

OVERPRODUCTION OF THE ENGLISH DEFINITE ARTICLE BY PORTUGUESE LEARNERS: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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Abstract

The English article system is actually so complex that it presents many challenges for most non-native learners of English. The main difficulty of Portuguese learners, despite the numerous similarities between the two article systems, is noticeable in a marked tendency to produce the definite article where native speakers of English would not use it. This article reports the results of a cross-sectional study which examined the English definite article overproduction by a group of 12 Portuguese EFL learners with at least seven years of English instruction. The prediction is that these learners will exhibit evidence of transferring L1 features to their interlanguage when they overuse the definite article. The data were collected by means of a gap-filling task and a composition. The results found, as predicted, that these learners overused *the* in *generic* contexts. It is argued that this overuse is directly tied to and can be explained by *transfer to somewhere* and *conceptual transfer* principles.

Sinopse

A utilização correcta do artigo definido em Inglês revela-se de alguma complexidade para a generalidade dos aprendentes de Inglês não nativos. A principal dificuldade para os portugueses, apesar das muitas semelhanças entre os

dois sistemas, reside numa tendência significativa para utilizar o artigo definido quando este não é necessário em Inglês. Este trabalho apresenta os resultados de um estudo sobre este problema com um grupo de 12 estudantes de Inglês como língua estrangeira com pelo menos sete anos de aprendizagem da língua. Prevê-se que estes evidenciarão transferência de características da língua materna para a sua interlíngua quando utilizam excessivamente o artigo definido em Inglês. A recolha de dados foi feita por meio de um exercício de preenchimento de espaços e uma composição. Tal como previsto, os estudantes produziram em excesso o artigo definido em contextos genéricos. Este facto estará relacionado com os princípios de *transfer to somewhere* e *conceptual transfer* e poderá ser explicado por estes.

Key words: definite article, zero article, generic, specific, interlanguage.

Palavras-chave: artigo definido, artigo zero, genérico, específico, interlíngua.

1. Introduction

It is widely known that one of the main difficulties for learners, regardless of their nationality, in the acquisition of English as a foreign language (EFL) is the use of articles. Portuguese learners are no exception. The article system in Portuguese, although generally comparable to the English article system, namely as far as definiteness and indefiniteness are concerned, is different from the latter since it does not consider the differences between generic and specific in the use of the definite article. This particularity of the English definite article induces errors where learners ungrammatically add *the* in contexts where no article, henceforth *zero article*, is required, as the following examples gathered from the study illustrate: ‘**The* governments should reduce the number of nuclear power stations...’ or ‘...when

something happens in **the* nature...’ in place of ‘Governments should reduce the number of nuclear power stations...’ or ‘...when something happens in nature...’.

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the frequency of the English definite article overproduction by a group of Portuguese EFL learners in those particular situations and try to understand which linguistic features can account for that process. The following section presents some theoretical considerations: firstly, on the significance of transfer in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), in particular three major principles, *transfer to somewhere*, *transfer to nowhere* and *conceptual transfer*; secondly, on the role of transfer in the use of articles by EFL learners in general. Subsequently, in section three, the hypotheses to be tested in the present study are presented. In the fourth section a description of the subjects engaged, the materials used and the procedures adopted is provided. This is followed by an account of how the data obtained were analysed and a summary of the results achieved, illustrated by means of tables. Section four offers a discussion of the implications of the results by comparing them with the literature reviewed in section two. Finally, in section five, conclusions are drawn and suggestions concerning directions for future research are made.

2. Linguistic background

2.1. *Transfer in Second Language Acquisition*

Which psychological factors are truly relevant in the learners’ processes of acquiring a second language? Selinker suggests that the linguistic phenomena that SLA researchers should be able to identify to this purpose are ‘those behavioural events which would lead to an understanding of the psycholinguistic structures and processes underlying “attempted meaningful performance” in a second language’ (Selinker 1972: 210). Three distinct linguistic systems are, in his view, to be taken into account: the learner’s production in the mother language, the learner’s

production in the L2 and the production of the L2 by native speakers (Selinker 1972: 214). The second one has for long been a matter of interest and could be described as a latent mental structure where the process of construction by the learner of a unique linguistic system of the foreign language takes place, based on the language they have mostly been exposed to, normally their mother tongue, and on the teaching they have been given. Selinker calls this structurally intermediate grammar that learners create for themselves interlanguage (IL).

Another significant phenomenon closely associated with IL is crosslinguistic influence (CLI) or, as it is most frequently termed, language transfer. The influence of the native language is a major factor in SLA and it ‘... can be detected in a number of strategies, the most important of which is language transfer’ (Pavlenko 1999: 1). There is general agreement among linguists on the significance of L1 transfer upon second language learning: ‘... language transfer is indeed a real and central phenomenon that must be considered in any full account of the second language acquisition process’ (Gass & Selinker 1992: 7). Having realised that the learner’s native language, or any other previously learned language, determines how a new language is learned, transfer analysis compares the learner’s IL with their L1 in an attempt to explore the ways in which the influence of the latter is exhibited in their use of the target language. Although, as Kellerman (1983: 113) pointed out, ‘not everything that *looks* transferable *is* transferable’, there seems to be clear evidence and consensus from several previous studies (see, among others, Cabrera, M. & Zubizarreta, M. 2005; Gabriele, A. & Martohardjono, G. 2005; Bliss, H. 2006) that first language transfer can account for a large number of problems in second language acquisition, including the production of non-target-like forms. The possibility of other IL phenomena interacting with transfer, making it more difficult for the learner to shift to an IL stage that is closer to the target language system, is equally important to SLA studies. Selinker (1972: 216–217), for example, alongside with the process of language transfer itself, distinguishes four other crucial processes that do not suggest features of the mother language. Actually, they

are the result of the learning process itself and he believes they coexist with transfer in the learners' IL: transfer-of-training, concerning teaching techniques; strategies of second-language learning, connected with the learner's attitude towards teaching materials; strategies of second-language communication, related to any attempt by the learner to communicate with L2 native speakers; and overgeneralization of target language linguistic material, 'a result of a clear overgeneralization of TL rules and semantic features' (Selinker 1972: 217). All these processes in conjunction with transfer seem to be common to all learners of any second language.

Transfer being such a complex issue it is necessary, Andersen (1983: 177) believes, to constrain it as much as possible so that we will be able to outline more accurately the conditions which are necessary for transfer to facilitate or obstruct the acquisition and use of a second language. From the learner's point of view, crosslinguistic similarities appear to be much more significant than the differences, since those are more likely to stimulate acquisition whereas these seem to restrain it. In his attempt to constrain transfer, Andersen (1983: 178) proposes his *transfer to somewhere* principle: the perception by the learner of the specific structures of the L2 and their similarities with the L1 in combination with natural acquisition processes is likely to trigger generalization from the L1, thus inducing learners to produce the same form or structure in their IL. Besides, he argues that other conditions/constraints are necessary for such transfer to take place:

... preference is given in the resulting interlanguage to *free, invariant, functionally simple* morphemes which are congruent with the L1 and L2 (or there is congruence between the L1 and natural acquisitional processes) and the morphemes occur *frequently* in the L1 and/or the L2 (Andersen 1983: 182).

From all the exposed and in sum, it is evident that when all these conditions get together *transfer to somewhere* will quite probably occur.

Although recognizing Andersen's *transfer to somewhere* principle, Kellerman (1995: 131) claims that there are some situations suggesting that it should be refined. He argues that another possibility must be considered, which is 'if cross-language similarity is the driving force behind CLI, then where there is no perceived similarity, there should be no transfer' (Kellerman 1995: 131). There are, of course, circumstances in which big differences between the two languages can really bring about learning problems, in particular those situations involving the learners' predisposition to conceptualize experiences from their mother tongue. In the presence of an L1 concept for which there is no possible equivalent in the L2, the learner will find nowhere to transfer it to. Therefore, and as a complement to Andersen's principle, Kellerman suggests a new principle - *transfer to nowhere*, which states that 'there can be transfer which is not licensed by similarity to the L2, and where the way the L2 works may very largely go unheeded' (Kellerman 1995: 137).

Jarvis (1999: 1), in a remarkable line of approach, argues that apart from *linguistic transfer*, that is, the use of the L1 linguistic system as the source for transfer, another type, *conceptual transfer*, concerning transfer of the L1 cognitive system, should also be considered, since

There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that many instances of transfer arise not from the learner's reliance on the formal L1 system itself, but from the conceptual system that underlies the L1 (Jarvis 1999: 2).

In other words, the mental concepts that the learner acquires based on his/her experience with the mother tongue are very likely to prevail in the learner's IL and influence acquisition and use of the L2, no matter what perception the learner may possess of the target language potentially different conceptual system. *Conceptual transfer* can determine, among other areas, the learner's grammatical predispositions at several levels, including the use of articles.

2.2. *Transfer in the use of articles*

Most of the literature on the use and acquisition of English articles by EFL learners concentrates mainly on the differences between definite and indefinite articles. Previous studies on the production of English articles by Japanese, Korean, and Russian learners, whose native languages do not possess an article system, showed that these learners are more likely to omit English articles than learners whose L1 does contain articles (Kubota, M. 1994; Ionin, T. et al. 2004). The problem with Portuguese L2-English learners, on the contrary, doesn't seem so much to be omission but rather overuse and the literature has not yet been able, at least to our knowledge, to provide any conclusive explanations for what causes L2-English learners to overproduce *the*.

According to his studies, Andersen (1983: 177) claims that the use of articles in English, including the *zero article*, by Spanish speakers could be explained by transfer and he concludes that 'transfer promotes early acquisition of the articles because the equivalent Spanish articles are also frequent, free morphemes and congruent with the English articles' (Andersen 1983: 183). The Portuguese articles are also frequent, free morphemes and congruent with the English articles. Consequently, and given the similarities between the two article systems, it is just possible that learners will tend to generalize from the input, and that the English articles will be among the IL features that can be attributed to *transfer to somewhere*.

Jarvis (1999: 4), in his experiments with Finnish and Swedish speakers, concluded that the effects of *conceptual transfer* were to be found, among other areas, in learners' use of L2 grammar, including their misuse of English articles. Therefore, it is quite likely that *conceptual transfer* will also occur in the developing IL of Portuguese learners when they process and produce articles in English.

This study will try to demonstrate that the overproduction of the definite article by EFL Portuguese learners suggests an IL linguistic feature that can be attributed both to *transfer to somewhere* and *conceptual transfer*.

3. Hypotheses

The hypotheses to be tested in this study are the following:

3.1 Overproduction of the definite article by Portuguese learners in *zero article* contexts is due to the fact that they use their L1 as a reference.

3.2 This fact should in turn predict no *zero article* production in ‘definite article’ contexts, since the *zero article* does not exist in their L1, at least in the same contexts as it occurs in L2.

4. Method

4.1. *Subjects*

The data for this research project were collected in March 2007 at the Institute of Accountancy and Administration of Oporto, Portugal (ISCAP), one of the institutions of the Polytechnic Institute of Oporto (IPP). The subjects, randomly chosen, are all native speakers of Portuguese attending the first grade of English as a Foreign Language in the Business Communication Course. Twelve students, 11 female and 1 male, ranging in age from 18 to 23 and having all been learning English for between seven and eight years were requested to participate. The level of assessment these learners are subject to at this stage of their course is FCE (level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

4.2. *Materials*

This research was based on two tasks:

1. A blank-filling exercise on the use of articles in English, consisting of 30 sentences, with one blank in each, of which one half was designed to elicit *the* and the other half *zero*. The statements were all taken from FCE level course books and tests, in some cases adapted to suit the intended aim of this study, i. e. to concentrate on the differences between *generic* and *specific*. For the same reason, the uses of the two articles before proper nouns, geographical names, superlatives and special combinations like with the words hospital, school, prison, etc were not included (see Appendix 1).

2. A composition on a topic familiar to the students, with no restriction on its length, no previous knowledge of the topic and no access to dictionaries, with a few guidelines aiming at eliciting both articles (see Appendix 2).

4.3. *Procedures*

The materials for this research were administered in the course of a regular ninety-minute lesson. The students had not previously been informed that this would be a completely different lesson, not included in their syllabus. The blank-filling tests were distributed at the beginning of the lesson. All participants were attributed numbers to preserve anonymity, made aware of that, and informed that there would be no pre-established time limit for any of the tasks. It was also explained to them that there would be another activity, the handout of which would be distributed to them as soon as they had finished and handed in the first task.

4.4. *Data analysis and results*

The tests were all collected and 12 were randomly selected for analysis, out of a total of 26, the number of students present. The twelve blank-filling tests and compositions were then marked, taking into account the number of ungrammatical

occurrences, i.e. misuses of *the* and misuses of *zero*. Next, the total number of non-target-like forms per student and the total number of non-target-like forms per article were considered. This was followed by a comparative analysis of the total amount of non-target-like forms in each of the two tasks. Subsequently, the comparative production of the two articles by each student was analysed and its percentage in the two tasks calculated. Finally, the average rate per student of overproduced forms was also calculated.

Probably the most comforting feature about the results is that in the blank-filling exercise the group's response was quite good, with the number of non-target-like forms per student ranging from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 10, whereas in the composition the number of non-target-like forms ranged from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 17¹(table 1).

STUDENT	BLANK-FILLING			COMPOSITION		
	Overproduction of <i>the</i>	Overproduction of <i>0</i>	Total nr of non-target-like forms per student	Overproduction of <i>the</i>	Overproduction of <i>0</i>	Total nr of non-target-like forms per student
1	2	3	5	16	1	17
2	6	2	8	2	0	2
3	1	1	2	3	0	3
4	1	0	1	3	1	4
5	4	4	8	9	4	13
6	3	1	4	3	0	3

¹Another student reached 13 non-target-like forms.

7	2	2	4	4	1	5
8	5	3	8	2	1	3
9	1	1	2	5	1	6
10	4	2	6	1	6	7
11	2	5	7	5	0	5
12	5	5	10	2	2	4
Total nr of non-target-like forms	36	29	65	55	17	72

Table 1. Combined data: amounts of non-target-like forms in the blank-filling and composition exercises

The results also revealed that the overproduction of *the* was higher in the composition than in the blank-filling test, 55 against 36 respectively. On the other hand, we can say that the overproduction of *zero* followed the opposite path, since its production was higher in the blank-filling test than in the composition, although the difference, 12 non-target-like forms only, was smaller than the previous. The difference between the total amounts of non-target-like forms in the two tasks, however, does not seem very large ($72 - 65 = 7$), which was totally unexpected (table 1).

Production	BLANK-FILLING		COMPOSITION	
	Nr of cases	%	Nr of cases	%
+ THE	5	41.7	10	83.3

+ 0	2	16.7	1	8.3
=	5	41.7	1	8.3

Table 2. Comparative production of the two articles

It was stated in the preceding paragraph that the overproduction of *the* was higher in the composition than in the blank-filling test, but comparatively and in terms of percentage (table 2) the difference is much higher, 83.3% against 41.7%, roughly twice as much, which is quite possibly one of the most striking figures in this study.

In view of the unexpected and striking results achieved, the average rate per student of overproduced forms was also calculated, in order to obtain a more accurate and complete image of the findings. This was accomplished by dividing the total number of each of the non-target-like forms produced and also their total in the two tests by the number of subjects in the experiment, so as to obtain the average rate of overproduction of *the*, *zero* and their total. This is described in the following table.

BLANK-FILLING			COMPOSITION		
Overproduction of <i>the</i> per student	Overproduction of <i>0</i> per student	Total nr of non-target-like forms per student	Overproduction of <i>the</i> per student	Overproduction of <i>0</i> per student	Total nr of non-target-like forms per student
3	2.4	5.4	4.6	1.4	6

Table 3. Average rate of overproduction

5. Discussion

In the first place, it is necessary to emphasize the overall satisfactory results achieved. It should be noted that in the blank-filling test only 4 out of a total of 12 subjects participating in the experiment reached between 8 and 10 non-target-like forms, the highest amounts produced, and that even these figures are still clearly below 50% of the total of ungrammatical occurrences possible. These results together with the low average rate of overproduction of the two articles demonstrated in table 3 suggest that the majority of these students have already acquired the usage of the article system in English to a large degree and they have been able to master most of its complexities in their IL. They quite probably did it in their early stages of L2-English acquisition.

Nevertheless, the main goal of this study is to analyse to what extent the overproduction of *the* in generic contexts is attributable to learners using their L1 as a reference. Despite the quite reasonable findings, there is clear evidence that these learners do have a tendency to overuse *the* in *zero article* contexts as a consequence of transfer from their mother language, supporting the first hypothesis raised above. If that is a natural consequence of the learners' perception of the similarities between the L1 and the L2, as it seems, it can be assumed that these results should be attributed to *transfer to somewhere*. The composition test, in turn, because it is supposed to elicit productive knowledge of the article system, is precisely where learners are a great deal more likely to actually use the system of mental concepts that they have acquired from their native language. Thus, the results obtained in this task, revealing a noticeably higher rate of *the* overuse than the blank-filling task, lead us to believe that we can admittedly be in the presence of *conceptual transfer* from L1 playing a role in these students' IL article choice.

The second hypothesis tested in this work, which predicted that there would be practically no *zero article* production in definite article contexts, is not supported by the findings. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that the *zero article* is a

marked element, peculiar of the English article system. It is well-known that areas of the L2 that are different from the L1 and more marked, as this one is, are likely to cause more difficulties for learners. The rate of *zero article* production, much higher than expected, may be interpreted, in the absence of L1 transfer effects, as a sign of overuse, that is, overgeneralization of the L2 norms, one of Kellerman's four central processes interacting with transfer, as explained in section 2.1. Or it could plausibly be attributed to insufficient or deficient exposure to the article system in English (Odlin, 1989: 34), which would bring us back to Kellerman's processes of transfer-of-training or strategies of second-language learning. In short, the overproduction of *zero* demonstrated by these students is very probably a consequence of the learning process itself.

6. Conclusions

In the final analysis, the following outcomes emerge from the present study:

1. The subjects involved in the experiments demonstrate reasonably accurate use of the English definite article in their IL.
2. Their overproduction of the definite article seems to be in some ways influenced by their native language, which can be ascribed to *transfer to somewhere* and *conceptual transfer* principles.
3. They tend to overproduce the *zero article* admittedly as a consequence of overgeneralizing the L2 rules.

It should also be emphasized that this is a cross-sectional study limited to L2 subjects. Only a follow-up longitudinal study, with a larger number of students at different developmental stages, extended to a meaningful number of native speakers and perhaps expanded to learners' performance in speech, will help us to understand what mechanisms underlie the overproduction of the definite article by Portuguese learners.

Finally, it should be stressed that, while the main centre of attention of SLA is the description and explanation of the universal side of acquiring a second language, ‘SLA also acknowledges that there are individual differences in L2 acquisition’ (Ellis 1997: 73). Such factors as the learner’s personality and maturity, language aptitude, learning styles, motivation for learning and the circumstances of learning, i.e., the learning environment and the strategies applied, also have a very important say in the acquisition and use of a second language.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Fill in the gaps in the following sentences with 'the' or 'Ø' when no article is required.

1. CDs are cleaner than tapes.
2. Did you see the film on television last night?
3. computers crashed at work today.
4. light travels at about 300 000 km a second.
5. It's a nice bar, but service is very slow.
6. meat we had for lunch last Saturday was very tough.
7. watches have become very cheap and very attractive.
8. A lot of people are giving up meat.
9. After work, Ann usually goes to the café.
10. They couldn't find the bodies of people who were killed in the plane crash.
11. They tell me that honesty is the best policy.
12. To me men are a complete mystery.
13. We studied history of the Spanish Civil War at school.
14. Would you like to see photos I took on holiday?
15. Andrew hates examinations.
16. Are these CDs you asked for?
17. Could you turn on television, please?
18. Do you know old people sitting over there?
19. Do you know what business travel is like?

20. He gave up his office job as he didn't like life.
21. How did you get on in examinations yesterday?
22. I don't understand computers.
23. I enjoy talking to old people.
24. I find history an interesting subject.
25. I think that young people are much more mature these days.
26. I will never regret time I've spent enjoying myself.
27. Making mistakes is an inevitable part of life.
28. Most of watches you see today work on quartz.
29. She decided to leave her job in Romania because she couldn't learn language.
30. They left lights on all over the house, but they were still burgled.

Your Sex: female male (please put a ✓)

Your age:

Number of years you have been studying English (not including this one):

Appendix 2

Write a composition on the following subject. You are not allowed to use any dictionaries. There is no restriction on the length of the composition.

The planet earth

What, if anything, do you think governments and individuals should be doing to protect the environment?

Consider the following:

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| - nuclear power stations | - recycling of rubbish |
| - tropical rainforests | - the quantity of traffic |
| - the ozone layer | - pollution |
