

# DEFINITE ARTICLE USE IN THE IL OF SPANISH SPEAKERS: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL PROBLEM

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## 1. Introduction: Transfer, fluctuation and article use in English

The articles “the” and “a” provide the most basic expression of definiteness and indefiniteness in the English language. We will focus on the marker of definiteness par excellence, “the”, in order to study what kind of processes might affect its appearance in the interlanguage of intermediate learners. The reason for restricting this study to the definite article is based on its wider variety of usage and its higher frequency of use than the indefinite article *a(n)*.

Article form and use differ quite a lot in Spanish and English, so that learners from both languages find it difficult to adjust their systems of thought to the new rules and contexts of application. Thus, the article use of a Spanish speaker of English will be greatly influenced by his or her linguistic background due to *transfer*. Language transfer gives rise to what has been labelled as *interlingual errors*, that is, errors that result from interference from the mother tongue, as Corder (1981: 207) acknowledges. The concept of transfer has developed significantly in the last few years and, as Odlin (1989:27) concedes, transfer becomes not simply a *matter of interference*, or a question of merely *falling back on the native tongue*. Following Kellerman’s *transfer to nowhere* principle, it might be said that transfer “can now come through similarity and difference” (Kellerman 1995:142).

In order to account for the differences in the utterances produced by non native speakers of a given L2 and the corresponding ones which would probably be produced by the native speakers of that language, Selinker (1972:214) poses the idea of *interlanguage* to refer to a separate linguistic system based on the observable output which results from a learner's attempted production of a target language (henceforth, TL) norm. There are a number of principles at work within this latent psychological structure, the most relevant of which, as far as our study is concerned, are overgeneralization of TL rules and fossilization. Coulter (1968) presents convincing data suggesting that there exists a sort of strategy of communication among learners that dictates to them that they know enough of the TL in order to communicate and so they stop learning and fossilize.

In recent years, fossilization has been increasingly related to the phenomenon of empty categories, that is, those elements which are not present in the IL, even though they are required in the TL and, sometimes, even in the source language, as Cebreiros (2004:34) acknowledges. The predictable appearance of empty categories in the IL, or rather, the lack of the expected linguistic constructions, has been linked to the Multiple Effects Principle, which establishes that the simultaneous operation of two or more IL phenomena (one of them normally being transfer and in this case, the other being empty categories) will lead to their permanent stabilization. As far as article use is concerned, we may argue that the IL of Spanish speakers of English L2 will be characterized by the phenomenon that is opposite to empty categories, since they produce utterances where the article does not apply due to L1 similarity (i.e. they produce "full" categories), this being the phenomenon which is going to stabilize in their IL.

The actual extent of L1 influence is a controversial issue: whereas some studies have shown that L1 influence decreases with language proficiency (e.g. as the learner gains control over L2 conventions), others have revealed that it increases with IL development (e.g. as the learner acquires the L2 tools necessary for expressing his or her L1-based perspectives). Still other investigations have suggested that L1 influence neither increases nor decreases with proficiency, nor does it fluctuate substantially before taking a terminal direction. (Jarvis 2000:247). Another related contentious topic has to do with inter-L1-group heterogeneity, that is, the fact that comparable learners of a common L2 who speak different L1s diverge in their performance. Relevant to our study is the work of Ringbom (1987), who has proved that L1 Finnish learners of English are significantly more likely to omit English articles and prepositions than L1 Swedish learners are, thereby proving that the IL omission of function words (i.e. articles and prepositions) is not something that every learner does regardless

of L1 background. A number of studies (such as Andersen, 1992 and Stehle, 2009) have proved that not having an article system in the L1 constitutes a handicap when acquiring such a system in the L2.

## **2. Review of the literature**

Because of its high complexity and frequent use, the English article system is one of the most difficult structural elements for ESL learners, very difficult if not impossible to teach (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982). A survey conducted by Covitt (1976) ranked the teaching of English article usage first among difficult tasks for ESL instructors, something which was confirmed some years later by Parrish (1987) and, more recently, by Jarvis (2002).

Although some earlier studies (Christophersen, 1939; Jespersen, 1949) made significant contributions to our understanding of the issue, Bickerton's (1981) work is arguably the most important and enlightening, as it renders a new and unique systematic approach to the analysis of the use of the English article system.

According to Bickerton (1981), the use of the English articles —*a*, *the*, and zero— is governed by the semantic function of the noun phrase (henceforth, NP) in discourse. The classification of the semantic function of a NP is then determined, he argued, by two binary discourse features: (a) whether a noun is a specific referent ( $\pm$ SR), and (b) whether the hearer knows the referent ( $\pm$ HK). If the grasp of the use of the English article system entails a command of the discourse and referential constraints on NPs, the acquisition of the article system must in turn involve the learning of these constraints—a task that research has shown, directly or indirectly, to be especially challenging, albeit possible, for L2 learners.

In 1983, Huebner applied Bickerton's noun classification to the teaching of articles in ESL. Detaching himself from traditional research that considered the presence or absence of the article as depending on the context, Huebner's analysis tackled two more important issues: first, the various semantic functions or types of NPs and the article(s) used with each semantic type; and second, the development of ESL learners' grasp of the article + NP function relationship. Using the two binary features that Bickerton developed, Huebner classified his data according to the semantic functions of the NPs. Thanks to such a classification of nouns, one could understand the learner's use of articles in a semantic context by considering the article(s) that an ESL learner used with each type. Liu and Gleason (2002:4) have claimed that Huebner's method of analysis has allowed researchers to gain a deeper understanding of ESL article usage than the method of examining only the production of articles in obligatory contexts.

Following this line of thought, Thomas (1989) argues that some fruitful insight may be gained from comparing article production in child L1 learners to adult L2 learners. She claims that children's frequent use of the definite article in referential indefinite contexts, that is, with nouns appearing in the discourse for the first time, (a context where adults would use the indefinite article) may be mirrored in adult L2 learners. The results of research prove that adult L2 learners also overgeneralize the definite article, employing *the* in referential indefinite contexts at significantly higher rates than in non-referential contexts when such a strategy is possible in their native language, thus relating article use and transference.

More recently, scholars have suggested that variable production of morphological forms can be attributed to the difficulties learners experience in relating the abstract syntax of the L2 to their production of L2 target-like forms. The Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (henceforth, MSIH; Prévost and White, 2000) postulates that while morphological production in the L2 is variable, it is also largely marked and regular (i.e. not random). However, as White (2003) later recognises, the main weakness of this approach is that it is inherently *post hoc* and thus MSIH has recently been supplemented by a proposal that allows for representational problems to play a part, but restricting them to the phonological level. The Prosodic Transfer Hypothesis (as described by Goad and White, 2004) suggests that a transfer of L1 phonological representations might interfere with the production of L2 morphology.

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Influenced by these hypotheses, scholars like Trenkic (2007) have related article-use in the IL of L2 speakers of English to transference from their L1 and the influence of its morphological structure. More specifically, there have been several studies which focus on the acquisition of the English article system by Spanish learners, taking transfer into consideration, such as that by Ionin, Zubizarreta and Maldonado (2008). They state that the main problem in the acquisition of the English article system lies in the difference between English having definite plurals with only specific reference (The lions are dangerous → specific group of lions) and Spanish having definite plurals which stand for generic as well as specific reference ( *leones son peligrosos* → *los* can be referring to lions in general or to a specific group of them). Their claim that Spanish L1 speakers will allow for a generic interpretation of bare plurals due to influence from their mother tongue is expanded in Cebreiros (2004), who relates transfer from the L1 with the creation of empty categories. This author argues that the appearance of these categories stems from the speaker's natural tendency to regularize the rules of the L2 in the IL using strategies such as simplification and overextension of analogy. Going a step further, Andersen (1992) examines the differences in article acquisition between Spanish and Japanese learners and maintains that:

A well-known characteristic of both first and second language acquisition is that grammatical morphemes are absent in early stages of interlanguage. The natural processes of acquisition that produce a simplified interlanguage without articles in early stages is thus reinforced by negative transfer from a language that does not have articles (Japanese). It appears that this early simplification in interlanguage is overridden by positive transfer in the case of the acquisition of English articles by Spanish speakers. (Andersen 1992:184)

Other studies, such as Robertson (2000), Lu (2001), Ionin et al. (2004) and, more recently, Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) have focused on fluctuation. In the course of article acquisition, L2 learners of English have been documented as omitting articles in both definite and indefinite contexts, and as misusing them, that is, substituting one in the context of another. Bearing this in mind Ionin *et al.* (2004) developed an explanation for the inappropriate use of articles in L2 English. On the basis of a given set of restrictions, Ionin *et al.* (2004:16) put forward a parameter-setting account to explain the variability in L2 learners' productions of articles: the Fluctuation Hypothesis (henceforth, FH). It states that:

- L2 learners have full access to Universal Grammar (UG) principles and parameter-settings.
- L2 learners fluctuate between different parameter-settings until the input leads them to set the parameter to the appropriate value.

Under the FH, L2 English learners will predictably fluctuate between the two settings of the Article Choice Parameter until they are exposed to sufficient input to set the parameter correctly. This first study of fluctuation was carried out on subjects whose L1 did not have article systems of their own. Thus, a follow-up study with subjects whose L1 did have such a system was carried out in 2006.

Ionin, Zubizarreta and Maldonado (2008), compared L2 learners whose L1 has articles (Spanish) with L2 learners from an article-less L1 (Russian) background. Two competing hypotheses regarding the role of fluctuation and L1 transfer in the acquisition of articles were posed:

- a) Possibility 1: Fluctuation overrides transfer: all L2 learners should fluctuate between definiteness and specificity in their article choice. In other words, both Spanish and Russian learners are expected to misuse articles.
- b) Possibility 2: Transfer overrides fluctuation: L2 learners whose L1s have articles should transfer article semantics from their L1 to their L2. The [- article] L1 learners should fluctuate, since they have no parameter setting to transfer.

The aforementioned authors found evidence supporting Possibility 2. The results of a written elicitation test indicated that the Spanish learners of English transferred article semantics from their L1 to their L2, because they did not fluctuate between

definiteness and specificity and distinguished between *the* and *a* on the basis of definiteness. The Russian speakers, in the absence of L1 transfer, were less accurate than the Spanish speakers, as they fluctuated between distinguishing *the* and *a* on the basis of definiteness and on the basis of specificity, similar to the Russian speakers in Ionin et al. (2004).

### 3. Article Usage in English as compared to Spanish

English has three so-called articles, *the*, *a* and  $\emptyset$  (zero). They appear to have different, yet overlapping distributions. It is generally accepted that the use of *the* first falls into two major categories: generic and non-generic use (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Hawkins, 2001; Quirk et al., 1985). The definite article *the* can be potentially used with all types of nouns: count singular, count plural and non-count, as Huddleston and Pullum (2002:368) postulate. The definite article is used before singular and plural nouns when the noun is particular or specific. *The* signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a *particular* member of a group. *The* is not used with non-countable nouns referring to something in a general sense. Following Butt and Benjamin (1988), this is what we will refer to as general reference:

[no article] *Coffee is a popular drink.*

[no article] *Japanese was his native language.*

[no article] *Intelligence is difficult to quantify.*

*The* is used with non-countable nouns that are made more specific by a limiting modifying phrase or clause:

*The coffee in my cup is too hot to drink.*

*The Japanese he speaks is often heard in the countryside.*

Liu and Gleason (2002:7) propose to divide the types of definite article above into four main types:

- a) CULTURAL, where *the* is used with a noun that is a unique and well-known referent in a speech community.  
*We went hiking in the Lake District last autumn.*
- b) SITUATIONAL, 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.  
*A woman, with her hands full, says to a man standing in front of the office, "Open the door for me, would you?"*
- c) STRUCTURAL, where *the* is used with a first-mention noun that has a modifier.  
*The movies that are shown here now are all rated R.*

- d) TEXTUAL, where *the* is used with a noun that has been previously referred to or is related to a previously mentioned noun.

*We rented a boat last summer at a lake.*

*Unfortunately, the boat hit another boat and sank.*

The indefinite article *a* can be used with singular count nouns and abstract (non-count) nouns, but not with plural count nouns and not usually with count nouns. For instance:

*I saw a rabbit.*

*They reached an understanding.*

The  $\emptyset$  article can be used with plural nouns, mass nouns and abstract nouns, but not usually with singular count nouns (unless they can be interpreted as mass nouns: e.g. *She doesn't eat rabbit*). For instance:

*I saw ( $\emptyset$ ) rabbits in the garden.*

*She presented ( $\emptyset$ ) evidence for her claim.*

The following table illustrates the range of co-occurrence of English articles depending on the type of noun being used:

Article	Noun Types	Examples
The	N[+count, + singular] [+count, - singular] [-count, + mass] [-count, - mass]	the rabbit the rabbits the porridge the truth
A	N[+count, + singular] [-count, - mass]	a rabbit a (home) truth
$\emptyset$	N[+count, - singular] [-count, + mass] [-count, - mass]	$\emptyset$ rabbits $\emptyset$ porridge $\emptyset$ truth

(Hawkins, 2001: 233)

TABLE 1: Co-occurrence possibilities of the articles *the*, *a*,  $\emptyset$  and types of noun

Once the use of the articles in English has been clarified, let us now turn to Spanish:

	Definite article (the)		Indefinite article (a, an)	
	masc.	fem.	masc.	fem.
Singular	El	la	un	una
Plural	los	las	unos	unas

TABLE 2: Forms of the articles

Article usage in Spanish seems especially elusive for English-speaking learners. Perhaps the most striking difference between both languages as far as article use is concerned is the use of the definite article with nouns alluding to:

- a) Mass nouns which refer to an idea of substance in general:  
*la informalidad* → *informality*      *la naturaleza* → *nature*
- b) Count nouns which denote all the members in their class:  
*Los belgas beben mucha cerveza* → *Belgians drink lots of beer*  
*Los tigres son animales peligrosos* → *Tigers are dangerous animals*

Unlike English, the definite article is used in Spanish:

- a) Before certain nouns, such as church, school, etc...which refer not to the actual physical place but to the institution they represent:  
En **la** escuela → at school      en **el** trabajo → at work  
En **la** iglesia → at church      en **la** cárcel → in jail
- b) Instead of the possessive, when this is inferred or expressed in the direct object:  
Bajé **la** cabeza → I lowered my head  
Levanté **la** mano → I raised my hand
- c) With street names and geographical places:  
Visitamos **el** lago Ness → We visited Lake Ness  
Vivo en **la** calle Urzáiz → I live in Urzáiz Street

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#### 4. Hypotheses

1. L1-Spanish learners of English will transfer the properties of generic reference from their L1 to their L2, hence allowing the generic reading of English definite plurals.
2. Due to this generic reading of English definite plurals, *the* will be overused by Spanish speakers of English as L2 through processes of simplification and overextension of analogy, and perhaps transfer of training.
3. Recovery from L1-transfer may be possible: following the Fluctuation Hypothesis, we may argue that more advanced L1-Spanish L2-English learners may with time interpret definite plurals in a target-like manner, as specific rather than generic.

## 5. Method

### a. The subjects

In order to analyze article production, a set of three different exercises were carried out with four groups of ten students each. Thirty were fourth-year ESO students (Compulsory Secondary Education), and ten first-year Bachillerato students. All of them were enrolled in the same state high school in Vigo (Pontevedra). Twenty-one were girls and nineteen were boys, and some had recently immigrated to Spain from different countries in Latin America. They had been studying English for an average of five years. It is worth mentioning that the inclusion of a control group was not thought necessary since we felt it would be irrelevant due to the high degree of markedness as far as article use is concerned in English. The higher level group, the one corresponding to 1<sup>st</sup> year of Bachillerato, was included in an attempt to obtain data regarding article use in more advanced contexts. Regarding this higher-level group, it is important to mention that their results will be presented in a separate chart so as not to mix linguistic performances that may corrupt the data.

### b. Materials

The set of exercises consisted of three different tasks, each focused on a different aspect of article use. The first was a 12-sentence fill-in the gap exercise, where the options were *the* or  $\emptyset$  article.<sup>1</sup> The sentences were made as simple and straightforward as possible to make the students feel confident and to avoid stress that might lead them to give the first answer that came into their heads. The second task was a 6-sentence translation exercise devised to examine the students' active production of language. The third task was an 8-sentence either/or exercise where students had to circle whichever option (*the* or  $\emptyset$  article) they thought more suitable. The operating principle was very much the same as in the first assignment, but the difficulty of the sentences was increased.

### c. Procedure

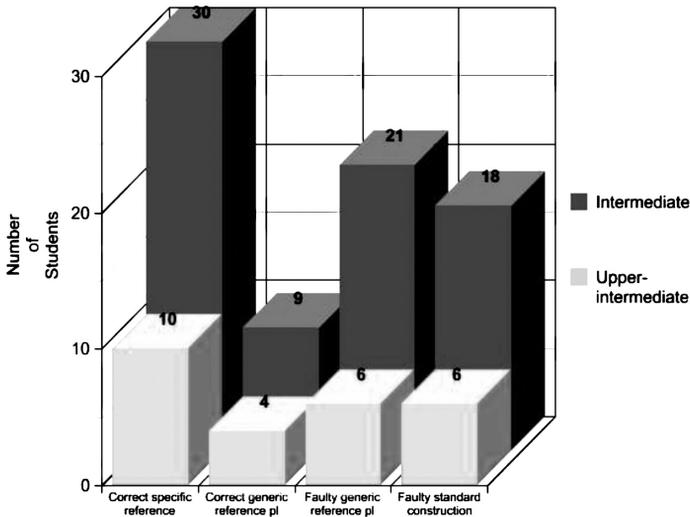
Firstly, the level of the fourth-year ESO students was ascertained through the Oxford Placement Test 2 (Allen 1992), whereby they were labeled as intermediate. The same test was carried out on the first-year Bachillerato students, and they were tagged as upper-intermediate. After the test, all students were given fifty minutes to finish the tasks. All three exercises were done during class hours. The students had the option of asking whatever vocabulary items they were not familiar with in the hope that answers would not be left blank simply because a vocabulary item was unknown..

### d. Data analysis

In the first task for the intermediate group, as might be expected since Spanish and English follow the same rules for specific reference in the singular, a not

surprising 100% of the students employed the article correctly. This is shown in Bar number 1, which is labeled as “Correct generic reference”. This fact shows that although their competence in English may not be very high, they are able to apply the rules of the L1 to the L2 successfully. On the other hand, bars 2 (correct specific reference pl) and 3 (faulty specific reference pl) clearly attest that the vast majority of students fail to use the Ø article with general reference in the plural, thus showing interference from their L1 background, since Spanish lacks that kind of referential use without the article. An interesting case is bar number 4, which reads “faulty standard construction”. This refers to sentence nº 11 in the appendix, (See you on.....Wednesday), which we may take as a standard construction in the TL that we expected the learners to have interiorized at this level of proficiency. Nonetheless, the data shows that this is not the case and that they still apply L1 rules to such a construction. Table 1 illustrates the data obtained from the first task:

First Task

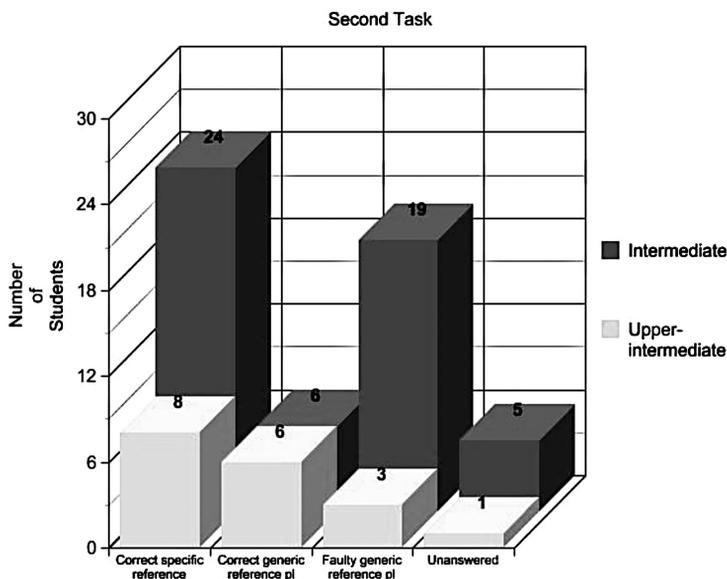


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As we can see in the table, the overall results of the more advanced group seem to support the figures obtained for the intermediate group. Once again, 100% of the students successfully employed the definite article correctly in the first situation (i.e. specific reference). As we can see from the results presented in bars 3 and 4, despite their higher level, almost all of them present the same problem with the use of the Ø article for general reference in the plural, thus reinforcing our hypothesis

regarding interference from their L1 background due to the previously mentioned lack of referential use without the article in Spanish.

The second task was devised to examine the students' active production of language. Translating requires a more active application of the TL rules and exposes the student more openly to the influence of his/her L1 than the closed exercises of the first-task might. Consequently, the results were quite similar to those obtained in task 1, the only difference being the higher number of unanswered sentences (bar number 4), hinting at inadequate language skills resulting in unanswered sentences. The good results obtained in Bar number 1, corresponding to specific reference, support our claim regarding the non-difficulty of Spanish speakers in this grammatical usage due to similarity between L1 and L2 in this matter. At the same time, bars 2 and 3, corresponding to either correct or faulty usage of generic reference in the plural, present results consistent with the results of the previous task, hence giving us ground to believe that this is the most problematic area of article use due to the students' applying rules of overextension of analogy from their Spanish grammatical background. Let us see the results more graphically:



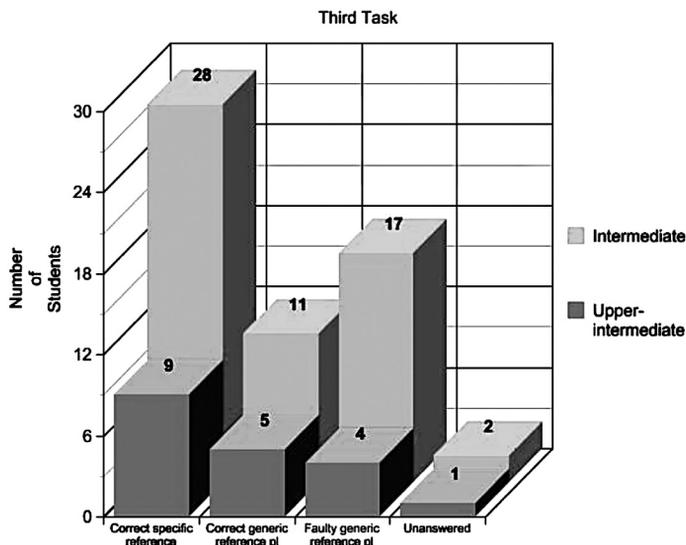
The results obtained in this second task from the upper-intermediate level group are consistent with a higher level of training in English. Hence, the only remarkable

finding is the lower figure related to unanswered sentences (bar number 4), suggesting a greater ability to translate the required sentences into English.

Although one might have expected to get far worse results than in Task 3 than in Task 1, the reverse was the case. The reason for their good performance in Task 3 may be that the students exercised greater concentration during the exercise, or perhaps they simply paid more attention to article use after the two previous tasks. The results obtained in bar number 1 (correct specific reference) are consistent with those of the two previous tasks, as are those in bar number 2 (correct generic reference pl) and 3 (faulty generic reference pl), thus proving that students of English as L2 with a Spanish L1 background do present interference from this L1 in their application of article use rules. What is clear is that the overall results obtained show a higher degree of correct article use when dealing with generic reference in the plural (see bars 2 and 3 for correct and faulty usages in each case), the students' weakest point so far.

The following table illustrates the aforementioned point:

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The overall improvement perceived in intermediate pupils can also be seen in the results for 1<sup>st</sup> year Bachillerato students. However, since the upper-intermediate group's results in the second task were slightly better in relation to their intermediate counterparts, the fact that they have obtained better results in this

third task is not as surprising as the intermediate group's good performance in the same task. Still, it may be worth mentioning that the results obtained prove that generic reference with plurals (see bars 2 and 3 for the number of correct and faulty uses in each case) is the most problematic area for all students tested, regardless of their linguistic proficiency.

## **6. Discussion**

As the three exercises illustrate, the IL of Spanish speakers of L2 English at intermediate level is consistently affected, at least as far as definite article use is concerned, by their L1. We need to be aware of the fact that, as Odlin (1989:33) acknowledges, "researchers have long used the terms 'cross linguistic influence' and 'language transfer' interchangeably", a practice which assumes that some kind of influence is essential to the phenomenon of transfer.

As the data analysis has shown, a very high percentage of the students, both intermediate and upper-intermediate, do present instances of interference as far as generic reference in the plural is concerned. This influence constitutes an instance of Andersen's principle of *transfer to somewhere*. Transfer is a phenomenon that very seldom occurs in isolation, and in this specific case we may take the students' tendency to use the article at all times, even in contexts where it does not apply, as a case of overextension of analogy from their L1. In other words, they overuse the definite article because they apply their L1 article conventions to the TL, henceforth overextending the Spanish generic use in the plural of *the* to their IL. To support this evidence, this deviant performance is accompanied by a consistently target-like use of *the* in the singular for specific reference, due to similarity with Spanish. In fact, most research since the mid-1970s has stressed the notion that transfer is the result of learners selectively exploiting their knowledge of the first language while grappling with the complexity of the L2 input, see Kellerman (1995:126) for instance.

Although the present study has taken a primarily generativist standpoint, it is worth mentioning that the abovementioned scholar relates transfer to the Competition Model (Kellerman 1995:127). For him, the Competition Model is a functionalist account of performance often resorted to when dealing with child acquisition of notions such as Agent, Subject, etc... as well as their use of notions such as animacy, word order, case marking and verb agreement, to name a few. What emerges from studies built upon this model is that the assignment of certain functions to form utterances may largely follow the pattern dictated by the L1, especially when the learner is not very advanced, as is the case with our students.

In relation to our study, the notion of competition model may help us understand certain surprising results, as in the case of *Susan loves (Ø) cake more than anything else in the world*: the subjects will consistently use *the* in most cases, a tendency which is prompted by the Spanish use of the definite article when the reference is to a generic, universal singular.

My reference to empty categories and transfer in the review of the literature section one might lead the reader to think I consider these instances of overuse of the article as transfer to nowhere, but it should be remembered that this principle “does not so much refer to differences in grammatical form (as is the case in our study) but to the differences in the way languages predispose their speakers to conceptualize experience”, as Kellerman (1995:136) himself states. The mechanism at work here, as indicated above, is that something which is the opposite to empty categories (what I have defined as “full categories”) appears. These “full categories” may very well be considered a linguistic phenomenon motivated by language contact and similarity that causes articles to be overused in the L2 of Spanish speakers.

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From the intermediate’s consistent failure to recognize the generic uses of the article in English and from the upper-intermediate’s slightly better results, we could argue that this deviant performance might be motivated by insufficient exposure to the English article system. In fact, numerous studies have proved that although this is true of speakers whose L2 does not have an article system, as far as Spanish is concerned, the case is different. Odlin (1989:34) explains how “errors of article omission in the English of Spanish speakers appear to correspond closely—though not entirely—to areas of contrast between English and Spanish”. Such an acknowledgement supports our thesis regarding the possible appearance of incorrect applications of article use rules in the subjects’ IL.

A final remark on the high incidence of incorrect article use due to Spanish influence might be a reflection on the transfer involved in a particular type of language training, such as when teachers encourage their students to translate directly from their mother tongue. This should make us reflect on the types of methodologies currently applied to language lessons in Spain: Students have proved more able to produce correct articles in closed contexts, such as the first exercise, than in open, more active ones, like the translation exercise. It is not difficult to infer from the results obtained that students perform better in closed contexts, not only due to the transfer of training, but due to the fact that they are not sufficiently familiarized with the more creative language skills ( ), since these are the two which are usually given less attention in the classroom. Although not relevant to the present study, it might be worth bearing in mind that there is a need for a change in language teaching methodologies at intermediate levels which would endow students with

the resources necessary to enable them to actively produce language rather than simply apply rules in closed contexts.

As a brief summary, we can state that the English rules for article use are simplified by the majority of the participants in the study in a clear instance of oversimplification and overextension of analogy from *the* when specific reference in the singular is intended. Empty categories, though persistently associated with IL and transfer, are not relevant to our study.

From these considerations we may conclude that our first and second hypotheses were met, having obtained consistent data that support our theory about Spanish speakers transferring the properties of generic reference from their L1 to their L2 and consequently overusing *the* in non-target like contexts. However, it would be interesting to carry on further explorations with more groups of different levels to further test the sustainability of our two hypotheses. As far as our third hypothesis is concerned, we have already argued that it would take a little more time than was available to prove, although our own preliminary data regarding the more advanced group and many other studies seem to support our thesis.

## **7. Conclusion**

The findings of the three tasks carried out by intermediate Spanish L1 English L2 students demonstrate that influence from the L1 is a reality operating at this level and that this triggers transfer of the operative principles of Spanish articles to their English counterparts, consistently producing non-target like uses of *the*, the most common of which results in the generic reading of English definite plurals.

One might be tempted to guess that these anomalous forms of the definite article will disappear as proficiency in the language increases with a heightened awareness of the L2's constraints and contexts of use, but this would have to be tested after some time had elapsed in the same group, and falls outside the scope of this paper. We need to be aware, nonetheless, that the various factors operating here (overgeneralization, simplification, and overuse) may reinforce each other leading to fossilization in the IL as formulated in the Multiple Effects Principle proposed by Selinker and Lakshmanan (1992).

Little attention has been paid to interlingual influence on the IL. It is significant that prior knowledge of nonnative languages may lead to some meaningful differences in learners' TL knowledge. The focus on the use of function words in L3 or L4 language written production is motivated by prior research findings reported in the literature on multilingualism (Ringbom, 1987; Vildomec, 1963; Williams & Hammarberg, 1998), which suggest that multilinguals seem to favor

the use of function words from their nonnative languages rather than their native language in production, provided that the source and the target language are typologically close to each other, as De Angelis (2005:381) recognizes. A research project on multilingual students to see whether their deviant practices are similar to those of their monolingual counterparts or are actually more target-like would be of great interest, but that has to be left for the future.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>. For the complete exercises, please see the appendices at the end.

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## Appendices

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### 1. FIRST TASK:

FILL IN THE GAPS *with* the or no article:

1. .... giraffes tend to live in small communities.
2. Look! ..... tree is losing its leaves.
3. My grandmother likes..... flowers very much.
4. I received.....book for my birthday.
5. My brother loves .....brand of T-shirts.
6. Jimmy forgot his keys in ..... car.
7. .... lion is a very dangerous animal.
8. Andrea loves ..... cake more than anything else.
9. .... horses are useful animals in a farm.
10. Your garden is so beautiful! And ..... flower is blooming so fast!
11. I saw Peter walking down..... street the other day.
12. See you on .....Wednesday.

### 2. SECOND TASK:

TRANSLATION:

1. Yo no bebo cerveza pero me gustan el té y el café.
2. La sociedad debería preocuparse más por los problemas medioambientales.
3. Mi madre tiene 52 años y vive en Munich.
4. La nueva película de Brad Pitt es un éxito.
5. A Julio le encantan los animales, especialmente los perros.
6. No deberías llegar tarde a la escuela.

### 3. THIRD TASK:

COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES

1. Shop wisely! You could end up choosing \_\_\_ wrong club and losing more money than pounds.  
a) The      b) no article
2. You may find out too late that \_\_\_ health clubs aren't for you.  
a) The      b) no article

**Definite article use in the il of spanish speakers: a multi-dimensional...**

3. \_\_\_ San Diego fitness experts recommend thoroughly checking out several health clubs before you join one.  
a) The        b) no article
4. You may be in \_\_\_ market for a full-service health club; then, make sure it offers lots of activities.  
a) The        b) no article
5. Look for a place near your house, and check out \_\_\_ exercise instructors and personal trainers.  
a) The        b) no article
6. Certified instructors have at least some knowledge of anatomy, exercise physiology, injury prevention and \_\_\_ cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR).  
a) The        b) no article
7. Look in \_\_\_ locker room, workout room, and shower--everywhere should be clean.  
a) The        b) no article
8. \_\_\_ locker room sanitation is usually a good indication of how clean other areas are.  
a) The        b) no article

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Reviews

