mean (CI 95%)	SD	Mean (CI 95%)	SD
Level of L2 proficiency	25.42* (10.89-15.16)	2.71	12.39 (11.13-14.92)	5.52

Note: *-Statistical significance (p<.05)

The results indicate a statistically significant difference between the two groups in favor of G1.

The results from the article suppliance test are presented in Table 2. It provides an overview of the correct responses (40 items), the type of incorrect response (40 items), and the number of correct responses provided for the [+specific] and [-specific] items (20 each).[4] The results for both G1 and G2 can be found in the table.

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[4] For the two formed groups of [+specific] and [-specific] items, it was possible to produce both *the*, and *a/an* as a response, due to the different possible combinations with the [±definite] feature. The same applies for the data in Table 3. The zero article was not the correct response on any of the items.

Table 2. Percentage of responses by item type and group

Variables	English language majors		Non-English language majors	
	Mean (CI 95%)	SD	Mean (CI 95%)	SD
Correct responses: all 40 items	37.81* (36.5-39.11)	3.55	23.04 (20.88-25.20)	7.27
Incorrect response *the*: all 40 items	1.13* (.21-2.5)	2.5	4.24 (3.38-5.09)	2.87
Incorrect response *a*: all 40 items	.94* (.24-1.63)	1.89	5.74 (4.79-6.69)	3.19
Incorrect response $\varnothing$: all 40 items	.16* (-.7-.4)	.63	6.85 (5.42-8.28)	4.82
Correct responses on the [+specific] items: 20 items	18.61* (17.81-19.41)	2.18	11.74 (10.52-12.96)	4.09
Correct responses on the [-specific] items: 20 items	19.16* (18.45-19.88)	1.95	11.3 (10.14-12.47)	3.93

Note: *-Statistical significance (p<.05)

A statistically significant difference between G1 and G2 can be noted for the number of correct responses (40 items) (G1-37.81 ± 3.55 vs G2-23.04 ± 7.27), in favor of G1. Further statistically significant differences were observed for the correct responses provided for items with the feature [+specific] and [-specific], respectively. For the former, G1-18.61 ± 2.18 vs G2-11.74 ± 4.09, and for the latter, G1-19.16 ± 1.95 vs G2-11.3 ± 3.93, (p<.05). Once again, the difference was in favor of G1. A statistically significant difference between G1 and G2 was determined in the number of incorrect responses when classified into the following groups: "Incorrect response *the*", "Incorrect response *a*", and "Incorrect response $\varnothing$" (for Incorrect response *the*, G1-1.13 ± 2.5 vs G2-4.24 ± 2.87, for Incorrect response *a*, G1-.94 ± 1.89 vs G2-5.74 ± 3.19, and for Incorrect response $\varnothing$, G1-.16 ± .63 vs G2-6.85 ± 4.82, p<.05). The difference was once again in favor of G1.

However, a within-group comparison of the correct responses for the [+specific] and [-specific] items did not indicate a statistically significant difference for either group (G1- p=.149 and G2- p=.383). Therefore, the [±specific] feature did not have an impact on the L2 article suppliance for either group of participants.

For incorrect responses, G1 reported a slightly greater occurrence of the definite article, while G2 reported the same for the zero article. However, the numerical differences between the possible incorrect responses were not great enough to warrant any conclusions regarding preference for a particular response, for either group.

The types of incorrect responses, broken down based on group and item type, are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Percentage and type of incorrect responses

Variables	English language majors					Non-English language majors					
	Correct (%)	Incorrect (%)	Incorrect a (%)	Incorrect the (%)	Incorrect zero (%)	Correct (%)	Incorrect (%)	Incorrect a (%)	Incorrect the (%)	Incorrect zero (%)	Missing
[+d, +s]	356 (95.69)	16 (4.31)	15 (4.03)	/	1 (0.26)	313 (56.7)	235 (42.57)	133 (24.09)	/	102 (18.47)	4 (0.72)
[+d, -s]	233 (93.95)	15 (6.04)	11 (4.43)	/	4 (1.61)	234 (63.58)	142 (36.42)	54 (38)	/	88 (61.97)	2 (0.54)
[-d, +s]	221 (89.11)	27 (10.88)	/	27 (100)	0 (0)	233 (63.31)	135 (36.69)	/	70 (51.85)	65 (48.14)	0 (0)
[-d, -s]	367 (98.65)	11 (1.35)	/	11 (100)	0 (0)	396 (71.73)	156 (28.27)	/	96 (61.53)	60 (38.46)	0 (0)
20 [+specific] items	577 (93.06)	43 (6.93)	16 (2.58)	26 (4.19)	1 (0.16)	539 (58.58)	377 (40.97)	140 (15.21)	70 (7.6)	167 (18.15)	4 (0.43)
20 [-specific] items	594 (95.8)	26 (4.19)	17 (2.74)	5 (0.8)	4 (0.64)	529 (57.5)	389 (42.28)	126 (13.69)	125 (13.58)	148 (16.08)	2 (0.21)
All 40 items	1171 (94.43)	69 (5.56)	35 (2.82)	29 (2.33)	5 (0.4)	1060 (57.6)	774 (42.06)	195 (10.59)	264 (14.34)	315 (17.11)	6 (0.32)

Note: the percentage of Incorrect *the*, Incorrect *a*, and Incorrect θ were calculated from the total of incorrect responses.

In terms of the participants' performance on the four groups of items identified based on the combination of the [±specific] and [±definite] features, the distribution of the results is as follows. The percentage of correct responses for G1 was in the high 90s, and the most frequently incorrectly used article was *the*, as the only incorrect response recorded for the [-d, +s] group, and the [-d, -s] group, at a rate of 10.88% and 1.35% respectively. The indefinite article occurred less than 6% of the time in the [+d, -s] group. Therefore, no overuse was recorded.

For G2, the percentage of correct responses ranged in the high 60s, while the type of incorrect responses varied and their percentage was much higher than for G1. In the [+d, +s] group, almost one-quarter of the incorrect responses was *a/an*. In the [+d, -s] group, the most frequently incorrectly used article was *Θ*, at a rate of almost 62%. However, it was once again *the* that was noted as the most frequent incorrect response in the [-d, +s] and [-d, -s] group of items, accounting for 51.85% and 61.53% of all the incorrect responses, respectively. However, the overall percentage of incorrect responses for G2 once again did not indicate overuse.

Regarding the two groups of items marked [+specific] and [-specific], both groups tended to provide correct responses, with G1 once again outperforming G2 on the percentage of correct responses (low 90s vs high 50s). Of the incorrect responses, G2 tended to use *a/an* in the [+specific] group of items, and *Θ* in the [-specific], while G1 infrequently used *the* in the [+specific] group of items, and *a/an* in the [-specific].

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to analyze whether specificity affects the L2 article suppliance of a sample of L1 Serbian learners at the tertiary level of education. The proposed impact was most clearly outlined in the work of Ionin et al. (2004) who concluded that a particular combination of the [±specific] and [±definite] features will result in the overuse of *the* in the [-d, +s] and an overuse of *a* in the [+d, -s] combinations. Similar results were also determined by Veličković (2019a). To analyze the issue further, the 40-item measuring instrument designed by Ionin et al. (2004) was used to provide empirical data pertaining primarily to the effects of specificity on the L2 article suppliance of the aforementioned population. Furthermore, the impact of factors such as level of L2 proficiency was also analyzed, in light of the claim that increased proficiency levels do not preclude errors of article omission and substitution (Cowan 2008; Snape 2008; Umeda et al. 2017). A statistically significant difference was noted between the groups for L2 proficiency in favor of G1 ($p < .05$). These results confirm those of Ionin et al. (2004), that an increase in proficiency does affect the accuracy of L2 article use, contrary to the aforementioned claims.

Despite the theory that NNSs are more susceptible to specificity than to definiteness, no overuse of *the* or *a/an* was noted for G1 and G2, either a numeric or a statistically significant one, for any of the 40 items. Moreover, lower L2 proficiency was also assumed to render EFL learners more susceptible to the aforementioned impact of the [±specific] feature. However, neither G1 nor G2, between whom a statistically significant difference was noted in terms of L2 proficiency, indicated any signs of overuse on [+specific] items (Table 3). The results of the current study do not support the claim that the [±specific] feature had any quantifiable impact on L2 article suppliance. This is congruent with Trenkić's (2008) conclusion that there is no 'unequivocal evidence' that specificity affects L2 article suppliance, in part due to issues regarding the operationalization of specificity, a point discussed in the concluding segment of this paper.

If specificity had no quantifiable impact, and neither G1 nor G2 showed signs of overuse despite their significant difference in proficiency levels, then the relationship between the [±specific] and [±definite] features must be reviewed. If the participants were not susceptible to specificity, definiteness must be considered as a factor of some importance. This echoes White et al.'s (2012) claims of a 'definiteness effect', where EFL learners may become more sensitive to the definiteness feature which impacted their performance, to a certain extent. Ionin (2003) also found that more proficient groups of participants grow accustomed to the [±definite] setting and therefore produce L2 articles in a manner different than that of their less advanced counterparts, who, in the aforementioned study, and the current one, provided a greater range of possible responses on the [+specific] and [-specific] groups of items.

Based on these findings, I propose that L1 Serbian learners to an extent 'equate' the [±definite] and the [±specific] feature, i.e. that they do not distinguish clearly between specificity and definiteness. This may come about as a result of some of their overlapping features: discourse prominence, anaphora, and familiarity, to name a few, and the fact that specificity can be defined as the existence of a 'noteworthy' feature of the referent (Ionin et al. 2008) which might deceive (L1 Serbian) learners into concluding that it is in some way pertinent, singled out for discourse prominence, and not merely being 'introduced', even in the [-d, -s] group of items. For example (taken from Ionin et al. (2004)):

> Mary: I heard that it was your son Roger's birthday last week. Did he have a good celebration?

> Roger: Yes! It was great. He got lots of gifts – books, toys. And best of all – he got (a, the, --) puppy!

The 'vagueness' of the noteworthy feature, as pointed out in later work done by Trenkić (2008), can be noted in this example: perhaps the speaker did not have an 'intent to infer', but enough information is con-

tained in this example to render the referent in question identifiable (or sufficiently described) so as to confuse NNSs into using *the*. This information includes the name of the child, Roger, the fact that it was the occasion of his birthday, that the birthday was celebrated, that many gifts were exchanged, and that one in particular is being singled out as 'best of all'.

The fact that the definite article is the most frequently occurring incorrect response for G1 is not a surprising occurrence. NNSs with an articleless L1 more frequently use *the* in contexts where a particular feature of the referent in question stands out (akin to the aforementioned noteworthiness), but also in contexts where it has been noted that the speaker is 'acquainted' with the referent in question (the aforementioned specific indefinite contexts (Ionin et al. 2004; Snape 2008; Hawkins et al. 2006; Tyrzna 2009). The presence of a noteworthy feature could therefore be of vital importance in the instruction process of L1 Serbian/L2 English learners. It accounts for the use of *the* in the [-d, +s] context (Ionin et al. 2004; Veličković 2019a), but also for the occurrence of incorrectly used instances of *the* in the current study. Here, this pattern in L2 article suppliance is easier to determine among the more advanced L2 learners. Furthermore, finding *the* in [+specific] contexts is also particularly frequent with CSg nouns (Ogawa 2015) which were the only type of nouns included in the questionnaire used in this study.

Similarly, Ko et al. (2008) analyzed the L2 article suppliance of a group of L1 Serbo-Croatian speakers. The study proposed that semantic universals have an independent, or even unequal, impact on L2 article use, with some features exerting a more persistent influence, especially on low-proficiency learners. The study showed that SC learners overused *the* in [+specific] contexts, but that, like in the current study, no main effect of specificity was empirically noted.

Even though the aforementioned account mostly focused on the frequent inappropriate uses of the definite article identified among the results noted for G1, the same account could be extended to the uses of the definite article registered for G2, with the addition that the latter group showed a much greater range of incorrect responses. They included all three articles in a variety of item groups: *a/an* in the [+d, +s] group, *Ө* in the [+d, -s] group, *the* in the [-d, +s] and [-d, -s] groups. The frequent inappropriate use of the zero article could be ascribed to an earlier theory proposed by Trenkić (2004), that an excess of identifiable information might lead NNSs to omit articles altogether. Trenkić (2004, 2008) focused on the occurrence of adjectives in the NP and the possibility of determiners in general being misinterpreted as adjectivals (with the literal meaning of 'can' and 'cannot be identified'), which had a proposed impact on article suppliance/omission. Using the example *Pass me the BLUE mug.* (Trenkić 2008: 10, original emphasis), the author states that L2 learners might consider it redundant to use an article if, contextually speaking, the referent

was identifiable based on the physical situation the interlocutors find themselves in, with the provided modification. However, based on my experience as a practitioner at the tertiary level, I still believe that more convincing proof for this theory lies beyond the scope of this study.

Although the overall number of incorrect responses for G2 did not indicate overuse, these findings could to an extent be connected to the Fluctuation Hypothesis (Ionin 2003), or the 'miscellaneous pattern' of article acquisition proposed by Avery and Radišić (2007). Based on the non-Uniformity Assumption and L1 interference in particular, the authors concluded that the idiosyncrasies of various groups of learners could be explained by the fact that each individual learner is at their own stage of developing interlanguage grammar, which indicates the absence of a universal account of patterns of behavior in L2 article production. Thus, there may be no predictable pattern of L2 article suppliance for some groups of EFL learners. It would be interesting to note the L2 article suppliance of some of the less proficient participants individually, to find further support for these conclusions. However, this too lies outside the scope of this paper.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the current study indicated that no overuse of either the definite or indefinite article was noted, and no statistically significant effect of specificity was found on L2 article suppliance for either group. Based on the type of incorrect response, the less proficient group was determined to adhere to the miscellaneous pattern of article acquisition.

There is no doubting the semantic complexity of the English article system. With such a system, exposure without properly designed instruction will not bring about desired L2 proficiency. The current findings support the connection between specificity and definiteness, and yet certain characteristics of the Serbian language, to date insufficiently unexplored, may as yet in the end facilitate the L2 article instruction process. There may be the need for L2 learners to be exposed to more explicit evidence that *the* is not associated with the [+specific] feature, with more details provided about semantic-pragmatic categories such as specificity during the instruction process. To that we add the miscellaneous individualized L2 article production patterns, as well as the previously criticized source material used in the Serbian linguistic environment with underrepresented accounts of definiteness and specificity, and what emerges is the basis for developing a new, improved method of instruction.

As a final note, certain limitations and implications for further study need to be taken into consideration. Trenkić (2008: 3-4) stated that the way specificity is coded could have an impact on L2 article suppliance. The author claimed that a distinction should be made between speaker specificity and discourse specificity, which was missing from the

questionnaire. Furthermore, it was also stated that speakers oftentimes do have more information regarding the referent at their disposal, which merely, at that point in time, is not considered 'noteworthy' enough as it does not contribute to the ensuing discourse. It is possible that L2 learners are not be able to make this distinction, which leads to potential confusion regarding article suppliance, especially pertaining to discourse prominence.

Future studies should include a greater number of English and non-English language majors, to indicate whether alternate patterns that might have a bearing on the results would emerge. Secondly, since non-English language majors come from different backgrounds, a more in-depth look at this subgroup, both as part of this dataset, and in general, may be key for unearthing information that could lead to increased and improved L2 article suppliance. Closer attention should also be paid to the classification of participants based on their L2 proficiency, to determine whether statistically significant differences would be noted, and to which extent particular levels of proficiency affect production. This requires including participants of a greater variety of proficiency levels. Considering the fact that this study was a quantitative one, a further qualitative analysis could offer further in-depth insight into L2 article suppliance.

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УПОТРЕБА ЧЛАНОВА У ЕНГЛЕСКОМ ЈЕЗИКУ КОД СТУДЕНАТА НА ТЕРЦИЈАРНОМ НИВОУ: УТИЦАЈ ПОЗНАВАЊА ЈЕЗИКА И СПЕЦИФИЦИРАНОСТИ

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Резиме

У овом истраживању анализиран је утицај неколико фактора на употребу чланова у енглеском језику на узорку студената Универзитета у Нишу. Ту спадају утицај одлика [±одређен] и [±специфициран] као и општи ниво познавања енглеског језика. Истраживање је базирано на подацима који указују на то да управо чињеница да језици могу имати само једну од ове две одлике, [±одређен] или [±специфициран], може утицати на то до које би се мере могла научити тачна употреба чланова у енглеском језику. Како ове одлике, а пре свега [±специфициран], нису према сазнањима овог аутора у већем обиму истраживане на српском говорном подручју, постојала је потреба за даљим истраживањем.

У истраживању је учествовало укупно 77 студената, подељених у две групе. Једну гурпу чинили су студенти Департмана за англистику, док је друга група обухватила студенте различитих департмана. Испитаници су попунили претходно припремљене и у пракси проверене упитнике. Један упитник коришћен је како би се утврдио ниво познавања употребе чланова, у коме су ајтеми класификовани у четири групе према одликама [±одређен] и [±специфициран], а други је коришћен за утврђивање нивоа познавања енглеског језика студената. Добијени одговори кодирани су за статистичку анализу. Након статистичке анализе дат је одговор на следеће истраживачко питање: да ли специфицираност утиче на тачну употребу чланова. Резултати су указали на статистички значајне разлике у тачној употреби чланова, као и у нивоу познавања енглеског језика, у корист групе студената енглеског језика. Утицај специфицираност на употребу чланова у енглеском језику није утврђен.