English Acquisition

"Using *the* properly": L1 Transfer in the Acquisition of Definite Articles in English by Spanish speakers

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Abstract

The study of L2 article acquisition has become an important area in the cross-linguistic field. Articles have been classified as one of the most difficult features in English, as they are employed very frequently in the language. Recent research has investigated the acquisition process of L2 ESL learners whose L1 contains articles in order to explore the possibilities of L1 transfer to the target language. The present paper aims at proving L1 transfer from Spanish to English by analysing the acquisition of the generic and non-generic definite article *the*. To this end, transferring the Spanish article semantics into English would imply the better use of the article in non-generic contexts than in generic ones. The participants were 47 university students of the University of the Basque Country studying the English Studies Degree, half of them being first year students, and the other half third year students. Moreover, 31 of the participants had Spanish as their native language, while the remaining 16 were bilingual (Spanish/Basque). A Cambridge English Language Assessment was given to them in order to test their level of English proficiency more accurately. The instrument was based on 17 English sentences, previously piloted by Liu & Gleason (2002), in which students were asked to place the definite article *the* wherever they deemed appropriate. The analysis did not show L1 transfer, as the major rate of errors occurred in non-generic contexts, mostly in structural positions. Nevertheless, the number of errors among the participants appeared to decrease as their level of proficiency increased, as previously predicted. In conclusion, yet transfer was not demonstrated in this dissertation, it was proven that learners of the language with high levels of proficiency still appear to ignore the different uses the definite article *the* encompasses. Finally, some pedagogical implications were proposed so as to contribute to the better teaching of the English definite articles to second language learners.

Keywords: L2 article acquisition, cross-linguistic field, generic contexts, L1 transfer, *the*

Index

1.   Introduction

Articles have been classified as one of the most difficult features to be acquired in English, not only for their complexity but also for their frequency of use (Harb, 2014). For this reason, numerous studies have investigated the acquisition of the English article system by ESL learners (e.g. Bickerton 1981; García Mayo 2008; Ionin et al. 2004; Liu & Gleason 2002; Master 1987; Zdorenko & Paradis 2007).

Diverse researchers (Ionin et al. 2004; Ionin et al. 2008; Master 1987; Zdorenko & Paradis 2007; Zdorenko & Paradis 2011) have explored the differences in ESL learners' article choice depending on whether their L1 has an article system or not. It is presumable that ESL learners whose L1 lacks articles will encounter more troubles in acquiring the English articles than those whose L2 contains articles.

However, L2 learners whose native language contains an article system will face another problem: L1 transfer. Many linguists (e.g. Dotti & O'Donnell 2014; García Mayo 2008; Ionin et al. 2008; Morales 2011; Zdorenko & Paradis 2007) have examined the acquisition process of English articles by learners whose L1 contains articles. One such case is that of Spanish ESL learners' article acquisition, which has frequently been the focus of research due to the existent semantic parallelism between Spanish and the target language. Nevertheless, little is known concerning the different uses and realisations of the definite articles in both languages, which collide in the process of article acquisition. Generic singular and plural references do not realise the article *the* in English, but instead use the NP with null article. On the contrary, Spanish does employ the corresponding articles which agree in number and gender with the NP they precede in generic contexts. As for non-generic contexts, both of the languages agree in the process of selection of the definite article. The goal of this dissertation is to search for L1 transfer by analysing the acquisition of English articles in generic and non-generic plural contexts by Spanish speakers. Given the fact that these two languages disagree in the realisation of generic uses, the incorrect use of the latter and the correct use of non-generic contexts will prove transfer. Consequently, this paper seeks to (i) check if L1 Spanish ESL students extract their article semantics from their native language, and (ii) analyse if learners with higher proficiency resort less to transfer that learners with lower levels of proficiency.

This dissertation is organised as follows: I start with a detailed insight into the Article systems of English and Spanish, and I make a connection with the *Article Choice Parameter*. Then, I explain the acquisition process of English articles by making a distinction between L1 children and L2 adults. Afterwards, I comment on the main findings of the study and discuss about the reasons behind these results. Finally, I conclude by summarizing the major ideas together with pedagogical implications.

2. Article realisations

This chapter includes an extended insight into the realisations of English and Spanish article systems, together with the existing differences and similarities between them. Furthermore, the Article Choice Parameter is explained in order to observe the possibility of transfer in different settings of the articles.

2.1. English

As put forward by Ionin et al. (2004), Standard English contains two articles: *the* and *a.* The former is given the name of definite article and it is used in [+definite] contexts, whereas the latter is known as indefinite article and it is employed in [-definite] contexts. Both of them are discourse related, which means that one or the other will be chosen in the discourse depending on the speaker's or hearer's knowledge (ibid). Let me exemplify this by introducing (1a) and (1b), where the knowledge of the speaker about the existence of a given dog is not the same in each of the two cases. In (1a), *the dog* has been mentioned before the moment of speaking, and so both the speaker and hearer can identify it among the set of all dogs. In contrast, if we observe (1b), the *dog* which is been mentioned is not necessary known by the hearer or the speaker, and so the indefinite article *a* is used in this case. Thus, the conditions of definiteness are met in (1a), but not in (1b).

(1)   a. *The* dog bit my friend yesterday.

        b. *A* dog bit my friend yesterday.

According to Ionin et al. (2004), although the language does also differentiate between the feature [+specific] and [-specific], this does not receive any morphological expression. For her part, Garcia Mayo (2009) perfectly portrayed the null marking of

the [+specific] feature in English articles. In (2), adapted from (ibid), the definite article *the* is used, but we can assume that the specificity of it solely depends on the context: (2a) shows that *Joan* knows who the winner is and can identify her in the whole set of winners. This is why (2a) is considered to contain a [+specific] feature. Likewise, (3a) is similar to the latter, except for the fact that the article in (3) is indeterminate. On the other hand, in (2b) and (3b), the context shows that the speaker does not know the person who is being referred: neither Joan nor Peter know the identity of the people they are referring to.

(2) Joan wants to present *the* prize to the winner

    (a) … but he doesn't want to receive it from her. [+specific]

    (b) … so she'll have to wait around till the race finishes. [-specific]

(3) Peter intends to marry *a* merchant banker

    (a) … even though he doesn't get on at all with her. [+specific]

    (b) … though he hasn't met one yet. [-specific]

To sum up, *the* will never be interpreted as an indefinite article, the same way as *a* will never be given a definite reading. Apart from this, even if specificity is not marked in English, we will find situations in which the definite article *the* can contain the feature [+specific]. The same will apply for the indefinite article *a* (Garcia Mayo, 2009: 22).

2.2. Spanish

Traditional Spanish grammar places the article as a sentence's part whose purpose is to announce the number and gender of the unit that comes afterwards (Álvarez Martínez, 1986).

Table 1. Spanish article realisation

	Singular		Plural	
	Masculine	Feminine	Masculine	Feminine
Definite	el	la	los	las
Indefinite	un	una	unos	unas

Spanish article system is characterized by the [+definite] feature, as in the case of English. This means that Spanish articles can be classified as definite and indefinite and receive different realisations for each of the two cases, (see Table 1).

Furthermore, specificity is not marked, again equal to English. The only difference is that Spanish does mark gender and number in its article system, whereas English does only mark number by means of the indefinite article (for further explanation see García Mayo, 2009: 22-23).

2.3. Differences and similarities

As noted earlier, article uses in English and Spanish share the same characteristics in most of the cases as far as definiteness and specificity is concerned. Nonetheless, two reference types, which are marked in grey in Table 2, are not equally realised. This is perfectly portrayed in the classification by Dotti & O'Donnell (2014) below:

Table 2. English and Spanish article realisations

Context of Reference	English	Spanish	Example
Specific: identifiable	the	el/la	the water
Specific:nonidentif:single	a/an	un/una	a dog
Specific:nonidentif:plural	some/Ø	unos/unas	some dogs/dogs
Specific:nonidentif:noncount	some/Ø	Ø	some water/water some doubt/doubt
Generic: singular	a/an	un/una	a cat
Generic: plural (i)	Ø	los/las	cats/los gatos
(ii)	some	unos/unas	Some cats/unos gatos
Generic: non-countable	Ø	el/la	society/la sociedad

In English, the realisation of generic plural reference does not include any determiner in subject position, as we can observe in (4a). The plural NP *cats* refers to a general group of individuals, and thus the characteristics that are reported must always be true. In this particular example, it is correct to talk about cats' being considered dog's foes, as this is a generalised belief which affects the whole set of cats. In Spanish, this type of referent is used with the incorporation of an article, which is the case of (4b). The definite plural article *los* is inserted before the plural NP *gatos*. If we keep in mind that in Spanish specific identifiable reference utilises the same formula as generic plural reference, it is predictable to find L1 transfer from Spanish to English. On this basis, (4c) would represent an example of ESL Spanish learners' placing an article before the plural referent where it should not be.

(4) Generic plural reference

    a. <u>Cats</u> have always been considered dog's foes.

    b. <u>Los gatos</u> siempre han sido considerados enemigos de los perros.

    c. * <u>The cats</u> have always been considered dog's foes.

In addition, the realisation of generic non-countable reference in English and Spanish does also diverge: (5a) demonstrates that English does not include an article in this context, since *society* refers to a general group of individuals, and cannot be accompanied by an article. Besides, (5c) would correspond to the L1 transfer error that a Spanish ESL would make, as Spanish requires the singular definite article *la* in this context, as it is portrayed in (5b).

(5) Non-countable reference

 a. <u>Society</u> is getting more materialistic every year.

 b. <u>La sociedad</u> es más materialista a medida que pasan los años.

 c. * <u>The society</u> is getting more materialistic every year.

As explained above, generic plural and non-countable references receive a dissimilar treatment in English and Spanish article realisations in subject position. Unlike is the case of the object position, where both of the languages omit the article only in plural generic contexts. Let me exemplify this by explaining (6), where we can observe that in both of the languages the referent *hijos* or *children* are not accompanied by an article because they are in object position.

(6) The referent in the object position

 a. Las madres tienen <u>hijos</u> cuando están preparadas.

 b. Mums have <u>children</u> when they feel prepared.

All in all, we have noticed that Spanish and English article systems behave similarly in all the reference contexts except for generic plural and generic non-countable references. However, we have observed that the syntactic position of the referent matters in these contexts: in subject position, English does not insert the article *the* before the NP which is being referred to, whereas Spanish does, which are the cases of (4) and (5); in opposition to that, when the referent goes in object position in generic plural contexts, which is the case of (6), Spanish and English behave likewise. Taking this into account, this paper will only compare plural generic contexts in English and Spanish, and it will treat differently the cases in which the referents are in subject or

object position, testing whether this has an influence on the correct use of the articles among ESL Spanish learners.

2.4. The Article Choice Parameter

Ionin et al. (2004) considered the cases of English and Samoan articles. As previously stated in this paper, English lacks any marker for the [+specific] feature (cf. Section 2.1), and consequently, definiteness is crucial for the target language. As for Samoan, articles are governed by specificity, and consequently distinguished by the [+specific] feature (*le)* and the [-specific] feature *(se).* Consider the following examples taken from Mosel & Hovdhaugen (1992), cited in Ionin et al. (2004: 9-10):

(7) Samoan articles

    a. [-definite, +specific]

    'O le ulugali'i, fanau l=a la tama 'o le teine 'o Sina.

     "There was a couple who had a child, a girl called Sina."

    b. [-definite, -specific]

    Sa fesili mai se tamaitai po=o ai l=o ma tama.

    "A lady asked us who our father was."

As it can be observed, (7a) contains the article *le* in order to mark the feature [+specific] in Samoan. Conversely, (7b) utilises the article *se* in order to make reference to the [-specific] feature, which proves that "definiteness does not play a role in article choice" (Ionin et al. 2004: 10).

On this basis, *The Article Choice Parameter* was proposed (ibid), and predicted "two possible patterns of article choice in two-article languages cross-linguistically" (Ionin et al. 2004: 12). This parameter would contain two settings: the definiteness setting and the specificity setting, and every language containing an article system could be classified by means of one setting or the other.

3. The acquisition of the English article system

This chapter will be divided into L1 acquisition of English and L2 acquisition of English. It has been classified in this manner in an attempt to clarify the differences between first language acquisition and second language acquisition.

3.1. L1 acquisition

Research by Zdorenko and Paradis (2011) supports that children have a set of parameters available for them when acquiring their first language. However, their duty is to choose the parameters which are used in their L1 and ignore the rest. "Importantly, children acquiring their L1 compose lexical items feature by feature" (ibid, p. 3), so it is common to find errors in the early stages of L1 acquisition of articles due to the difficulty of the task. Moreover, their study yielded two important findings: first, L1 speakers of English between the ages of 2;8 and 3;5 appeared to reach 90% of correct article use, and second, it was discovered that *the* was sometimes used incorrectly in indefinite contexts. In any case, Zdorenko and Paradis (2011) argued that child L1 present no problems in the acquisition of the English articles, but sometimes cannot exactly know what the hearer in the discourse knows about a given topic, selecting consequently an erroneous article.

3.2. L2 acquisition

This section will explain the basic features in L2 article acquisition. It will be divided into two sub-categories: child L2 and adults L2. It will be distributed in that way so as to correctly distinguish between the different characteristics involved along the acquisition process.

3.2.1. Child L2

The most common errors reported in L2 acquisition of articles are omission and substitution (Zdorenko & Paradis, 2011). Article omission was commonly found in learners whose L1 has no articles. In the case of substitution, it was documented that L1 learners with no article systems made more mistakes than L1 learners with a language containing articles. Furthermore, learners appeared to acquire *the* more easily than *a* due

to the fact that the definite article in English takes no number into account, which makes the task less difficult in one aspect at least compared to the case of the indefinite article (Lardiere, 2004 cited in Zdorenko & Paradis, 2011: 6). Following this statement, Zdorenko & Paradis (2011) tested Lardiere's claim with children whose L1 were Mandarin/Cantonese, Hindi/Urdu/Punjabi, Spanish and Arabic. The ESL learners were asked to tell a story looking into pictures of a book to their hearer, who was their teacher. Having being explained that the rules of the game were that the hearer of the tale could not see the pictures, the children were supposed to use the articles *a* and *the* according to the context. This would test the correct use of these articles, for when the children were to introduce a character in the story they were supposed to use *a* for the first time, and *the* the next time they mentioned it. The results showed that L2 children scored 80% of correct uses of *the* in comparison to 50% of correct uses of *a*.

3.2.2. Adult L2

According to Ionin et al. (2004), L2 learners show different patterns of acquisition of the target language. On the one hand, L2 learners have been proved to have access to parameter-settings which are neither included in their L1 nor in their L2. On the other hand, "L2 learners show optional adherence to parameter-settings: Their behavior suggests that they sometimes adopt one setting of the parameter and sometimes another" (ibid: 16). In any case, both ideas shared the principles of Universal Grammar. On this basis, the Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH) was created, and it included a combination of both findings. This is the classification taken from (ibid):

(8) The Fluctuation Hypothesis

    a. L2 learners have full access to UG principles and parameter-settings.

    b. L2 learners fluctuate between different parameter-settings until the input leads them to set the parameter to the appropriate value.

The main finding of the FH was that L2 learners' errors are based on the fluctuation they make between different parameter-settings which are not always appropriate for the target language.

In line with previous research, Ionin et al. (2008) offered research into the behaviour of L2 ESL learners whose L1 contained articles. According to them, all L2 learners of the target language whose native language was Spanish should either fluctuate between definiteness and specificity, or transfer their article semantics from their L1. Results showed the following:

> Turning to the L1-Spanish L2-English learners, we find that they were highly accurate in their article choice, on both definites and indefinites, providing support for the "transfer overrides fluctuation" […]. We now have clear empirical evidence that L1-transfer is operative at the level of article semantics (Ionin et al. 2008: 569).

As expected, participants perfectly chose to mark definiteness and not specificity, which clearly demonstrates that they extracted this configuration from their L1. Bearing this in mind, I find predictable to encounter transfer in L1 Spanish ESL learners when trying to apply the generic articles rules in the target language.

4.   Research questions and predictions

The study presented here is a follow up of Liu & Gleason (2002) – henceforth, L&G – a study which intended to test the major uses of the non-generic *the*. In order to do so, the eight uses of the definite article *the,* which they extracted from Hawkins (1978)'s Location Theory, were compressed into four: cultural, situation, structural and textual. First, when *the* precedes a noun which is well-known in a speech community, we categorise it as a *cultural* use. (9a) shows that, in order to use *the* in *the Mississippi river* correctly*,* we need to have a cultural background that will encourage us to know whether it is correct or not to use the definite article. Besides, as (9b) perfectly portrays, when *the* is used to accompany a first-mentioned element which can be noticed directly or indirectly by the hearer, as in the case of *the blanks,* which have not been mentioned before by the teacher, we talk about *situation* use. Furthermore, the *structural* use needs the definite article to be used with a noun that has a modifier, like in (9c), where *the professor* needs to contain the definite article *the* because it is followed by a subordinate clause which modifies the subject. Finally, whenever *the* is employed with a noun which has been previously referred to, we say that it has a *textual* use, as in (9d), where

man and *car* need to be preceded by *the*, as they have been already mentioned before in the discourse.

(9) Non-generic uses of *the*[1]

   a. <u>The</u> Mississippi river runs through Louisiana.

   b. Before the examination begins, the teacher says to the students, "Write your answers in <u>the</u> blanks."

   c. <u>The</u> professor who teaches the physics class explains things very well.

   d. I saw a man in a car across the street. At first I wasn't sure, but then I realized that <u>the</u> man driving <u>the</u> car was a friend of mine.

The study by L&G yielded some significant findings. On the one hand, L&G found that the four non-generic uses of the article *the* are not equally difficult: "ESL students appear to acquire situation use first, cultural use last, and structural and textual uses in between" (ibid, p. 18). On the other hand, it was discovered that the percentage of underuse of obligatory *the* decreased among non-native learners as their level of proficiency improved. What is more, L&G reported the existence of unexpected uses of *the* by the participants in their study: generic referents that were introduced by an article that should be omitted in English. The cases of these unnecessary uses of *the* increased as the level of proficiency improved from low to intermediate, and decreased as the level of proficiency improved from intermediate to advanced. These unexpected uses were classified into three groups: the *cultural overuse* group contained examples such as disease and geographical names which do not require an article (*<u>the</u> polio or <u>the</u> Mount Etna*); the *general reference overuse* category contained examples were an article had been placed before words with generic reference, as in *Our office got some new computers last week. Someday, I think that <u>the</u> computers will replace people everywhere;* finally, the *structural overuse* category included cases in which the noun preceded by *the* contained a modifier but was not a specific referent itself (*<u>The</u> people from around the world are meeting here today).*

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[1] See Appendix B in Liu & Gleason (2002)

L&G proposed that these uses were a consequence of L2 learners' misinterpreting generic referents as specific. Consequently, this paper will intend to show the existence of L1 transfer from Spanish to English by testing the unexpected uses found in L&G of the English article *the*. Hence, the incorrect and correct employments of the articles will be correlated with the cross-linguistic influence on the learners, and classified as errors of omission (omission of *the* in non-generic contexts) and comission (insertion of *the* in generic contexts), and they will be further correlated to their syntactic position (subject vs. object). In other words, if learners place *the* in a generic context, and specially in subject position, they will be doing so because this is how it works in their L1, which is Spanish, and not because they do not identify the context as generic. As well as that, the correct use of non-generic uses will prove L1 transfer as well, for Spanish shares the same article system with English, and this simplifies the process of acquisition.

To this end, this paper will propose a new classification based on L&G's unexpected uses of *the*, which will apply the structural and non-structural conditions into generic and non-generic uses of *the*, but ignore the cultural ones due to time and space constraints. The difference between structural and non-structural is maintained because it is useful to control whether L2 errors are due to misinterpretation of specificity/genericity or to transfer.

As far as the level of proficiency is concerned, L&G observed that the number of errors varied in relation to the level of proficiency; that is, the lower the level of English, the higher the number of errors, and vice versa. As a consequence, I will follow L&G's distribution and divide the errors into two categories: errors of omission and errors of comission. The former refers to the absence of an article in an obligatory context, whereas the latter indicates the use of an article in null or zero.

To sum up, this paper aims to:

1) check if L1 Spanish ESL students extract their article semantics from Spanish to English. Therefore, if transfer exists, I expect to find more errors of comission among the participants due to the different uses of generic *the* in Spanish and the target language. In addition, a major rate of errors should be located in subject positions as a result of the dissimilar uses between the two languages.

2) analyse if learners with higher proficiency resort less to transfer that learners with lower levels of proficiency; if so, we expect to find a major number of errors among participants whose level of proficiency is lower.

5. Methodology

This section explains in detail the study I have conducted in order to test transfer among ESL learners with Spanish as their native language. On the one hand, details about the participants will be provided in order to know better the characteristics of them. On the other hand, the Test Instrument will be explained so as to comprehend its form and use.

5.1. Participants

The participants included 11 upper-intermediate, 13 advanced and 7 proficiency EFL students of the English Studies Degree at the University of the Basque Country. The average length of English study was 15.5 years in the upper-intermediate group, 15 years in the advanced group and 15.1 in the proficiency group. Due to my experience as a student of the English Studies degree, I knew that the correct use of the articles is complicated even for people specialised in the field of the English language. Consequently, I found senseless to apply this test to a group of people with a lower level of English, as the results would have not shown relevant data.

I delivered the test before class lectures at the university to two different groups, of which one was composed by first year students and the other one by third year students. The reason to do so was that I wanted to collect different levels of proficiency, First (B2), Advanced (C1) and Proficiency (C2) levels, among the participants, for it was proven in L&G's study that the level of English had a direct impact on the correct use of the English generic articles. I controlled that by including a Cambridge English Language Assessment (n.d) along with the Test Instrument.

Considering that the Test Instrument included a question about the participants' native language, it was intended at first to separate L1 Spanish participants from L1

Spanish/Basque and L1 Basque, and consider merely the group of Spanish students. Nevertheless, I also analysed the bilingual group in case the results gave me interesting data. The bilingual group included four FCE level participant, five CAE participants and seven CPE level participants. As it can be appreciated, the number of students in these two groups was quite limited, but I could not predict the number of students that would attend class those days.

5.2. Instrument

The instrument (see Appendix A) contained 17 sentences, which were adapted from the study by L&G. The reason to do so was that it was impossible to pilot a new instrument with native speakers due to time constraints. Consequently, I chose 17 of the 91 sentences that were used in their instrument for the present study[2].

First of all, I selected sentences from L&G's Test Instrument by classifying them into the categories of generic and non-generic, and distinguishing them into structural and non-structural. In the cases of generic sentences, I only chose those that were governed by a plural referent. In 8 of the sentences, there were a total of 10 obligatory uses of *the* deleted. On the other hand, the remaining 9 sentences contained a total of 12 obligatory omitted uses of *the*.

Besides, I followed L&G's idea of deleting the blanks where the article should or should not be placed in an attempt to avoid students' filling the space randomly. The reason to do so was that L&G found that some participants in their study inserted *the* in places which were not expected, what motivated this follow-up study.

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[2] (S5) and (S17) were made shorter by deleting the parts including another use of *the* that would not be noteworthy for this study, preventing at any moment to alter the content.

Table 3. *Classification of the sentences in the Test Instrument*[3]

Non-generic		Generic	
Obligatory insertion of *the*		Obligatory omission of *the*	
Structural	Non-structural	Structural	Non-structural
S2A, S6, S13, S14A, S14B	S1, S2B, S8, S10, S15	S3, S7A, S7B, S9, S11A, S11B, S16	S4A, S4B, S5, S12, S17

Table 3 shows the classification of the sentences in the Test Instrument. In general terms, two conditions are leading the distribution: non-generic (where *the* is obligatory to be used) and generic (where *the* is obligatory to be omitted) conditions. In addition to that, both of the groups will be composed by two sub-categories: structural and non-structural. Structural conditions will correspond to NPs which contain a modifier, such as *the light on top of that table* in S6, where the noun *light* is followed by a prepositional phrase. By contrast, non-structural conditions will include cases in which the NP is not modified (e.g. *computers will replace people everywhere* in S4).

Table 4. Classification of the sentences in the Test Instrument depending on the syntactic position of the referent in generic contexts

Generic contexts		
	Structural	Non-structural
Subject position	S3, S11A	S4A, S5, S12, S17
Object position	S7A, S7B, S9, S11B, S16	-

As noted earlier in this paper (cf. Section 2.3), subject and object positions do not interact similarly in generic plural contexts. Table 4 gives a clearer insight into the distribution of the generic items in the Test Instrument according to their syntactic distribution. Furthermore, a lack of uniformity can be appreciated: in subject position, there are two items in the structural group in opposition to the four items in the non-

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[3] The numbers in the table correspond to the sentences in the Test Instrument, while the letters refer to the position of the items in the cases in which the sentences include more than one item.

structural one; the case of object position is even more striking, for all the items in this category are governed by the structural condition.

6. Data Analysis and Results

This section aims to codify, comment and examine the results obtained in the study. It will be distributed from general to more specific terms in order to facilitate the better understanding of the results. It is noteworthy to know that all the percentages reflect the quantity of errors - of comission or omission depending on the condition - committed by the participants.

6.1. Description

Figure 1. Percentage of errors of omission and comission by Spanish ESL learners
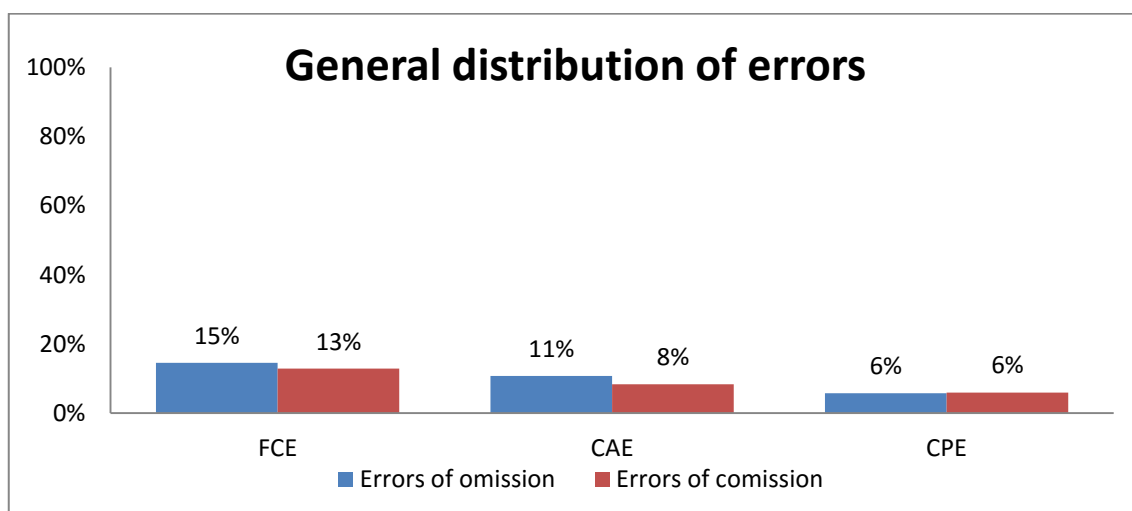
First of all, Figure 1 shows a low rate of errors among the participants, being 15% the highest percentage. Furthermore, a decreasing tendency of errors can be observed as the English proficiency level increases. Apart from that, non-generic contexts appear to be more difficult for students than generic ones, as participants commit more errors of omission (missed obligatory uses of *the* in specific contexts) than of comission (inappropriate uses of *the* in generic contexts). Nevertheless, it must be noticed that the difference between the percentages of errors is not really striking in the cases of FCE and CAE students, and non-existent in the CPE level.

Figure 2. Percentage of errors of omission in non-generic contexts governed by non-structural and structural conditions

Errors in non-generic contexts
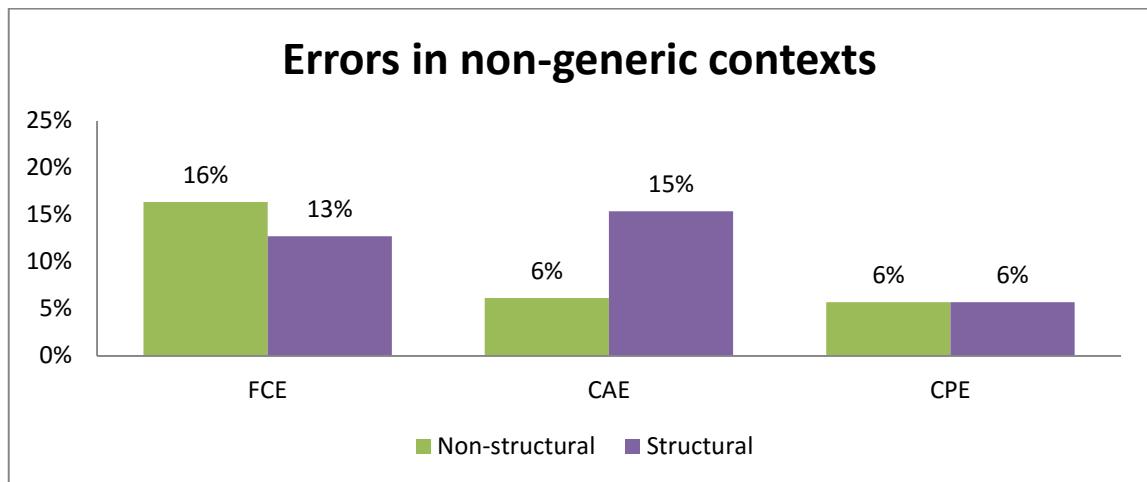
As it can be described in Figure 2, non-generic contexts show more number of errors in: non-structural conditions among FCE levels (16%), structural conditions among CAE students (15%), and the same number of errors among CPE students in non-structural and structural contexts (6%).

Furthermore, it is important to comment on the patterns of error distribution in connection to the non-structural and structural conditions. On the one hand, non-generic contexts report a significant reduction of errors in non-structural contexts in the transition between FCE to CAE levels (from %16 to 6%), and the maintenance of them in CPE levels. Unlikely, structural contexts provide a variable development of errors: it begins with a 13% of errors in the FCE level, increases into 15% in CAE, and significantly descends into 6% in the CPE level.

Figure 3. Percentage of errors of comission in generic contexts governed by non-structural and structural conditions
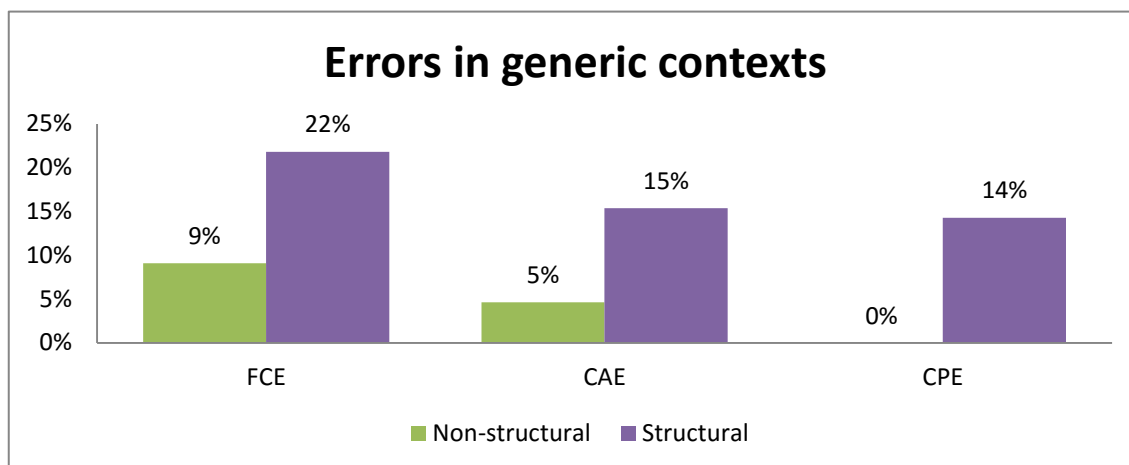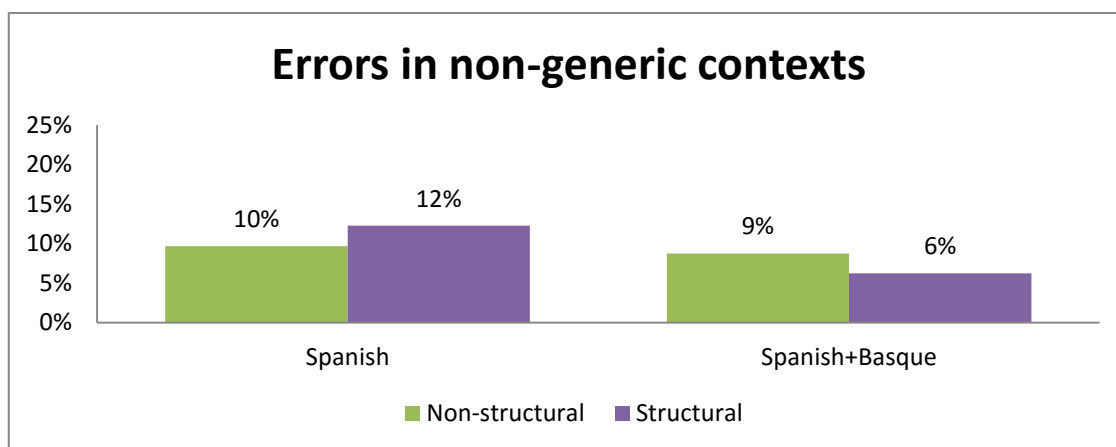

Moving into generic contexts, Figure 3 portrays a major rate of errors in contexts governed by a structural condition in the three levels of proficiency. Besides, uniformity can be appreciated as far as the sequence of errors is concerned: non-structural and structural contexts perfectly show a decreasing tendency of errors as the level of proficiency increases.

Figure 4. Percentage of errors depending on whether the referent is in subject or object position in generic contexts
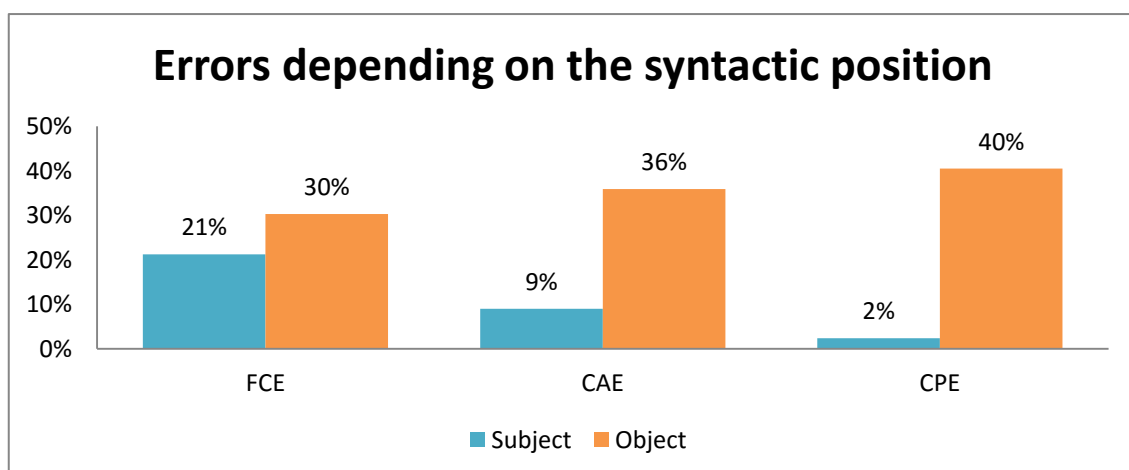

Remarkably, Figure 4 presents a major number of errors in object positions in generic contexts. Although the number of errors decreases in the subject position as the level of proficiency increases, the contrary occurs in object position, where we can observe an incremental number of errors from FCE to CPE levels.

Errors in non-generic contexts

When talking about native language's influence in non-generic contexts, Figure 5 shows dissimilar rates of errors among the two groups of participants. In the L1 Spanish group, more errors were encountered in structural contexts (12%) than in non-structural contexts (10%). Nonetheless, the bilingual group showed the contrary: more errors were found in non-structural contexts (%9) in opposition to structural ones (6%).

Figure 6. Percentage of errors in generic contexts depending on the linguistic profiles of the participants

Errors in generic contexts
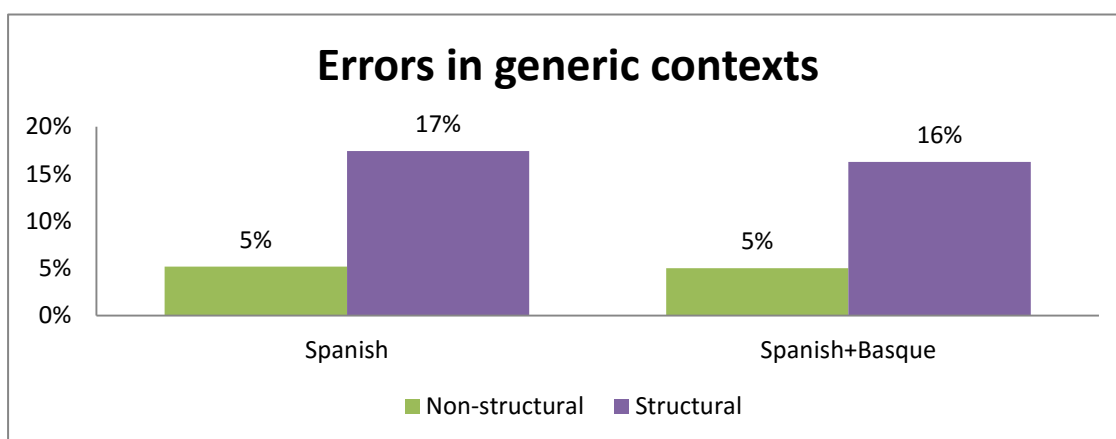
In the case of generic contexts, Figure 6 illustrates a prominent similarity in the percentage of errors in both of the groups, with a major rate of errors in structural contexts (17% among L1 Spanish speakers and 16% among L1 Spanish/Basque

speakers), and the same percentage of errors in non-structural contexts among both of the groups (%5).

6.2. Discussion

The aim of this dissertation was to check the cross-linguistic influence in the acquisition of English definite articles among Spanish speakers, giving special attention to generic and non-generic uses of the article *the* in different syntactic contexts: structural vs. non-structural conditions and subject vs. object positions. Given the dissimilarities between the two languages (cf. Section 2.3), this study expected to find more errors of comission (insertion of *the* in generic contexts) than omission (lack of *the* in specific contexts) in the samples, and for errors to be located in subject positions of generic plural referents. Moreover, it also expected to find a major rate of errors among participants with lower levels of English.

In general, a low rate of errors was found among the L1 Spanish participants. This could be because students were aware of the fact that the study would test their article knowledge. Consequently, they might have paid more attention to the proper placement of the articles. It is presumed that the amount of errors would increase in natural uses of the language or in a test that does not examine articles so explicitly. Furthermore, the fact that the three of the levels of proficiency are quite high, being the lowest a B2 level and the highest a C2 level, might be correlated with the low percentage of errors. Therefore, a major number of errors could be found in a study with a larger number of participants or with a lower level of English.

As previously indicated in this paper, I expected to find L1 transfer of Spanish article semantics to English: ESL learners were expected to apply the rules of Spanish in non-generic and generic contexts. As differences among languages are more prominent in generic contexts, participants were presumed to make more errors of comission than of omission. Contrary to my expectations, more errors of omission were found in the samples, although the difference barely varied from the errors of comission (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, generic contexts received more errors in items belonging to the structural conditions, and non-generic contexts reported more number of errors in items

classified as non-structural (see Figure 3). The opposite was found for non-generic contexts: more errors were found in the non-structural condition than in the structural one (see Figure 2). This could be a consequence of participants' resorting to syntactic contexts instead of semantic contexts, and misinterpreting structural cases as specific, and non-structural ones as generic. In other words, participants paid more attention to the syntactic context (whether the NP contained a modifier) than to the referent of the sentences, and placed *the* depending on, whether the NP contained a modifier or not, and whether the referent was specific or generic. Let me exemplify this by providing examples in both non-generic and generic contexts. As it can be appreciated in the following sentences, which includes two non-generic contexts where *the* should be obligatorily inserted, *I saw a man in a car across the street. At first I wasn't sure, but then I realized that (S2A) man driving (S2B) car was a friend of mine[4],* we can observe that while S2A is composed by a structural condition, S2B is not. Out of 31 participants, 9 failed to place *the* in S2B, which might have occurred as a consequence of the participants' mismatching non-structural conditions with generic contexts as a general rule. Generic items in the structural condition would be the cases of S11A and S11B in *(S11A) Shoes in (S11B) department stores tend to be expensive,* where each of the referents contains a modifier. This might have confused the participants in this study, as they might have interpreted the referents as non-generic for having modifiers, and thus, failed to place *the* in places where it was obligatory to omit it.

Surprisingly, looking at the syntactic position of the referent, the object position had the highest rate of errors (see Figure 4). The most problematic sentences were S7A, S7B and S11B. This could be because the three of the items were structural which have been proven to be more problematic in generic contexts (see Figure 3). This could be interfering in the major quantity of errors, as the participants might have considered them specific for having a modifier, and consequently failed when placing *the* in a generic context.

Consequently, transfer as such could not be proven in this study, but the results align with L&G's original hypothesis that comission errors were due to

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[4] Note that the numbers of the sentences, together with their corresponding letters, have been inserted in order to indicate where *the* should or not should be placed.

misinterpretation of specificity/genericity. It is important to remind, however, that the study contained a limited quantity of participants, as tests were delivered in multilingual classes were some students' native language was Basque or any other foreign language.

As far as the level of proficiency is concerned, results supported my second hypothesis, as the major number of errors was found in FCE levels (15% of errors of omission and 13% of errors of comission). Additionally, an across-the-board role was encountered in that the number of errors decreased as the level of proficiency of the participants increased. This is consistent with research by L&G and García Mayo (2008), were the correct use of articles in non-generic contexts appeared to be influenced by the level of proficiency of the learners. The only case in which a higher level of English did not show a direct impact on the better use of the articles was the case of non-generic structural contexts, were the quantity of errors not only failed to cease in the transition from FCE to CAE, but also increased. Future research could test whether there is transfer among learners with lower levels of English.

Moving on into comparing bilingual samples with the L1 Spanish group, the results revealed little differences in the rate of mistakes in both groups. The only difference was encountered in structural non-generic contexts, were 12% of the mistakes were committed in this category among the group of L1 Spanish participants in opposition to the group of bilingual participants, which obtained 6% of mistakes. These results, rather than indicating a cross-linguistic influence, could be a consequence of the fact that the two groups of participants according to their linguistic profiles were not equally distributed with relation to the level of proficiency: 44% of the participants had a proficiency level in the bilingual group in opposition to the 23% of the Spanish group. Research could analyse whether bilingualism affects or not the acquisition of English articles.

As explained earlier in this paper, the Test Instrument contained some sentences with more than one possible insertion or omission of *the*, that is, a sentence could contain two items of the same category. One such example is S14, *My mother has a white dog and a black dog. (S14A) White dog is taller than (S14B) black one,* when two obligatory *the* were missing. Surprisingly, four participants (one proficiency, two advanced and one first levelled) did not place *the* in the first item but did place it in the second one, resulting in *White dog is taller than the black one.* Not only that but three

other participants (one of each level) committed the same mistake but reversely, that is, they placed *the* before *white dog* but avoided to do so in *black one*. All in all, these errors show the difficulty of use of the definite article *the* in all the levels of proficiency for ESL learners. Research could explore how grammatical elements of the sentence influence the correct use of the definite article *the*.

Moreover, there was an unexpected placement of *the* in two of the tests. In S6 *the* was inserted in *on <u>the</u> top of that table.* This could be because learners considered the referent as specific. What is more, these two participants also omitted the obligatory use of the before that sequence, resulting in *Can you turn on (S6) <u>light</u> on <u>the</u> top of that table?,* which might indicate an incorrect understanding of the sentence.

Finally, further research could conduct a larger investigation on L1 transfer affecting the acquisition of the English articles by L1 Spanish, as the participants of this study were only 31 in the Spanish group and 16 in the bilingual group. Besides, more items could be added to the Test Instrument, which could be extended by including distinct type of exercises avoiding participants' giving special attention to the position of the articles. Following L&G's unexpected uses, the *cultural* use could also be analysed in an attempt to enhance future studies.

7.   Conclusions and pedagogical implications

All in all, the primary goal of this dissertation was to test whether a cross-linguistic influence intervenes in the acquisition of the English definite article *the* by L1 Spanish learners. To this end, a comparison between the Spanish and English articles systems was presented. These two languages appeared to use the definite article similarly in non-generic contexts, but differed in generic ones, for Spanish employs *the* in generic plural contexts while English uses null article. Taking this into account, this dissertation aimed to check the tendency of article use among ESL learners. Therefore, the incorrect placement of *the* in a generic context would support the idea of L1 transfer.

Contrary to my expectations, the participants committed more errors of omission than comission, which demonstrates that they did not resort to the Spanish article system in the selection process of the English definite article. Instead, they paid more

attention to the syntactic context, misinterpreting non-structural items as generic and structural items as non-generic. It must be taken into account, however, that the rate of error was barely dissimilar in most of the cases.

On the other hand, the syntactic position, subject or object position, of the article in generic contexts was also investigated. Generic plural referents behave differently in subject position in English and Spanish - the former deletes the article, while the latter does not- but agrees in deleting the article in object position in both of the languages. Although I expected to find more errors in subject position due to the dissimilarities in use between the languages, results showed that more errors of comission were committed in object positions. Nevertheless, an important assumption should be noted: the cases in which *the* must be obligatorily omitted in object position were items dominated by structural conditions, which were proven to report a higher rate of errors (see Figure 3). As a consequence, this might have interfered in the study on the relevance of the syntactic position of the NP.

This paper also intended to examine whether the level of proficiency has an impact on the accuracy of article choice among L1 Spanish ESL learners, as prominent research had already proved. The results revealed that the proficiency level of the participants was correlated with the number of errors they committed, as there were more errors among intermediate level students than among proficiency level students.

On balance, this paper has not demonstrated L1 transfer from Spanish to English as far as article acquisition is concerned. Yet, results have proven that, in line with previous studies, the acquisition of the definite article *the* is an arduous task even for ESL learners with a high level of English proficiency. Future research could explore L1 transfer by including a major number of participants and an extended Test Instrument.

There are also some pedagogical implications of this study. First, considering the fact that articles constitute one of the most complex, albeit important, elements to acquire, not only for L2 learners, but also for L1 learners of English, more prominence should be given to them in the early levels of acquisition. Teachers of English as a Second Language in Spanish schools should emphasize the differences and similarities of use of the article *the* for students to be aware of the limits of each language. As a learner of the language, it was a shock for me to realise the different uses of *the* when I

was already in the third year of the English degree. Consequently, I consider vital to teach different uses of the articles in lower levels of the language due to the high frequency of use they involve. Also, I suggest to gradually introduce different uses of *the,* as it would be useless to talk about structural, generic or cultural uses in early ages of acquisition, yet significant to know in advanced levels of the language.

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Appendix A. Test Instrument

I. Please tell us:

Your native language _____

Number of years you have studied English _____

II. In some of the following sentences, the definite article "the" is missing. Please read the following sentences carefully and insert the article "the" wherever you believe necessary.

1. At dinner, the guest says to the host, "Could you please pass salt?"
2. I saw a man in a car across the street. At first I wasn't sure, but then I realized that man driving car was a friend of mine.
3. Children growing up with both parents are healthier than those growing up with only one parent.
4. Our office got some new computers last week. Someday, I really think that computers will replace people everywhere.
5. Usually short women aren't so good at playing basketball.
6. Can you turn on light on top of that table?
7. I generally don't read newspaper articles from low-class papers.
8. Fred bought a car on Monday. On Wednesday, he crashed car.
9. I've heard of parents who don't give their children enough to eat.
10. Before the examination begins, the teacher says to the students, "Write your answers in blanks.
11. Shoes in department stores tend to be expensive.
12. At the zoo I saw several tigers. I think that tigers are beautiful animals.

13. In a bright sunny room, the woman asks the man "Could you close curtains, it's too bright in here."

14. My mother has a white dog and a black dog. White dog is taller than black one.

15. While driving in their car to work, the husband asks his wife, "Could you open window please?"

16. I like to watch movies that are black and white.

17. Salads are very healthy for dinner.