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Articles in English L1–Persian L2 interlanguage: Transferability or task variation?

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Abstract

Aiming at describing variation in second-language acquisition and particularly, addressing the role of linguistic features and tasks, this paper describes the use of Persian articles in the interlanguage (IL) produced by two adult English L1 learners of Persian L2. Using a combination of contrastive analysis and error analysis, it takes the stand of idiosyncrasy in meaning, rather than form and the notion of specificity-based articles to identify and predict some possible instances of transfer across six elicitation tasks. It also intends to investigate whether any of the contextual features may variably influence the learners' IL. Providing evidence for the role of transferability from the viewpoint of semantic concerns, results describe the existence of variation in relation to task, rather than just linguistic form in the subjects' IL system.

Keywords: Articles, English L1, L1 transferability, Persian L2, task-based variation.

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1. Introduction

The notion of second-language acquisition (SLA) has long gained the attention of linguists who recognise the field as the meeting of two language systems. Upon the emergence of contrastive analysis (CA), some errors have been regarded as an evidence of language transfer. The strong version of CA hypothesis assumes that it is possible to identify the problematic areas of L2, once the differences between L1 and L2 are discovered (Lado, 1957). The weak version of CA, on the other hand, predicts that it is the marked element of the L2 which causes difficulty; thus, giving rise to the transfer of L1 unmarked structures (Eckman, 1977).

However, CA gradually lost its validity as a psychological approach to the investigation of the SLA process because of two main pitfalls: equating the degree of learning difficulty and the error with the degree of difference between the two languages; and the inability to identify sources of difficulty other than the learners' L1.

Because of the drawbacks of CA, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, linguists' and educators' attitudes towards errors changed gradually, and the emphasis shifted from the product to the underlying process with respect to L2 learners' errors. For instance, Corder (1967) stated that errors are evidence of the learners 'built-in syllabus', one that is often different from the textbook's or teacher's syllabuses, and can show how language learners develop their own independent system of language which is different from their L1 and L2 and has its own set of rules. Such a system was later termed as 'interlanguage' (IL) by Selinker (1972), who also argued that the best data for the study of IL is the learner language produced in meaningful interaction, which is different from what the learner produces in a controlled learning context. Since then, error analysis (EA) has been practiced as an area of SLA research (Dessouky, 1990; Ellis, 2008; Lightbown & Spada, 2006) and such a practice will continue because learners will make errors in their processes of language learning (Mahmoud, 2011). EA contributes to language teaching and learning as a diagnostic tool through a systematic analysis of language learners' errors (Corder, 1967).

Since then, many researchers have attempted to explore the mental and behavioural processes that language learners go through in order to better inform pedagogy (Tarone & Swierzbin, 2009). Accordingly, the phenomenon of IL variability has always attracted the attention of SLA researchers who have attempted to come up with a full description of such variability. In doing so, Ellis (1985) views IL variability resulting from linguistic factors on one hand, and situational factors on the other. With respect to the linguistic variation, Dickerson and Dickerson (1977) claim that it is the type of obligatory linguistic context that determines the choice of a particular form. Regarding the situational factors, task-based variation has been the centre of attention to scholars suggesting that learner language considerably changes from one elicitation task to another (Tarone, 1979). For instance, Tarone (1979, 1985, 1989) asserts that based on the amount of attention that learners pay to their linguistic performance, they shift styles along the continuum of IL. Thus, one obstacle to establishing a unique system underlying learner language is variable performance across context when assessing the same form in the IL.

2. Literature review

In order to account for the patterns of variation in IL, Tarone (1985, p. 14) proposes that an adequate theoretical model needs to take into consideration of all the factors which may cause a shift in IL as far as accuracy is concerned. Such factors include the linguistic context, the function performed by the linguistic form, psychological processing factors, social factors and task-related factors. She further provides evidence that such factors may interact in any given elicitation situation.

By the same token, SLA variation studies have attempted to investigate the role of the elicitation task in learners' production of L2. For instance, Tarone and Parrish (1988) found that learners'

production of articles in noun phrases (NPs) differed from one task to another. Literature informs us that a number of task features may relate to variation in L2 production. Some examples are as follows: the role of interviewer; i.e., the degree of empathy s/he shows (Berkowitz, 1989) or their ethnicity (Beebe & Zuengler, 1985); the topic of conversation (Selinker & Douglass, 1985); and the genre and kind of activity, such as free speech, dialogue reading and word list reading (Dickerson & Dickerson, 1977). Other aspects of task may also be involved in variation; for example, the purpose for setting the task and the setting in which the interactional task takes place, etc. (Ellis, 1999).

Further, Odlin (2014, p. 14) points out to the importance of form-function relations as a main consideration for interpreting the role of L1 transfer. To her, 'meaning-based concerns often seem to be involved in attempts to create interlingual identifications between the grammatical systems of source and target languages'. She attempts to explain the difficulty of predictability, as proposed by the strong version of CAH, by pointing out to the notion of 'idiosyncrasy in meaning'. She asserts that it is more difficult to predict the learners' intended meaning when they use or do not use a particular form of L2. Such a prediction is difficult, if not possible, because pragmatic assumptions are at work. For instance, it is quite possible that one experiences the same difficulty in deciding what kind of article should have been used by the speaker. It all depends on their assumption if the listener can identify the referent or not.

Accordingly, articles have been reported as a serious source of difficulty to L2 learners, especially for those learners whose L1 lacks articles. For instance, Master (2003) asserts that such learners do not use articles (zero article) at the early stages of IL development. This can be a result of either a case of natural order of acquisition or that of the strategy of avoidance. They were reported by Parrish (1987) to use articles in the following order of accuracy: zero artide, definite article and indefinite article. The difficulty is attributed to the fact that such functional words by themselves are not essential in conveying meaning. While learners try to communicate, most of their focus is on meaning rather than form. To put it differently, learners find it difficult to express meaning when it comes to article usage mainly due to factors like abstractness of the concept as well as the potential influence of L1 (Pienemann, 1998).

More precisely, the sources of difficulty have been suggested by Harb (2014) as a combination of 'internal' and 'external' factors. Internal factors are related to the structure of the L2 and are categorised into lexico-syntactic (countability, definiteness and specificity), and discourse (unique identifiability, familiarity, accessibility and others) whereas external factors pertain to the similarities and differences between L1 and L2; i.e., the cases of positive and negative transfer.

Yet, viewing the matter from another dimension, articles involve a great deal of semantic difficulty as their underlying semantic rules 'are the rules a speaker must operate with if he is to deploy the definite and non-definite articles across the full range of situations that can arise in our linguistic community' (Brown, 1973, p. 350).

As informed by the studies in the area of SLA, while there is a growing body of research on Persian L1 speakers' acquisition of English L2, there has been a very little SLA research on English L1 speakers' acquisition of Persian L2, more specifically its article system. This area merits more attention in order to fill the need of both Persian teachers and Persian language learners.

From another perspective, no attempt has been made to investigate the well-established phenomenon of task-based variation in the process of learning Persian as a foreign language. As Tarone (1979) once pointed out, researchers need to investigate a combination of variable features in order to have more valid assessment of the issue. So, CA seems to help us explain the role of transferability concerning both form and meaning. Also in the lieu of EA, this study will be able to identify and describe other sources of difficulty rather than L1 transfer as well as the strategies involved in the process of IL development.

A contributing study is Khanzadi (2014) who studied the use of two Persian phonemes (a voiced velar fricative /q/ and a voiceless velar fricative /x/) as produced by two adult English-speaking

learners of Persian L2 across six different tasks. Aiming to identify and predict possible instances and effects of transfer as well as the various positions of those phonemes in the syllable, she found that the accuracy level was not only affected by transfer (as predicted by CA), but also by context (as predicted by variationist SLA theory).

So, although some steps have been taken to address the issue in the scope of phonology, there is still a need to explore if it also holds true in the domain of morphology, more specifically in the use of Persian L2 articles. In an attempt to fill the gap, the present study used a task-based approach, eliciting the learner language to examine adult English speakers' acquisition of articles in Persian L2 as orally produced in an unrehearsed setting. Following Khanzadi (2014), the present study used the same publically available data.

3. The study

The present study was a descriptive analysis of articles in Persian learner language produced in unrehearsed task-based oral interaction by two adult English-speaking learners of Persian L2. The general approach to the analysis used in the present study was a combination of CA, EA and ILA to identify and predict possible incidents of transfer from English L1 to Persian L2, the other sources involved in inaccuracy as well as the overall linguistic patterns in learner language in order to explore if any variation is evident in the process of Persian L2 acquisition of articles. Further, this study sought to describe and examine task-based variation.

In doing so, the present paper tends to analyse the data gathered in six different tasks in a research study (U.S. Department of Education Office Postsecondary Education Award # P017A090297,9/1/2009-8/31/2012, Principal Investigator Elaine Tarone, University of Minnesota) which is now freely available on CARLA site (http://www.carla.umn.edu/learnerlanguage/per/videos.html). Each task was purposefully designed to naturally elicit certain aspects of the language. For instance, based on the general belief that articles play a semantic role in communication by offering cohesive clues in discourse (Odlin, 2014), some tasks were particularly designed to elicit discourse coherence. As such, each of the tasks has a specific implication for the objective of this study; i.e., the acquisition of L2 Persian articles by L1 English learners. More specifically, the tasks have been designed to elicit articles (definite/indefinite) used in the oral production of Persian L2 learners.

3.1. Contrastive analysis of English *and* Persian article systems

A contrastive study on the article systems of English and Persian will demonstrate if the target Persian articles exist in the English article system and if they do not, as proposed by the strong version of CAH, we could predict that it will influence the learners' production as a result of positive transfer? Or is the issue more complicated than this? So, the first step would be a CA of the article systems of the two languages.

3.1.1. English article system

The article system of English language which falls in the categorisation of determiners consists of the definite article 'the' and the indefinite articles 'a, an' which are used before most common nouns. Generally speaking, definite articles are used when the reference is known to both the speaker/writer and hearer/reader, while indefinite articles are used before unspecific nouns such as one of many. Notwithstanding such distinction, there are some instances where no article is required (zero article), for example before indefinite plurals, generic nouns and proper names. Still, there are some exceptions which require the use of 'the' before proper names like 'the USA', etc. (Cowan, 2008).

3.1.2. Persian article system

The article system of Persian language has been generally described as lacking definite article (e.g., Wilson & Wilson, 2001). However, Iranian linguists do not quite agree. For instance, Anzali (1985)

argues that the absence of a morphological element like an equivalent for 'the' in Persian does not suggest at all that the concept of definiteness does not exist. Not only that, Ghomeshi (2003) goes even further and claims that there is a definite article in Persian, but it is only used in informal spoken language (see example 2, below).

From another perspective, drawing on two recent notions in the area of article systems proposed by Ionin (2003), Persian articles can be distinguished from those of English in that the former are based on specificity, while the latter are definiteness-based. Specificity is referred to as a semantic feature, not syntactic, dealing with what the speaker intends to refer to regardless of the hearer's state of knowledge. In other words, in some languages like Persian, article markers are either specific or non-specific, rather than definite or indefinite as in English (Geranpayeh, 2000).

In Persian, as stated by Geranpayeh (2000), definites are always specific, whereas indefinites are ambiguous with respect to specificity. Generics, on the other hand, are always non-specific. Specific NPs, definite or indefinite, have one feature in common: they denote a specific individual. In other words, they pick a certain type of individual out of a set of individuals. The difference between definite NPs and specific indefinite NPs is that the former are presumed to be known to the hearer, whereas the latter are not. The set of indefinite NPs overlaps with the set of specific NPs, since only some of the indefinite NPs are specific definite NPs which are the subset of specific NPs. Table 1 illustrates such markers in Persian. The transcription key is found.[1]

Table 1. Classification of Persian article markers

Specificity Definiteness	Specific	Non-specific
Definite (known to both the speaker/writer and hearer/reader)	zero marker (1); enclitics */-e/* or */-ye/* (in informal spoken language) (2); particle */ra/* (-o informal) following a modified NP like direct object in a relative clause (3); as a proper noun (4); or as a determiner (pronoun (5) or demonstrative) (6))	NA
Indefinite (known to the speaker/writer, only)	zero marker (7); enclitic */-i/* (8); the word */yek/* (informal */ye/*) (9);	enclitic */-i/* (10); the word */yek/ (ye*) (11);
Generic	NA	zero marker (12);

Note: NP = noun phrase; NA = not applicable; the numbers in parentheses correspond to the examples in the text.

Consider the following:

- Specific definite

1. */moælem amæd/*
   /teacher came3SG/
   'The teacher came'
2. */dokhtær-e narahæt æst væli agha-ye khoshhal-e/*
   /girl-DefM sad is but man-DefM happy-is/
   'The girl is sad but the man is happy'
3. */ketab-i ro ke mi-khast-æm khærid-æm/*
   /ketab-IndefM DOM RP wanted-1SG bought-1SG/
   'I bought the book that I wanted'
4. */Mæryæm ro did-æm/*
   /Maryam DOM saw-1SG/

'I saw Maryam'

5. /*u ra be mædrese bord-æm*/
   /s/he DOM to school took-1SG/
   'I took her/him to school'
6. /*an (in) ketab ro khand-i?*/
   /that (this) book DOM readPast-2SG?/
   'Did you read that (this) book?'

One point to mention is that particle /*ra*/ is not obligatory when the specific NP (the direct object) is in subject position and can be omitted (as in example 3). This is because Persian grammar allows for a shift of direct object to the subject position without being changed to passive voice. However, this is not the case with pronouns.

- *Specific indefinite*

7. /*mi-khast-æm ketab-e ingilisi be-khær-æm*/
   /wanted-1SG book-GM English InfM-buy-1SG/
   'I wanted to buy an English book'

8a. /*mærd-i dær khiyaban gol mi-forukht*/
   /man-IndfM in street flower ProgM-sold/
   'A man was selling flowers in the street'

8b. /*mærd-e fæghir-I dær khiyaban gol mi-forukht*/
   /man-GM poor-IndfM in street flower ProgM- sold/
   'A poor man was selling flowers in the street'

9. /*mæn ye gol khærid-æm*/
   /I one flower bought-1SG/
   'I bought a flower'

It is noteworthy to point out that in contrast to English, Persian allows for adding the specific indefinite marker */-i/* to an adjective as well (see 8b).

- *Non-specific indefinite*

10. /*dær parking mashin-I park bud*/
    /in parking car-IndfM parked was/
    'A car was parked in the parking'

11. /*ye mashin tu parking bud*/
    /one car in parking was/
    'A/one car was in the parking'

12. /*gol khærid-æm*/
    /flower bought-1SG/
    'I bought flowers'

13. /*emshæb mah ghæshæng æst*/
    /tonight moon beautiful is/
    'The moon is beautiful tonight'

Another point to bear in mind is that in cases of generic NP, /*yek-i*/ 'one' can be used as a pronoun to replace it, but specific NPs can only be replaced by pronoun /*un*/ 'it'. Consider the following utterances:

14. / *mæn* *gol* *khærid-æm,* *u* *hæm* *yek-i* *khærid*/
/I flower bought-1SG, s/he too one-IndM bought/
'I bought flowers, she bought one, too'

15. */*mæn* *gol-e* *roz* *khærid-æm,* *u* *hæm* *un* *ro* *khærid*/
*/I flower-GM rose bought-1SG, s/he too it DOM bought/
* 'I bought the rose flower, s/he bought it, too'

As illustrated in the examples above, the rules of Persian articles are quite flexible, allowing for frequent omission of article markers. This is due to the fact that the distinction between definiteness and indefiniteness in Persian is determined by the semantic features of the context (Geranpayeh, 2000). Such a feature may facilitate the task for learners of the language due to the mechanism of reduction at work. Altogether, due to the fact that modern standard written Persian does not have a formal single word corresponding to the English definite article 'the', it is usually speculated that the acquisition of Persian definiteness/specificity will not cause much of difficulty. But then, the use of zero article is only one of the alternatives allowed here by Persian rules of definiteness. As illustrated in Table 1, definite/specific NPs may be expressed in other ways as well. In terms of indefiniteness, although Persian morphemes seem to be compatible with their corresponding morphemes in English, it can be perceived that Persian L2 learners are more likely to face a problem in producing indefiniteness when they face complicated rules involved. For instance, they may find it irregular to add indefinite marker /-i/ to an adjective, too.

Thus, taking the stand that the article system of Persian is semantically specificity-based and according to the strong version of CA, it can be predicted that the subjects of the present study will have the least difficulty dealing with generic NPs as Persian requires zero article. On the other hand, they will probably find the area of specific indefinite the most problematic due to the variable and complicated rules involved. Hence, one may come up with the prediction of the following descending hierarchy of difficulty: non-specific generic → specific definite → non-specific indefinite → specific indefinite.

So, in accordance with the assumptions made by CA on one hand and SLA variation hypothesis on the other, the present study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. In unrehearsed oral communication, to what extent is English L1–Persian L2 learners' production of L2 articles congruent with predictions made by CA?
2. Is there any variation related to task evident in the learners' IL article system? If so, what may account for this variation?

4. Method

4.1. *Participants*

The participants in this study were two female English L1 speakers at different stages of acquisition of Persian as a second language: 'Pari' (a pseudonym; hereafter *P*) was more proficient and having experienced exposure to Persian for two years in both accuracy-oriented and communication-oriented settings while 'Fereshteh' (a pseudonym; hereafter *F*) had studied Persian for 1 year in a formal classroom setting where the focus was on accuracy and grammar. Both learners started learning Persian after the critical period. In terms of their motivation for learning Persian, *P* was initially instrumentally motivated since she needed that as a student of political sciences; however, she

became interested in Persian people and culture and developed integrative orientation over time. *F*'s motivation for learning Persian, on the other hand, came from a desire to integrate with Persian people and culture. As far as their individual differences are concerned, the two learners were different in that *P* appeared more relaxed and self-confident during the interview with the native speaker, talked more, asked questions, appealed for assistance and even joked around, while *F* showed more anxiety although she did not mind taking risk during the interview. She appeared more relaxed in the tasks requiring peer interaction, though. Detailed background information about the participants, as gathered from the participants in an interview with Sara, a native speaker of Persian, is accessible at: http://www.carla.umn.edu/learnerlanguage/per/II/activity1.html.

4.2. *Tasks*

There were six communication tasks designed to elicit different aspects of learner language. In designing them, care was taken to get the learners to produce unrehearsed and spontaneous language while communicating in their L2. A full description of all tasks along with the prompts and instructions has been provided at: http://www.carla.umn.edu/learnerlanguage/prompts.html. A summary description of the tasks is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Description of the tasks

Task	Activity	Purpose of elicitation
# 1 Interview	Participating in an interview conducted by a native speaker of Persian	Personal information, past time, reference, negotiating for meaning, correcting feedback and providing input
#2 Questions	Asking questions from a native speaker about what they see in the picture prompts	Asking questions, reference, negotiating for meaning and scaffolding
# 3 Retell	Narrating the story about the same picture prompts they already asked questions about in Task 2	Reference, cohesiveness and no scaffolding
# 4 Narrative	Looking at the pictures showing a series of events and narrating what happened	Referential communication, referring to entities, location and movement to make it clear for the interlocutor
# 5 Jigsaw	Giving information and asking questions about the different pictures of houses they have in order to find three different and three similarities (learners do not show their pictures to each other)	Concrete nouns, comparison, co-construction and scaffolding in interaction, same/different analysis, picture description, focus on meaning and reference
#6 Comparison	Looking at the same pictures in Task 5, talking about the people who live in those houses and what the appearance of houses tells them about American culture	Academic language, language complexity, abstract nouns (social class, culture), critical thinking, complex sentences, linking devices, reference, building hypothesis and supporting evidence

4.3. Data collection

The data were gathered as part of a larger project funded by XXX (http://www.carla.umn.edu/learnerlanguage/per/videos.html) which gathered samples of unrehearsed, task-based IL produced by English-speaking learners of four less commonly taught languages in the US: Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Persian. This study focused only on the Persian learner language samples elicited in this grant-funded project.

The two learners of Persian were video-recorded over a period of three and half hours while engaging in six unrehearsed communication tasks. In all videos, these learners of Persian were shown

engaging in essentially the same six unrehearsed speaking tasks that Tarone and Swierzbin (2009) used in eliciting English L2 learner language from adult native speakers of Spanish, French and Mandarin Chinese. There was a system involved in eliciting data, calling for a range of styles and different aspects of learner language in order to accomplish the tasks. For example, the first two tasks (i.e., Interview and Question) were designed based on the interaction between a native speaker and the learners, providing for a more formal environment, while the interaction in the last two tasks (Jigsaw and Comparison) took place between the learners. Tasks 3 and 4 (Retell and Narrative) were individual-based activities and did not require much interaction.

4.4. Data analysis

This study used the initial transcription (both in English and Persian orthography) done by Sara; however, the author who had initially contributed to the procedure as a consultant, also, made some minor changes to the transcription based on the transcription key adopted for this study such as using /æ/ sound to distinguish it from /a/. The data show the use of Persian produced orally in a non-rehearsal setting by *F* and *P* while completing Task 1 through Task 6.Then, the author of the present study identified and calculated the presence and absence of obligatory Persian articles in the learners' productions.

For this study, the accurate usages of articles were measured in obligatory context. In Ellis's (1994, p. 716) words, 'obligatory context requires the obligatory use of a specific grammatical feature in samples of learner language'. In an attempt to identify possible IL patterns, learners' whole production of L2, not only errors, but also accurate items, were analysed using target language use (TLU) analysis proposed by Pica (1983). Pica's equation for TLU is the number of correct uses in obligatory context divided by (the number of obligatory contexts) + (the number of incorrect contexts) (Tarone & Swierzbin, 2009, p. 31). This equation is a quantitative measure that enables us to compare learners to determine how target-like their use of L2 articles was. Therefore, all instances in which *P* and *F* produced correct and incorrect versions of the target articles in obligatory context were identified. The TLU rate of articles produced throughout all the six tasks was calculated.

5. Results and discussion

Regarding the first research question, the rate of TLU calculated for target articles used by the subjects in each of the tasks gives us some insight as to the participants' level of accuracy. Table 3 presents a summary of the analysis.

Table 3. Number and TLU of Persian articles used by English L1 learners in relation to task

Task	Participant	Specific		Non-specific		Total use
		Definite	Indefinite	Indefinite	Generic	(mean TLU)
Interview	Fereshteh	15 (0.87)	1 (0.00)	1 (1)	13 (1)	30 (0.82)
	Pari	50 (0.81)	29 (0.21)	14 (0.40)	11 (1)	104 (0.55)
Question	Fereshteh	32 (1)	1 (1)	—	3 (1)	36 (1)
	Pari	12 (0.71)	—	—	7 (1)	19 (0.80)
Retell	Fereshteh	22 (0.63)	—	—	7 (1)	29 (0.70)
	Pari	21 (0.91)	2 (1)	1 (0.00)	9 (0.80)	33 (0.83)
Narrative	Fereshteh	12 (0.92)	—	—	1 (1)	13 (0.92)
	Pari	9 (0.80)	1 (0.00)	4 (1)	2 (1)	16 (0.78)
Jigsaw	Fereshteh	6 (0.90)	4 (1)	5 (0.43)	8 (1)	23 (0.53)
	Pari	1 (0.00)	6 (0.50)	6 (0.71)	9 (1)	22 (0.69)
Comparison	Fereshteh	21 (0.91)	2 (0.33)	4 (1)	11 (1)	38 (0.90)
	Pari	19 (0.90)	4 (0.14)	3 (0.50)	9 (1)	35 (0.75)
Total occurrence		220	50	38	90	398

The data presented in Table 3 can be interpreted in terms of TLU calculated for each participant with regard to both the type of article and the kind of task. As shown, *P*'s most frequent use of Persian article (104) occurred in Task 1, 50 of which were specific definite with the TLU of 0.81indicating her good command of such articles. *F*, too, performed better using specific definite articles, in terms of both frequency and accuracy. The area of indefiniteness, on the other hand, seems to be the most difficult for both learners. Also, the difficulty can be measured by comparing the frequency of zero article use by the participant; i.e., the more omission of article, the more difficulty. This can be supported by the fact that the highest rate of zero article use occurred in the area of indefiniteness.

To have a comparison between the two learners' performance, Table 4 shows the patterns of Persian article use in terms of accuracy and frequency.

Table 4. Accuracy and frequency orders of Persian articles used by the participants

Participant	Accuracy order (TLU)	Frequency order
	Non-specific generic (0.96)	Specific definite (18.66)
	Specific definite (0.69)	Non-specific generic (7.83)
Pari	Non-specific indefinite (0.52)	Specific indefinite (7.00)
	Specific indefinite (0.37)	Non-specific indefinite (4.66)
Mean	0.63	9.53
	Non-specific generic (1.00)	Specific definite (18)
	Specific definite (0.87)	Non-specific generic (7.16)
Fereshteh	Non-specific indefinite (0.81)	Non-specific indefinite (1.66)
	Specific indefinite (0.58)	Specific indefinite (1.33)
Mean	0.81	7.03

Based on the findings, this study suggests the beginnings of a possible (yet-to-be systematically studied) sequence of adults' acquisition of Persian L2 article system. The accuracy orders laid out for this study are almost the same for both participants. A comparison of the participants' article accuracy and frequency patterns indicates that there exists a similarity of order in the participants' individual performance. The most difficult kind of article with the lowest level of accuracy appears to be the specific indefinite for both, while they performed best in the use of generic NPs. The descending sequence of accurate Persian articles for both can be developed as: non-specific generic → specific definite → non-specific indefinite → specific indefinite. Such a hierarchy copes with the predictions made by CA.

The findings suggest that *F* is just farther along the article accuracy order than *P*. But then, she used fewer obligatory target articles and we need to take into consideration the phenomenon of avoidance as *F* avoided using articles five times, while *P* failed to use them only two times. As a whole, the results bear out that *P* used more articles than *F*.

In terms of frequency, total Persian articles used by the participants is illustrated in Figure 1, indicating specific definite as the most frequently used article, followed respectively by non-specific generic, specific indefinite and non-specific indefinite. Altogether, the findings seem to be somehow congruent with the predictions of CA in a sense that the use of generic (requiring no article) and specific definite (the same in two languages) do not seem to require a cognitively demanding language. Although there are cases where transfer effects can be clearly pointed out, transfer is not the only factor that influences IL, as predicted by Selinker (1972). So, the question whether or not the tasks account for the accuracy rate of certain article on the part of each learner is scrutinised as follows.

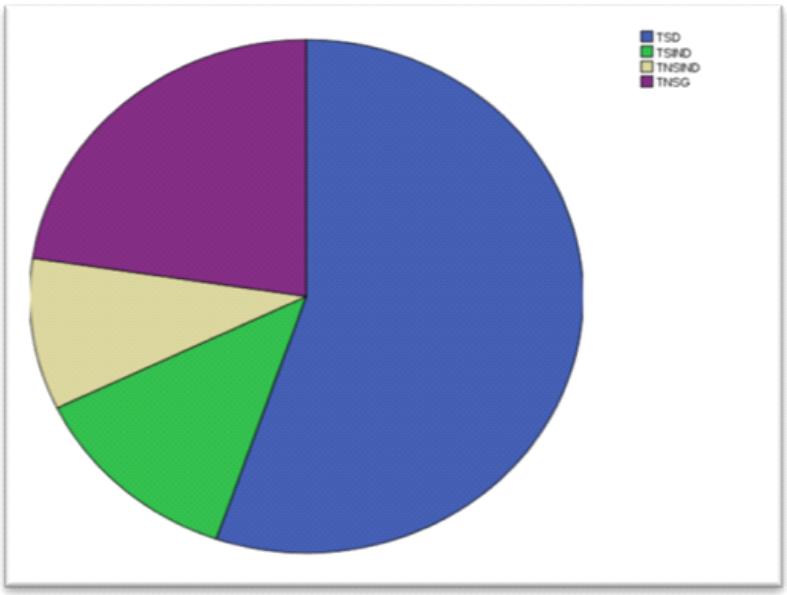

Figure 1. Total article use

Note: TSD = total specific definite article use; TSIND = total specific indefinite article use; TNSID = total non-specific indefinite article use; TNSG = total non-specific generic article use.

5.1. Error analysis of Persian target articles

The results of EA account for a variety of sources of errors. Some erroneous utterances are analysed here to gain insights into the causes of difficulty. The items marked by (*) are indicative of wrong use of Persian articles although the utterance may contain errors in other areas, as well. Such errors are left unattended as they are not within the scope of this study.

5.1.1. Specific indefinite

Pari (Interview):

*/væ um … bædæz in-ke kæm kæm *fe?, um, yad gereft-im…/*

/and um … after this-RP little little verb um, learned-1PL…/

Target-like production:

/væ bæ?d æz in-ke kæm kæm, fe?l ra yad gereft-im…/

/and after this-RP little little, verb DOM learned-1PL)

'And after we gradually learned the verbs, …'

Fereshteh (Interview):

*/bæle, kheyli dust dar-æm, aa…..chon *Iran dust dar-æm/*

/yes, a lot like have-1SG aa….. because Iran like have-1SG/

Target-like production:

/bæle, kheyli dust dar-æm, aa….. chon Iran ro dust dar-æm/

/yes, a lot like have-1SG, aa.. because Iran DOM like have-1SG/

(Yes, I like [it] a lot because I like Iran.)

The above examples indicate that both learners had difficulty in the area of specific indefiniteness. Both learners fail to use DOM due to the complexity of Persian rules involved. Probably, it is difficult for them to figure out whether the specific NP (the direct object) is in subject position or in object position. Here, the problem seems to have been internalised as self-correction does not occur by the learner even when pointed out by the interviewer:

Interviewer:

/zæman-ha-ye mokhtælef-e, [zaman-ha-ye mokhtalef-e fe?l-ro yad gereft-im,uhum/

Pari: */ [zæman-ha-ye *mokhtalef yad gereft-im …/*

'We learned the different tenses of verbs.'

5.1.2. Non-specific indefinite

Pari (Comparison):

*/khob. Motmæen nist-æm ke *kargær, ke tu-ye in khune zendegi mi-kon-e, mashin dar-e/*

/well. Sure be(Neg.)-1SG RP worker, RP in-GM this house live PM-do-GM, car have-3SG/

Target-like production:

/khob. motmæen nist-æm ke kargær-I, ke tu-ye in khune zendegi mi-kon-e mashin dar-e/

/well. sure be(Neg.)-1SG RP worker-IndM, RP in-GM this house live PM-do-GM, car have-3SG/

'Well. I'm not sure if the worker who lives in this house has a car.'

Fereshteh (Jigsaw):

*/væ ye fekr-I *bæd <laugh> um, dasht …/*

/and a thought-IndM bad had …/

Target-like production:

/væ ye fekr-e bæd-I dasht/

'And s/he had a bad thought.'

The two examples above are suggestive of the cases when the complexity of rules leads to the learner's use of strategy of simplification on one hand and substitution, on the other. When *P* omits enclitic */-i/*, the strategy of simplification is at work. *F*'s error, on the other hand, can be explained by the issue of complexity in that Persian allows for adding the marker to the adjective, as well.

5.1.3. Specific definite

Pari (Jigsaw)

*/aa.. khune, *khune ke kenar-e khune-æt, um, kodum *ræng æst?/*

/aa .. house, house RP next-GM house-PosAdj, um, which color is

Target-like production:

/aa.. khune, khune-I ke kenar-e khune-æt, um, cheh ræng-i æst?/

/aa .. house, house-IndM RP next-GM house-PosAdj, um, what color is?/

'aa.. what color is the house which is next to your house?'

Fereshteh (Retell):

*/maman goft, sima….. chera *keyk khord-i?/*

/mom said, sima….. why cake ate-2SG?/

Target-like production:

/maman	*goft,*	*sima ….*	*chera*	*keyk*	*ro/ra*	*khord-i?/*
/mom	said,	sima …. why	cake	DOM	ate-2SG?/	

'Mom said, 'Sima, why did you eat the cake?''

Here, again, the learners tend to omit Persian DOM and enclitic */-i/* perhaps due to the deficit of the equivalent of such markers in English. The employment of simplification strategy may be due to the great complexity of the target morpheme. In other words, the rules of Persian articles allow for frequent omission of article markers as the distinction between definiteness and indefiniteness in Persian is determined by the semantic features of the context. Such a feature may facilitate the task for learners of the language due to the mechanism of reduction at work. Further, one could attribute the cause of such errors to language transfer from English L1 to Persian L2. However, at times it is the minimal difference which accounts for difficulty rather than the non-existence of an item in L1. As an example, consider the following:

Pari (Comparison):

*/*yek dok,*	*dokhtær*	*ke*	*bozorg-tær-e*	*kar*	*mi-kon-e/*
/ one …..,	girl	RP	old-CAM-is	work	PM-do-3SG/

Target-like production:

/dokhtær-i	*ke*	*bozorg-tær-e*	*kar*	*mi-kon-e/*
/girl-DefM	RP	old-CAM-is	work	PM-do-3SG/

'The girl who is older works.'

The above example supports the notion that some errors are due to the phenomenon of overgeneralisation as the learner substitutes */-i/* for */yek/*, based on the false assumption that since these two articles both fall in the category of indefiniteness, they may also interchangeably be used for specificity. This is a case where definiteness in the English L1 system would affect the performance of Persian L2 specificity.

5.2. The role of task

From the findings, the results do not suggest consistency in relation to the use of target articles as the hierarchies developed by the participants fluctuate variably from one task to another. For instance, when the non-specific indefinite does not have obligatory contexts in a task, the morphemes' percent accuracies fluctuated greatly (anywhere between 0% and 100%) from retell task to narrative task. Figure 2 compares two participants' rate of Persian article use in each task.

A thorough study of the obtained data can help us to gain a better understanding whether it was the kind of target morpheme or the kind of task which had an impact on the learners' performance. In other words, can we attribute the variation of IL production to the linguistic (i.e., the form of morpheme) or to the social context (i.e., the nature of task or the interlocutor)?

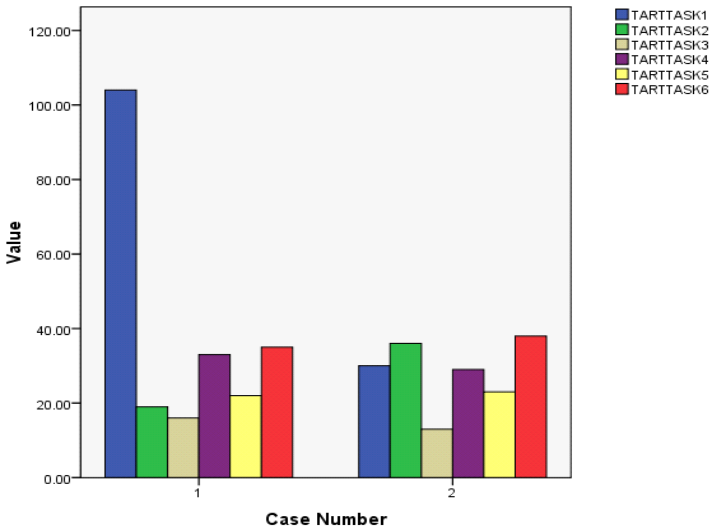

Figure 2. Comparison of learners' frequency of Persian article use by task
Note: TART = total article use; 1 = Pari; 2 = Fereshteh.

5.2.1. Interview and question tasks

Knowing that the tasks were designed to elicit certain aspects of IL, the purpose of elicitation may call for the use of certain articles. For instance, the nature of Task 1, Interview, requires concentration on meaning rather than form; thus, affecting the learner's rate of accuracy. This task particularly plays a role in language complexity on the part of the learner. It was in this task where *P* appeared to have rather a low accurate performance. In the second task, Question, the nature of the task accounts for variation in that the learner is provided with adequate visual clues to obligatorily use specific definite and generic articles.

Still, another factor merits attention and that is the role of interlocutor who gives feedback to the learner. As the XXX learner language section on learning in interaction points out, interactionist and sociocultural theories of SLA predict that this kind of scaffolding and support provided in interaction result in many opportunities for acquisition through the interactional sequence: error→ feedback → uptake.

In terms of frequency, Task 1 appears to be the most productive for *P* and the second most for *F*. However, neither of them gained their highest rate of accuracy for the use of articles in this task. Also, it was in this task that both of them showed their highest rate of performance in the use of non-specific generic, while specific indefinite article was the most difficult for both.

In Task 2, both learners showed their best performance in terms of accuracy. Again, both of them appear to have no difficulty in the use of the non-specific generic articles. Besides, *F* was 100% accurate in the use of the specific definite and specific indefinite articles. However, neither of them used the non-specific indefinite article. As for the role of task, one may attribute the high level of success to the presence of the interviewer, a native speaker of Persian who acts as a model and provides scaffolding.

5.2.2. Retell and narrative tasks

It was in Task 3, Retell, where *P* showed her best performance on Persian articles. *P*'s high overall performance (TLU = 0.83) in this task could be explained by the fact that she was already exposed to the same prompts in Task 2 and could recall some parts of the language already exchanged. However, the two participants' variety of performance accounts for different degrees of internalisation. The comparison indicates that *P* was 100% accurate in the use of the specific indefinite and used specific

definite articles more accurately in the retell task. As for the nature of the task, the participants were required to produce the language independently of any guide or scaffolding from the native speaker. Here, *P* can appropriately realise the important function of such morphemes for referencing to the entities and places in the story while *F* fails to do so and chooses to avoid indefinite articles altogether.

Task 4, Narrative, also demands 'referential communication' where the learner is supposed to make acts of reference, so that the listener can identify the referent and follow the story; thus, demanding for the use of specific definite article. It is in Task 4, where the learner avoids using any article perhaps because she simply takes it as redundancy when it does not affect communication, especially in a task of narrating a picture story where pictures by themselves are expressive of definite nouns.

Both learners used Persian articles the least frequently in the Narrative Task. This is suggestive of the fact that the task would not allow for scaffolding. The use of non-specific indefinite is of high demand in Task 4 which was realised by *P* who gained a TLU rate of 1 for this morpheme. On the other hand, there was no correct use of obligatory specific indefinite in her production in Task 4. This is the case where, quite to the contrary, errors occur in producing indefinite articles which exist in both languages, but then it is noteworthy to mention here that article system in Persian is specificity based. Task 4 gave rise to the highest rate of non-specific generic accuracy for *F*, too.

5.2.3. Jigsaw and communication tasks

In Task 5 (Jigsaw), the learners showed almost equal rate of frequency; however, *P* gained a higher score of accurate usage. The accuracy order shows that both of them used non-specific generic the most frequently; both obtaining the third place in terms of the rate of accuracy. Due to the nature of Task 5, Jigsaw, where the learners are supposed to talk about their own pictures, the findings suggest one of the least frequent and accurate use of articles by both participants. As this task is based on co-construction and peer-scaffolding, it can be hypothesised that the learners did not receive a good deal of feedback through interaction with each other.

In the last task, Comparison, both appear to show one of their best performances in the use of Persian specific definite article suggesting that completion of such a task demands the use of this morpheme as they talk about the pictures which are known to both of them. The task is communication-focused, too and demands a high level of attention to meaning as well as a high level of thinking like inference, building and testing hypothesis. Here, as opposed to Task 5, the task results in better performance by both learners. One explanation is that semantic features play a crucial role in Persian article system; thus, allowing for flexibility. For example, the Comparison task, to a large degree, requires the use of specific definite articles and one of the alternatives is 'zero marker' which apparently facilitates the task.

6. Conclusion

As the first study ever conducted on this particular issue, the attempt was made to reconsider the efficiency of CA from the semantic dimension. As explored in this study, the distinction between definiteness and indefiniteness in English is made within the scope of syntax, while it is semantic that plays a role in Persian. Considering such different realisations between the two languages, it was significant to examine the efficiency of CA. The findings of this study are in congruence with the predictions made by CA, in that the participants' IL consists of the hierarchy predicted by CA; thus, supporting the impact of transfer. The accuracy order of L2 acquisition laid out in this study for Persian articles provides a support for the role of transferability in terms of semantic concerns. The findings also support the notion of 'idiosyncrasy in meaning', proposed by Odlin (2014).

EA informed us that a number of conceivable determinants might be at work. For example, there were incidents of erroneous utterances which could be attributed to semantic or grammatical complexity of Persian articles, the application of communication strategies like simplification or avoidance strategy, or the developmental aspect of language acquisition. Also, the results show that,

as predicted by interactionist and sociocultural SLA theories, scaffolding provided in interaction activities facilitates more accurate performance. Such a conclusion gives rise to the notion that if we cannot attribute the variation of IL production to the linguistic (i.e., the form of article), then maybe it is the social context (i.e., the nature of task or the interlocutor) which can account for the existence of variation in the system of learner language.

Altogether, the question whether the IL produced by the subjects of the study revealed any variation (Question # 2) was explored by thorough examination of the learners' production based on the obtained quantitative measure of TLU. As for the variables involved, the findings suggest that task plays a significant role as well as the linguistic forms of the target articles. The learners' accuracy was variably affected by task; thus, testifying to variation in SLA. The cause of the variation evident in different tasks may be attributed to the purpose of elicitation assumed for each task, in that each task provides for the obligatory context required for the production of certain morphemes. It can be concluded that tasks which were more meaning-focused resulted in higher percent accuracies due to the fact that Persian article system is based on semantic features.

Last but not least, the author is well aware of the limitations of the study. For instance, it is admitted that it makes it impossible to make claims about transfer when this study had only two participants, both coming from the same L1 background; i.e., English. However, since this study was only a part of a bigger project on a variety of less common languages, other researchers contributing to the same project are encouraged to conduct more studies on other L1 languages, using the publically available data online, to explore if the results conform to those of the present study; thus, providing for probable generalisability. Further, in cases where the study fails to sensibly justify the inconsistency present in the data, maybe further studies (probably longitudinal) would shed more light on the exact cause of variation.

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Endnote

[1]Transcription key:
/a/ as in English '<u>a</u>re'
/æ/ as in English '<u>a</u>pple'
/e/ as in English 'p<u>e</u>n'
/i/ as in English 'sh<u>ee</u>p'
/o/ as in English 'm<u>o</u>re'
/u/ as in English 'p<u>ou</u>r'
1SG stands for first person singular
2SG stands for second person singular
3SG stands for third person singular
1PL stands for first person plural
DefM stands for definite marker
IndeM stands for indefinite marker
DOM stands for direct object marker
RP stands for relative pronoun
GM stands for genitive marker/enclitic
Neg stands for 'negative'
PM stands for present marker

PosAdj stands for possessive adjective
CAM stands for comparative adjective marker

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