Foreign Language Learners' Article Use: Specificity vs. Definiteness

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Abstract

In this paper an attempt is made to find out whether Persian EFL learners facing article use in English perform better in the recognition or production of the articles. It is also suggested that articles cross-linguistically might encode definiteness or specificity. Next, an Article Choice Parameter is proposed, which governs whether articles in a given language are distinguished on the basis of definiteness or on the basis of specificity. To clarify this point, definiteness/specificity variation in both Persian and English languages are studied firstly within each of these languages and secondly among the two. The findings show that difficulty in distinguishing between definiteness and specificity is the major problem in English article use among Persian learners of English while, they perform better in recognition than comprehension of the articles.

Key Words: specificity vs. definiteness, contextualization, pragmatic meaning, discourse processes, Shared Knowledge, Economy Principle.

1. Introduction

Ionin (2003) hypothesized that L2 learners fluctuate between the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter. This hypothesis leads to the prediction that L2 learners of English might make errors concerning article use because of either the overuse of *a* or the overuse of *the* with specific indefinite nouns. Throughout this paper, however, the fact will be discussed that certain variations are due to certain discourse processes such as topicalization or inversion in English and scrambling in Persian. That is like any variation in textual strategies, article use is completely discoursally motivated. Hence, the purpose of this study is the determine the extend to which definite, indefinite and specificity cause difficulties for Persian speakers in the production and recognition of English articles and to find out if there is any difference between students' performance on specificity and indefinite articles across the two tasks of recognition and production. The following research questions have been stated:

1- Is there any difficulty for Persian speakers in the production and recognition of English articles?

2- Is there any difference between students' performance on specificity and indefinite articles across the two tasks of recognition and production?

To find out the answers to these questions, different scholars' opinions on definiteness and specificity in both languages are reviewed, then the significance of shared background knowledge in successful communicative acts is described and the applicability of Economy Principle to the processes of referring to factual identities as well as abstract ones will be examined.

To understand the problems of the Persian speakers with article use in English a sample of university students was tested whose results are reported in detail and conclusions are discussed on the basis of the findings of the test conducted.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2. 1. English:

In modern English the noun is divided into three groups: definite, indefinite and specificity. Before we begin this paper, it is important to define all the three noun groups that will be discussed throughout this paper.

2. 1. 1. Definiteness

The definite phrase is one, which refers to something that can be identified uniquely in the contextual or general knowledge shared by speaker and hearer. In other words, the phrase is known both to speaker and addressee (Peterson, 1974:97).

2. 1.2. Indefiniteness

The indefinite phrase is used where the noun phrase is not uniquely identifiable in the shared knowledge of speaker and hearer, meaning, the indefinite noun phrase is unknown to both speaker and addressee. Sometimes the indefinite does not exist in reality at all (Peterson,

1974:96).

2. 1. 3. Specificity

The noun phrase specificity is the phrase in which the speaker has an individual in mind, but the addressee does not share this knowledge. In other words, the speaker has a belief of the existence and uniqueness of the referent, which is not shared by the addressee. The following table shows the differences.

Table 1: The Differences between Definite, Indefinite & Specificity Regarding the Shared Knowledge of Addressee & Addresser

	Addressee	Addresser
Definiteness	+	+
Indefiniteness	-	-
Specificity	-	+

To continue the discussion of specificity, it is necessary to distinguish between two sorts of specific indefinites, referential (known) and attribute (unknown) indefinites. It is also necessary to point out what they have in common and how they differ.

2. 1. 4. Non- Specific

According to Lambrecht (1994: 79-83) the noun phrase is specific when the speaker "has an individual in mind"; if not, the indefinite is non-specific. In other words, when the speaker does not have a particular individual in mind the NP is non-specific. A non- specific noun phrase can be replaced by the word one. Consider the following sentences:

He is going to find a nice car.

He is going to find one.

Here *'a nice car'* can be substituted by *'one'*, therefore it is non-specific.

2. 1. 5. Generic

In discussing the use of articles, the distinction between generic and specific reference is necessary. Compare the two sentences below:

There is a monkey in the cage.

Monkeys are clever.

In the first sentence, the reference is specific, since we have in mind a particular monkey. But by using the second sentence, the reference is generic, since we are thinking of a class of monkeys without any specific reference to a particular monkey. Thus, the generic reference denotes the whole class.

As Quirk et al (1985: 259-260) state, "all three major forms of articles (the, a/an, and zero) may be used generically to members of a class."

The following examples are from Quirk et al (op cit):

The bullterrier makes an excellent watchdog.

A bullterrier makes an excellent watchdog.
Bullterriers make excellent watchdogs.

To summarize the above classifications referring expressions can be categorized as follows:

A. Definite referring expressions
1- The man isn't eating anything. He looks like he is about to leave. [The others are not men.]
2- The fat man is the quietest of the lot. He looks like he is about to leave. [The others are not fat.]
3- The man of extraordinary size has a voice to match his size. He looks like he is about to leave. [The others are less fat.]

B. Indefinite nonspecific referring expressions
1- *A man must meet his obligations.* [He looks like he is about to leave.]
2- *A fat man has the advantage of reserves of fuel and energy for hard time.* [He looks like he is about to leave.]
3- A man of extraordinary size is exceptional at least in this respect. [He looks like he is about to leave.]

C. Indefinite specific referring expressions
1- This morning I saw a man. He came into the store.
2- This morning I saw a fat man. He came into the store.
3- This morning I saw a man of extraordinary size. He came into the store.

The difference between non-specific and specific indefinite reference can be seen in the fact that each indefinite specific referent in the C sentences accommodates the anaphoric reference to a specific individual *he* of the following sentence, whereas the indefinite nonspecific referents in B cannot.

The implication of these differences is that referring expressions that evoke a new referent are likely to constitute a greater challenge for ESL learners than referring expressions that identify a referent that is known to the interlocutor. This is because the language user cannot rely on shared knowledge about a new referent. Rather, the language user must be knowledgeable about abstract conventions specifying what constitutes a well-distinguished selection from a well-formed set.

II. PERSIAN:
In modern Persian, nouns are divided into two groups: common nouns and concrete nouns – common nouns are, in turn, divided into, definite, indefinite and specific categories.

Indefinite nouns cover all members of the special noun groups; for instance, */aesbi,/* a horse, refers to a member of group.

In Persian, indefinite is called /*nakaere/.* All common nouns are indefinite and if we want to know one of the whole species, we add the suffix – i which is called /- i - *tankir/,* (indefinite), and is placed at the end of the word, (noun); e.g.

/*diruz aesbi xaeridaem./*

(Yesterday I bought a horse.)

The hearer does not know which horse the speaker is referring to, a white horse or a black one, a large one or a small one. The suffix – i is also called / *yaye nakare*/ which means unknown and uncertain.

The definite noun phrase is known to both hearer and speaker; that is both have a certain individual in mind; for instance:

/ *ketab - ra xaeridaem.*/

(I bought the book.)

The book here is known both to the speaker and the hearer. So, when both the hearer and the speaker have a common reference for the word, it is called definite. In Persian definite is called /*maerefe/.* The suffix – *ra* is the marker for the definiteness and is placed after the definite word and is used with generic nouns too /*bache shokolat ra bishtar az shirini doust daraed/* (child likes chocolate more than cookies.) Dabirmoqaddam also believes that /*ra/* is one of the definite markers in Persian.

The specific noun is used when the speaker has an individual in mind which is unknown to the hearer, for example:

/*ruze xubi bud./*

(It was a nice day.)

In this sentence the speaker knows whether he is talking about a day in the winter with snow or about a day in the summer with sunshine, but the hearer does not have any special concept about that particular day in his mind. In other words, if the hearer does not share the speaker's awareness of the individual, the noun phrase is said to denote specificity. The specific noun phrase, on one hand, has a relation to definite and indefinite noun phrases, and on the other hand with generic noun phrases; e.g.

II. A. Generic:

/*aesb heivane ba hushi aest./* (Horses are intelligent animals.)

II. B. Specific:

/aesbe shomareye paenj dar mosabeqe baraende shodeh aest./ (Horse number five has won the race.)

II. C. Definite:

/maen aesbe baeradaere shoma- ra xaeridaem./ (I bought your brother's horse.)

II. D. Indefinite:

/delaem mixahaed aesbi bexaeraem./ (I'd like to buy a horse.)

Jamshidian (1990: 22-23) states that, "most of the foreign and Persian grammarians have worked on definiteness, indefiniteness and some on specificity in the Persian language

III. Contrast

The English and Persian noun phrases (definite, indefinite and specificity) as defined by grammarians were discussed. To complete the investigation the article use will be analyzed and the problems of learning this aspect of the English language will be discussed indicating the similarities and differences between the two languages on both the surface and deep structures through some examples. Moreover, an attempt will be made to determine the learning difficulties that Iranian students encounter, particularly when they are learning English as a foreign language.

III. C. 1. Common nouns with – ra

In certain cases, *-ra* is added to an indefinite noun to make it known, and it changes the generic noun to a definite one.

Compare the following pairs of sentences:

/aesbxaridid?/ (Did you buy any horse?)

/aesb-ra xaridid?/ (Did you buy the horse?)

/baername-i neveshtaem./ (I wrote a program.)

/ baername-ra neveshtaem./ (I wrote the program.)

/ali ketab lazem daraed./ (Ali needs some books.)

/ali ketab-ra lazem daraed./ (Ali needs the book.)

Considering the above examples, objects without *-ra* are indefinite whereas objects with *-ra* are definite. So *–ra* has been used as a postposition. In other words *–ra* is not a definite marker, but because the noun is definite *–re* is used. Another example:

/aesb-ra xaridid?/ (Did you buy the horse ?). The above sentence at first was: */aesbi-ra ke qaerar bud bexaerid xaeridid?/* (Did you buy the horse that you were supposed to ?)

So because of the definiteness of the word */aesb/ -ra* is used.

III. C. 2. Common nouns with /-i/ and /ke/.

Common nouns are sometimes indefinite nouns with an indefinite marker /-i/ used as definite by adding /ke/ (what) after them. Notice the following sentence: */namei ke mixastid neveshte shod./* (The letter which you had asked for has been written).

In Persian, unlike English, using a common noun as a definite does not need any article because definite nouns are known and no modifier is used; e.g.

/ketab daer qaefaese aest./ (The book is on the shelf.)

/haeva anja gaerm bud./ (The weather was hot there.)

III. C. 3. Pronouns

In Persian, pronouns are definite by nature. The reason is that they substitute for subjects, objects, etc. Which are known to both the hearer and the speaker. Notice the pronouns in

Persian :

A. Possessive pronouns,

/*male maen*/ (my own)   /*male ma*/ (our own)

/*male to*/ (your own)   /*male shoma*/ (your own)

/*male u*/ (his, her own)   /*male ishan */ (their own)

B. Personal pronouns,

/*maen*/ (I)   /*ma*/ (we)

/*to*/ (you)   /*shoma* /* (you)

/*u*/ (he, she) etc.   /ishan/ (they)

C. Reflexive pronouns,

/xodaem/ (myself)   /*xodeman*/ (ourselves)

/Xodaet/ (yourselfe)   /*xodetan*/ (yourselves)

/*xodaesh*/ (himself, herself)   /*xodeshan*/ (themselves)

III. C. 1. a. Persian Speakers Problems with Definite in English

A common definition of a definite noun in English is one with which the addressee is familiar. The definite marker in English is *the*. For Persian speakers, it is difficult to use the, because in Persian, if the whole concept of the noun is meant, not its single meaning, no article is applied such as: */ketab saergaermiye xubi aest./* (Book (reading) is a good hobby.) (cf. Jafarpur, 1973:18).

Unlike Persian, English normally requires an article with a singular count noun as a complement; e.g.

Ali is an engineer.

Ali is the engineer.

The second sentence is semantically correct only in the case of one engineer living in the society. In Persian zero article, is used in the above cases, so the equivalent to both the sentences is: /*ali mohaendes aest.*/ (lit: Ali is engineer.) Using article with count nouns as complements is one of the other ambiguities for Persian speakers. "In this regard, Persian speakers make mistake facing the expectations of article use. As Quirk defines there are four cases in which noun is definite: (a) immediate situation, larger situation, anaphoric reference (direct) and cataphoric reference (indirect)" (cf. Jamshidian, 1990: 266).

III. C. 1. b. Indefinite in English versus Persian

Lambton (1953: 3) Claims: "there is no definite and indefinite articles in Persian. Broadly speaking, a noun becomes indefinite by the addition of /i/ "ye"" . Concider the following :

/*ketab*/   (book)

/*ketabi*/   (a book)

/*miz*/   (table)

/*mizi*/   (a table)

In the preceding example, the words /*ketabi*/ (a book) and */mizi/* (a table) are indefinite and unknown. The cases in which nouns in Persian are indefinite include:

In Persian, unlike English, general nouns are used only in singular forms.

/*ketab duste xubi aest.*/ (Book is a good friend.)

/*sedaqaet neshaneye iman aest.*/ (Honesty is a sign of faith.)

In Persian, for the above example, there is no distinction between /*ketab*/ (book) and /*sedaqaet*/ (honesty) in case of article use, whereas in English, *book* is a count noun and it has to follow an article whereas, honesty is a mass noun and there is no need to use an article before it.

III. C. 2. a.. Persian Speakers Problems with Indefinite in English

The indefinite noun is a noun which is unknown to both the speaker and the hearer. In other words, the indefinite article is notionally the "Unmarked" article in the sense that it is used (for singular count nouns), where the condition for the use of the do not hold. That is a / an will be used where there is no referent for the noun; e.g.

I am student.

You are teacher.

Iranian students also use a/an when the article is unnecessary.

They use sentence (a) in place of sentence (b).

a. A man can adapt himself to any situation.

b. Man can adapt himself to any situation.

III. C. 3. a. Specificity in Persian

Almost all the nouns in Persian are divided in to generic nouns and non – generic nouns.

III. C. 3. a. 1. Generic nouns

Jafarpur (1973: 18) states that, "almost any noun devoid of any suffix or prefix can be used as a generic concept".

/*sib awael daer esfahan be aemael amaed.*/ (The apple was first raised in Isfahan.)

/*ensan naebayaed aelaqe fe zendegi-ra aez daest bedehaed.* / (Man should never lose interest in life.)

3. Design of the Study

According to Tickoo (2002: 176-193), "an aspect of noun phrase reference of interest to researchers of language acquisition and/or pedagogy is how referring is achieved when there is no readily available term with which to identify the intended entity." A number of scholars have mentioned some referent identification strategies that are put to use in these circumstances, including description of the identifying characteristics of the referent (the thing with three legs), its identification in terms of similarity to a comparable namable entity (the object that looks like a star) and its identification in terms of its function (the thing that is used to open a can) (cf. Tickoo, 2002).

Advanced EFL learners seem to have no difficulty referring to physically present or known referents. They have considerable difficulty, however framing reference to new

referents. This might be because when the language user is referring to a physically present or known referent the general formulations of the Shared Knowledge and Economy Principles of communication may account for effective ways of referring to the referent, and in this manifestation, these principles pose no difficulty for the advanced learners. However, when the language user is required to evoke a new referent, then the task of referring does not seem to be fully addressed by the versions of these two principles. Rather, it requires conformity to a specialized version of the Shared Knowledge and Economy Principles, of which learners appear to be ignorant. Here these two principles are briefly introduced.

General principles of communication that underlie effective referent identification by these means have also been described. It has been claimed that to achieve referent identification, the referring expression must be framed in terms of information that is shared knowledge between speaker and interlocutor (the Shared Knowledge Principle) . Krauss and Fussell (1990: 112) state that "any communicative act rests on a base of mutual knowledge" .

"It has also been claimed that to effectively identify its referent, the referring expression must be framed in terms of the right amount of information, neither too little nor too much (the Economy Principle.)

These principles do not appear to apply in exactly the same way to every act of referring. They seem to apply differently to the task of referring to the following two types of referents:

Referents that are physically present at the time of reference, as in the underscored NP in la, or already known to the interlocutor at the time of reference, as in lb. (Sometimes they are already known as a result of having been introduced in the preceding discourse, as in the underscored NP in lc, or because they belong to a generic class, as in ld.)

1a) The man in the corner was asking about you.

1b) The man who came to see you yesterday … .

1c) A couple I've never seen before came in to see you yesterday. The man … .

1d) At this point a can opener will come in handy.

Rreferents that are neither physically present nor already known to the interlocutor, as in 2 :

2) When I arrived I found I did not know anyone. But the following day I met a man who could be a friend to me.

But a specialized version of these principles appears to monitor the felicitous framing of reference to new referents. It is this, specialized version of the Shared Knowledge and Economy Principles that poses a challenge for learners (cf. Levinson, 1983; Leech, 1983).

Considering the above argumentations, an attempt was made to find out the answers to the research questions i.e.

Is there any difficulty for Persian speakers in the production and recognition of English Articles? And

Is there any differences between students' performance on specificity and indefinite articles across the two tasks of recognition and production?

In this regard two groups of English major students from the university of Allama

Tabatabaie were randomly selected. These two groups were given two different proficiency test types: recognition and production. The procedure and results are discussed below:

1- The recognition (Test A, for both experimental and controlled groups) and production (Test B, for both experimental and controlled groups) tests, for English in context. (Using the Book "Bridge of San Luis Ray" + Persian translation of sentences translated by Shojaedin Shafa.) Each test contained 48 items. The items were chosen randomly according to their article use through the novel. A copy of the tests is attached.

2- The recognition (Test C) and production (Test D) tests, for isolated English sentences each of them contained 32 questions. The recognition test consisted of four choices. The participants were to choose the correct answer. For the production test the participants had to provide the sentences with the appropriate article (these tests were given to both experimental and control group).

4. Data Analysis

To analyze the obtained data statistical t-test was used to compare the mean scores of each two groups on the measure in question using SPSS program.

5. Results

The results show that the percentage of the students who make mistake in providing articles are more than the percentage of the ones who are to recognize correct articles. This is due to the interference of their mother tongue. As findings show, they also are confused in using definite and indefinite articles and for the case of specificity they misuse article "the" where it is unnecessary. They are confused between definite and specific. They are in some cases unable to distinguish specificity noun phrases from definite noun phrases. Hence, the L1 has interfered with the students' production in L2 but it has not interfered in their recognition significantly. This could be because the students' competence level vary. Statistical findings are attached.

According to the statistical findings, it is proved that specificity, definite and indefinite markers are more difficult when they are in context than in isolated sentences being recognized or produced.

6. Conclusion

The empirical data show that L2 English article choice is not random but reflects access to the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter, which was introduced in previous sections. And so the answers for the two research questions are as follows:

Persian speakers have difficulty in the production and recognition of English articles.

The students' performance on specificity and indefinite articles across the two tasks of recognition and production has been different.

The study suggests that advanced learners of ESL have difficulty with the proper framing of focal indefinite specific referring expressions. This appears to be because such referring expressions must evoke a referent that is new to the interlocutor, and the referent must be

evoked as a well – distinguished selection from a set to which it belongs. This requires that the learner use the right type of information, in the right amount, to frame a descriptor for the referent that will make the referent salient amongst same-set entities. To do this, the learner must be knowledgeable about conventionalized and therefore commonly shared notions of what is salient/newsworthy. To be perceived as salient, the focal indefinite specific referring expressions must also be observed by a salient observer. In addition, the framing of the referring expression must be constrained by the knowledge and perspective of the observer, at the time of referent observation.

To help the learner become competent in the use of focal indefinite specific referring expressions, therefore, classroom instruction should focus on the following areas of noun phrase reference.

The difference between focal and non-focal indefinite specific referring expressions should be illustrated, and learners should practice distinguishing between these two types of referring expressions.

The difference between a referent that is evoked as a well-distinguished element of the set to which it belongs and one that is not well-distinguished should be illustrated.

Learners should become knowledgeable about shared notions of salience and understand how to judge the type and amount of information used for the descriptor in the referring expression so that they can ensure the saliency of the referent amongst same-set entities.

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