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*Nongeneric Use of the Definite Article the by Persian Learners**

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Abstract:

Nongeneric use of the English definite article is one of the problematic areas of foreign language learning for Persian speakers. In this study the subjects were placed in different proficiency groups based on the results of a Cambridge First Certificate in English test. The participants responded to an instrument which consisted of 91 sentences by inserting the definite article wherever needed. The results show that out of four nongeneric uses of the definite article, Cultural use continues to be a problem for all language proficiency groups irrespective of the language proficiency. Structural use and Textual use are the next problematic areas. Finally, Situational use is the least problematic area. It is implied here that learners first learn the situational and textual uses and then the structural and cultural uses. The results also confirm overuse of the cultural category by all groups with steady decrease along with proficiency improvement. Finally, missing the obligatory use of the article does not seem to stop with proficiency improvement. Pedagogically these findings could be incorporated into syllabuses.

Key words: *nongeneric use, definite article, Persian learners.*

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I. INTRODUCTION:

Acquisition of the English definite article system has been one of the difficult areas for foreign and second language learners. More specifically, it has been one of the most frustrating areas for those learners whose language article system does not bear any resemblance to the English articles system. In one hand, Persian is one of the Indo-European languages which, as Faghieh (1997) concludes, has no article system equivalent to the English system. However, he believes, the context of discourse makes the meaning clear; for example, 'medad' would mean either 'pencil' or 'the pencil' based on the context. He further comments on the lack of any single word in Persian corresponding exactly to the English definite article *the*. He speculates that the acquisition of *the* will be difficult for Iranian students.

On the other hand, English grammarians and second language acquisition (SLA) practitioners generally divide the use of *the* in two main categories namely 'generic' and 'non-generic'. Species, races, and people of nation generally are referred to by generic use, for example "The English is very fluent", while in the rest of the situations non-generic use is employed. Hawkins (1978) identified eight types of non-generic uses as:

1. Anaphoric use: Use of *the* when something is mentioned a second time and subsequently, for example, "Last summer we stayed in a hotel in Shiraz. The hotel was a five star one."
2. Visible situation use: Use of *the* for the first time when speaker and hearer can see the object, for example, "Could you pass the salt, please!"

3. Immediate situation use: as type two, but it may not be immediately visible, for example, “Don’t open the box. The snake will bite you.”

4. Larger situation use relying on specific knowledge: Use of *the* with the first-mention noun because it is known in the community, “The café net in a small village.”

5. Larger situation use relying on general knowledge: Use of *the* with something that one can assume people from a country or around the world should know, for example “The moon”, or “The White House” meaning the U.S. government.

6. Associative anaphoric use: as the type one but the second noun (instead of being the same noun) is related to the previously mentioned noun, for example, “We went to the class. The lecture was boring.”

7. Unfamiliar use of noun phrases with explanatory modifiers: Use of *the* with a first-mention noun being modified by a clause or phrase, for example, “The papers that are published by this journal are refereed by two people.”

8. Unfamiliar use in noun phrases with nonexplanatory modifiers: as type seven, the only difference being that the modifier does not provide explanatory information. For example “My wife and I share the same secret”, where the modifier *same* does not inform us as to what the secrets are but “only points to an identity

between the two sets of secrets, my wife's and my own," (Hawkins 1978 as cited in Liu and Gleason, 2002, p.6).

Liu and Gleason (2002) combine some of these categories and establish four main categories:

The first is cultural use, where *the* is used with a noun that is a unique and well-known referent in a speech community. The second is situational use, where *the* is used when the referent of a first-mention noun can be sensed directly or indirectly by the interlocutors or the referent is known by the members in a local community, such as the only dog in a family or the only bookstore in a town. The third is structural use, where *the* is used with the first mention noun that has modifier. The fourth is textual use, where *the* is used with a noun that has been previously referred to or is related to a previously mentioned noun (p. 7).

As these four types of uses require different background knowledge (linguistic, and sociolinguistic, or both) it is hypothesized here that they will be learned at different stages by second language learners imposing different difficulty level for learners with various language proficiency levels.

II. HYPOTHESES:

It is hypothesized here that these four uses i.e. Textual, Structural, Situational, and Cultural (1) will be learned at different stages by second language learners and (2) they will impose different difficulty for learners with various language proficiency levels.

III. METHODOLOGY:**A. SUBJECTS:**

A Cambridge First Certificate in English test was administered to 49 Iranian undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Tabriz. Based on their scores (and according to quartile of the scores) they were put into four proficiency groups hereafter called Low (13 subjects), Intermediate (13 subjects), Upper-intermediate (11 subjects), Advanced (12 subjects). All subjects speak Persian as mother tongue.

B. PROCEDURE:

An instrument consisting of 91 sentences was used to test the use of *the* by these learners. They were asked to put *the* wherever they felt it was required. In 60 sentences (15 each category) the obligatory use of *the* was deleted, and remaining sentences were included as distracters and controlling items. The subjects were asked to put *the* in these sentences wherever they felt it was needed. The categories mentioned above were later coded and analyzed by SPSS program.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:**A. missed obligatory use of the:**

The mean value of each missed obligatory use of *the* in each category was calculated and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Means of Missed Obligatory Use of *The* by Four Proficiency Groups

Groups	N	Textual	Structural	Situational	Cultural
Low	13	4.31	4.38	2.46	8.08
Intermediate	13	3.38	2.46	1.15	6.46
Upper-intermediate	11	2.91	1.73	1.36	7.27
Advanced	12	2.58	1.58	0.83	6.75

The mean value comparison shows that the number of missed obligatory use decreases as the proficiency level increases. Textual, Structural, and Situational uses improve significantly with the proficiency, but Cultural use does not improve as such, as the number of missed obligatory use does not show any significant change.

A Kruskal-Wallis Non-parametric test was run to find out any difference between the groups. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test Comparing Missed Obligatory Use of *The* by Four Proficiency Groups

Category	df	Chi-Square	Asymp. Sig.
Textual	3	3.620	.305
Structural	3	9.317	.025
Situational	3	12.852	.005
Cultural	3	1.356	.716

As the table 2 shows no difference was found in textually and culturally missed obligatory uses of *the*, but there is a difference between the groups in the case of structurally and situationally missed obligatory uses of *the* as the Asymp. Significance is less than 0.05.

B. OVERUSE OF THE:

The results as shown in Table 3 reveal the difference between the four proficiency groups. The mean values indicate a drastic decrease of overuse of *the* in Textual context from 3.08 by Low group to 0.67 by Advanced group. A similar decrease (one third) occurs as language proficiency increases in Situational context. Overuse of *the* in

structural context also shows steady but not vanishing decrease from 6.38 by Low group to 2.83 by advanced group. But overuse of *the* in Cultural context is a bit complex as the occurrence of overuse only falls almost half from 4.69 by Low group to 2.91 by Upper-intermediate students and slightly decreases to 2.58 in the case of advanced students.

Table 3
Means of Overuse of *The* by Four Proficiency Groups

Groups	n	Textual	Structural	Situational	Cultural
Low	13	3.08	6.38	3.23	4.69
Intermediate	13	1.92	5.08	2.54	4.85
Upper-intermediate	11	0.27	4.09	1.36	2.91
Advanced	12	0.67	2.83	1.75	2.58

A Kruskal-Wallis Non-parametric test was run to examine the extent of the difference between the groups and the results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Results of Kruskal-Wallis Test Comparing Overuse of *The* by Four Proficiency Groups

Category	Df	Chi-Square	Asymp. Sig.
Textual	3	18.615	.000
Structural	3	8.156	.043
Situational	3	12.473	.006
Cultural	3	4.873	.181

A significant difference was observed in the Textual, Structural, and Situational overuses of *the*, but no difference was found in the Cultural use. This supports the idea that formal classroom training and

exposure to foreign language has not helped advanced level students much to fully grasp the cultural knowledge. However, it has helped the learners to obtain the knowledge that is mainly linguistic-based, i.e. to use *the* properly in places where the need for it is signaled textually, structurally, or situationally.

The coefficient of variation (C.V.) analysis could be a test to gauge intra-group variation. The results of this test also could be used to draw conclusions about the ease and/or difficulty of the various uses of *the*. Based on the comparison of C.V. of various groups and uses, the most difficult to the easiest uses, in general, for all learners could be determined. For example, as shown in Table 5 Textual overuse with the C.V. of 1.19 is the most difficult and culturally missed obligatory use with the C.V. of .45 is the easiest one.

Table 5
Coefficient of Variation Comparison of Uses of *The* According to Difficulty Level

	T. overuse	St miss	Si. miss	C. overuse	St. overuse	Si. overuse	T. miss	C. miss
Low	.52	.82	.49	.85	.19	.36	.65	.42
Intermediate	1.09	.49	1.05	.70	.86	.63	.60	.49
Upper- intermediate	2.41	1.13	.82	.64	.66	.95	.76	.50
Advanced	1.72	.78	1.0	.88	.86	.88	.67	.44
Total	1.19	.95	.84	.82	.72	.68	.68	.45

T.=Textual, St.=Structural, Si.=Situational, C.= Cultural

As among the various categories of overuse only Textual overuse and Situational overuse show significant difference between the groups (refer to table 4), we compare only these two by inter-group coefficient of variation (the smaller the C.V. the lesser the difference between the subjects within that group). Consequently, the lesser the variation, the more analogous use of *the*. Inter-group comparison of the C.V. shows that Textual overuse of *the* has increased with the proficiency and reached the highest at Upper-intermediate level (2.41) but slightly decreased at Advanced level (1.72). In the case of

Situational overuse of *the* again it increases steadily till Upper-intermediate level (.95), but decreases at Advanced level (.88).

Among the missed obligatory uses of *the* there were differences in the case of Structural and Situational categories (refer to table 4). First, it drops from a high C.V. of .82 at Low level to .49 at Intermediate level but increases rather significantly at Upper-intermediate level but again it reaches to a level similar to Low level at Advance level, i.e. .78. In the case of Situational missing of *the* it should be said that it starts with C.V. of .49 then rises to 1.05 at Intermediate level but falls to .82 at Upper-intermediate level and again rises to 1.0 at Advanced level.

V. CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS:

It could be concluded that there is significant difference between the groups in the case of structurally and situationally missed obligatory uses of *the*. The comparison of the mean values suggests that they are improved as the proficiency level increases. But the interesting finding (based on table 2) is that there is no difference between the groups in the case of textually and culturally missed obligatory uses, suggesting that learners have the same difficulty level despite the difference in language proficiency. This implies that they are learned gradually and with difficulty, and they are not learned completely by formal classroom education.

In line with our research hypothesis, i.e., "It is hypothesized here that these four uses i.e. Textual, Structural, Situational, and Cultural (1) will be learned at different stages by second language learners and (2) they will impose different difficulty for learners with various language proficiency levels," it could be claimed that in terms of structurally and situationally missed obligatory uses of *the*, our hypothesis is confirmed. These usages are the first ones which are learned as the proficiency improves; but the weight of imposition of difficulty attributed to proficiency in the case of textually and culturally missed obligatory uses is different from Structural and

Situational ones. In other words, they impose different difficulties for learners with various language proficiency levels. Pedagogically it is implied that formal classroom training has been successful in eradicating failure of the learners to recognize the places where use of *the* is required structurally or situationally, but it has not been able to enable the learners to win through getting the feeling of the language where the use of *the* is necessary due to textual requirements or cultural values, as no significant difference is observed between the highly proficient learners and the lesser proficient learners in this regard. It suggests that longer exposure of advanced learners to English language only through textbooks or through training with minimum contact with native speakers which may help the learners to acquire cultural knowledge of native English speakers has proved to be inefficient. Interuniversity student exchange and sending learners to the country where the language is natively spoken are well known remedies in this regard.

In the case of textual and situational overuses of *the*, it is concluded that they are improved at upper-intermediate level but again worsened at advanced level showing the recurrence or at least traces of difficulty despite the high proficiency. It suggests that adequate competence to use *the* in textual and situational context has not been acquired yet in spite of long exposure to formal language. Again as expected there was no difference between the groups in the case of cultural overuse of *the*. This suggests that in acquiring the correct context or usage of *the* all proficiency groups will experience a similar trauma. It could be said that cultural overuse of *the* is one of the most difficult problematic areas for learners of all proficiency levels whose mother tongue which lacks definite article and those who learn English in a nonnative context; Persian is an example of this.

Yet another pedagogical implication would be that situational overuse of *the*, after showing a period of recession at the intermediate stage again recurs at the advance level. Juxtaposing this problem (situational overuse) with that of situationally missed obligatory use of

the, leads us to the fact that learners are able to recognize most of the context where use of *the* is required due to situational constraints, but still there are some contexts which despite showing some resemblance to previous context (where the use of *the* was obligatory) use of *the* is not allowed in those contexts. Those situations or contexts are not fully known to the learners, hence overuse of *the*. It is felt that more educational emphasis is required in those areas.

Finally, coefficient of variation analysis shed more light on culturally missed obligatory use. The coefficient of variation within the groups is assumed be an index of linguistic homogeneity and successfulness of teaching in the relevant area. That is, culturally missed obligator use with the least C.V. (.45), could be mastered before the textually missed obligatory use. The sequence of learning for the rest of the categories is believed to be as textually missed use, situational overuse, structural overuse, cultural overuse, situationally missed obligatory use, structurally missed obligatory use, and finally textual overuse of *the*.

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