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ACQUISITION OF EFL GRAMMAR: EVIDENCE FROM LANGUAGE PRODUCTION

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Abstract

One of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for L2 learners is the acquisition of the article system. English article system expresses a semantic notion of definiteness/indefiniteness. Accordingly, there are the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a/an*. However, some other semantic notions influence the acquisition of English articles by L2 learners. There are also evident fluctuations of article use in interlanguages. The acquisition of the article system is also influenced by the L1 of English L2 learners. Thus, there are differences between learners whose L1s have articles and those learners whose L1s lack articles. In Croatian, which is a language without articles, the notion of definiteness/indefiniteness is expressed with some other linguistic means, so the linguistic concept of articles has often been creating difficulties for Croatian L1 learners of the English as a second language. The acquisition of English article system by Croatian L1 learners represents, therefore, an interesting topic for SLA research. This paper inspects an appropriate and inappropriate use of English articles in language production of four Croatian L1 learners from a qualitative point of view.

1 Introduction

One of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for L2 learners to acquire is the article system. It can be especially difficult for learners whose L1 does not have articles, but the concept of definiteness/indefiniteness is expressed with some other linguistic means, as it is the case in Croatian. In this paper the appropriate and inappropriate use of articles in language production of four Croatian L1 learners of the English as a second language is inspected from a qualitative point of view.

The paper is organized as follows. Firstly, the theoretical background necessary for the analysis is presented. As English article system is based on definiteness and indefiniteness, those concepts as well as the function of English articles with examples from Standard English grammars are explained. Furthermore, an overview of previous research on the second language acquisition of English article system follows, focusing on the role of the mother tongue and introducing important hypotheses for the analysis of the acquisition of the English article system. Accordingly, a qualitative analysis of four Croatian L1 learners' production in English during the period of four years is presented, prior to which the research questions, data on the sample and a description of the procedure are given. Consequently, the results of the analysis are discussed. Finally, the conclusion based on the analysis ends the paper.

2 Theoretical background

English is a language that uses articles. Croatian, on the other hand, has no articles and as a result of this, the concept of articles has often been creating difficulties for English L2 learners with Croatian L1 background. Therefore, it represents an interesting area for SLA research. The English article system expresses the semantic notion of definiteness/indefiniteness. Accordingly, there are the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a/an*. Articles in some other languages may also encode specificity or presuppositionality (Ko, Ionin & Wexler, 2010). Since these semantic concepts are parameters of Universal Grammar, English L2 learners may set a wrong parameter for the article use (Hawkins et al. 2006), which can result in inappropriate choice of an article. There will be some more elaboration on this issue later in the paper.

In this section the semantic concept of definiteness/indefiniteness according to the location theory by Hawkins (1978) is presented, as well as the function of English articles in examples based on Standard English grammars. Other semantic notions which influence incorrect article use in

English L2 production are also explained through examples, so that the reasons for an inappropriate article choice by English L2 learners can be better illustrated.

2.1   Notion of definiteness/indefiniteness in Standard English article system

Hawkins (1978) in his study of concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness in English offers a theory according to which speech act rules, appropriate usage rules and rules linking surface forms to logical meaning should be taken into account when deciding on the choice of article. Thus, he offers the location theory according to which the speaker using a definite article makes the following actions:

    a   addresses one or more referents to the hearer

    b   directs the hearer to locate the referent in some shared set of objects and

    c   refers to the totality of the objects or mass within this set which satisfy the expression to which the speaker refers.

Furthermore, in order to perform these acts, certain conditions have to be met. They are the following: set existence condition, set identifiability condition, set membership condition, and set composition condition. As Hawkins (1978) explains it, the set existence condition refers to the fact that the speaker and hearer share the set of objects that the definite reference can be located in. The set identifiablity condition assumes that the hearer can conclude from previous utterances or the mutual situational context which set the speaker is refering to. The following two conditions are the most important when the definiteness is about to be expressed, because they have the status of both pragmatic and logical presupposition. The set membership condition defines the existence of the definite reference in the shared set that the speaker refers to. The other most important condition refers to set composition. It stipulates that the definite reference must refer to neither more nor less objects than there are in the shared set. Finally, the hearer should assume that the object in the set has a property that the definite reference refers to.

The indefinites are, on the other hand, quite unclear in their understanding and interpretation. Based on the context, they can be assigned to some set common to the hearer and speaker or not. The context may also leave the indefinities unclear in that sense. According to Hawkins (1978), this may lead to the conclusion that there are no important differences between the definite and indefinite article. However, there are many examples that prove the differences between the article uses. The indefinite article can only be used in situations where the referent is not unique in the shared set of objects, that is, when there is at least one more such object in the set

which can be excluded from the reference[1], or when a uniqueness relationship based on the general knowledge is not present in the context. Nevertheless, the indefinite reference could be used in a sentence when there is only one unique object in the situation. It is signified then that it referes to one other object from another context, and the hearer has to activate other shared knowledge.

According to Hawkins (1978), the difference between the definite and indefinite article is on the pragmatic level. He explains the use of the definite article as imposing "a pragmatic blanket on the potentially infinite number of referents of a referring expression by instructing the hearer to exploit shared knowledge and the shared situation in reducing this infinity to something finite. All the potential referents falling outside this blanket are excluded as irrelevant, and the definite article refers inclusively to all the relevant objects falling under it" (p. 202). In case of the indefinite article use, the exclusiveness plays an important role, because the referring expression does not try to restrict an infinite domain of objects, but it refers to this infinity of possible referents. Therefore, the pragmatic functions of the definite article cause the inclusiveness of definiteness, and the lack of those functions causes the exclusiveness of indefiniteness. It is important that in both cases the hearer can clearly identify the referent.

2.1.1 Function of English articles

In this section, the function of the English article system based on two Standard English grammars and Hawkins' (1978) theory will be presented. Articles are used with nouns as their determiners. There are other types of determiners, such as possessives (my, your, our, their), demonstratives (this, that, those, these) and quantifiers (some, all, any, few). There is also a possibility that there is no article in front of a noun, which is often called the "*zero*" article (Berry, 1995, p. 5). Articles may be used both with proper and common nouns. For the purposes of the paper, it is sufficient to explain the article use with common nouns. They can be countable or uncountable, whereas countable nouns can have singular and plural forms. Prototypically, the indefinite article is used with singular countable nouns when something is described or classified:

> *It is **a frightful place**.* (Berry, 1995, p. 18)
>
> *My sister is **a doctor**.* (Eastwood, 2009, p. 199)
>
> *Tim talks about nothing but football. He's **a fanatic**.* (Eastwood, 2009, p. 199)

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[1] In case of plural indefinites, there must be more than two known objects possible to refer to in the shared set, because the plurality means referring to at least two objects (Hawkins, 1978).

The indefinite article is usually used when a noun is mentioned for the first time and it is not familiar to the listener. When the same noun is mentioned again, the definite article is used, as the following example shows:

> *But it seems Mrs Colombo owned **a dog** which her youngest son adored. The landlord had received complaints about **the dog** barking at night.* (Berry, 1995, p. 23)

In linguistics, this use is often referred to as the anaphoric use. However, this rule is only partially applicable. The definite article is used when referring back to something, but with a different noun:

> *There was **an enormous cat** crouching on the counter… **The animal** looked up at Mrs Bixby.* (Berry, 1995, p. 25)

Hawkins (1978) mentions that after using *a house* the speaker can further use *the roof* or *the windows*. He calls this article use as "associative anaphora" (p. 123). The first indefinite reference associates a whole set of noun phrases that are dependent on the first-mention noun.

It is also possible to use the definite article with a noun that is mentioned for the first time in situations when it is obvious from the context what it is referred to, that is, when it is unique in the context or from the world knowledge, which is also known as a "larger situation use" (Hawkins, 1978, p. 115). The speaker refers to the entities that exist in the hearer's knowledge of the larger situational context. The following examples illustrate this:

> *I'm just going to **the post office**.* (There is only one post office in the area.)
> **The sun** *was shining.* (There is only one sun in our solar system.)
> (Eastwood, 2009, p. 198)
> *Well, what happened to **the professor** then?* (There must be only one professor that the speaker and the hearer have previously talked about) (Hawkins, 1978, p. 108)

More specifically, the article choice in the last example is influenced by the mutual knowledge of the speaker and hearer. Hawkins (1978) calls it a "shared previous discourse set" (p. 109). Thus, there must not be any other object that is unique in the shared knowledge in order to qualify for the definite reference. Furthermore, the definite article is used in situations when an object is unique and visible to both speaker and hearer in the moment of the utterance, which is called "the visible situation use" (Hawkins, 1978, p. 111). There are also some other uses of the definite article in noun phrases with explanatory modifiers, which, at this point, do not need to be explained.

When it comes to making generalizations, all three combinations of article choice are possible to apply, as it is showed in Eastwood (2009, p. 200):

Camels *can close their noses*. (a plural countable noun with zero article meaning "all")

A camel *can close its nose*. (a singular countable noun with indefinite article meaning "any" or "typical")

The camel *can close its nose*. (a singular countable nouns with definite article meaning "a prototypical example of the class)

When making a generic reference, it would not be possible to use the definite article with a plural countable noun, because it would then mean a specific group and it would not be a general statement any more:

The camels *were carrying a heavy load*. (a specific group of camels)

Nevertheless, the definite article is used with a plural nationality noun or an adjective and still making a generic reference:

The Chinese*, in their turn, became the bitter enemies of* **the Russians***.*
It is our treatment of **the old** *which most shocks students of our culture.*
(Berry, 1995, p. 35)

There are also some special uses of articles that can also be structured as rules, but that are often acquired by English L2 learners as chunks or fixed expressions:

the police
twice a day
on holiday
go to school
walk home
go to the theatre
at the end
on the other hand

One special case which is linked to the indefinite article is the use of *one*. It is sometimes believed that *a/an* and *one* can be interchangeable. For an English L2 learner it can be sometimes helpful to try to substitute the indefinite article with the number *one*. For instance, it is possible in sentences like

> *It is **a** frightful place*.
>
> *It is **one** frightful place*. (Berry, 1995, p. 18)

There are also examples when the indefinite article undoubtedly means one. This occurs in phrases with numbers and measurements, such as *a hundred*, *a million*, *an hour*, *an inch* or *a quarter*. Nevertheless, *one* is used when the speaker wants to emphasize the number, i.e. that only one thing is involved or that one thing is contrasted with another, as the following examples illustrate:

> *The family have **a car***. (They can travel by road.) (Eastwood, 2009, p. 202)
>
> *The family have **one car***. (They don't have two cars.) (Eastwood, 2009, p. 202)
>
> *She was hopping on **one** foot*. (Berry, 1995, p. 19)

Therefore, English L2 speakers should be careful when using the number *one* instead of *a/an*, because it depends on the situational context whether *one* or the indefinite article should be used.

2.1.2   Other semantic notions in Standard English

From the previous examples it can be seen that the basic criterion for the article selection is definiteness/indefiniteness. Ko, Ionin, and Wexler (2010) state that for the use of the definite article a common set of information known to both speaker and hearer is necessary. There are, however, references to something that is known only to the speaker, which then implies a notion of specificity. In Standard English there are no articles that mark specificity, so both the definite and indefinite article can be used as specific or non-specific, depending on the context in which they are used, that is, whether the context is definite or indefinite:

> *I'm looking for **a pen***.
>
> > *It's a blue one. I was using it a few minutes ago*.   (specific)
> >
> > *I can't find one anywhere. Could you lend me one?*   (non-specific pen)
>
> (Eastwood, 2009, p. 199)

> *I want to talk to **the owner** of this store, whoever this is.*   (non-specific)
>
> *I want to talk to **the owner** of this store; she is my neighbour*.   (specific)
>
> (Balenović & Medved Krajnović, 2013, p. 36)

Hawkins et al. (2006) mention languages whose article systems encode the parameter of specificity, such as Samoan, Shuswap and Sango. What seems to make an article choice by English L2 learners more difficult is a determiner used in both indefinite and specific contexts. Such determiner is the demonstrative *this* in spoken English, which is often referred to as "the colloquial use of *this*"

(Hawkins et al., 2006, p. 10). The following examples show how *this* can be used with nouns and properties that, although indefinite, are considered to be "noteworthy" to mention (Ko, Ionin & Wexler, 2010):

> *Peter intends to meet a/this merchant banker*. (even though he doesn't get on with her)
> *Peter intends to meet a/*this merchant banker*. (though he hasn't met one yet)
> (Ko, Ionin & Wexler, 2010, p. 219)

When using the indefinite article, it is usually not clear whether the speaker has a specific referent in mind or not, whereas then using the definite article or "the colloquial use of *this*", there is no ambiguity because of their pragmatic functions (they invoke a prior knowledge of the existence of referents). The lack of those pragmatic functions of indefinites causes the specific/non-specific ambiguity (Hawkins, 1978). In specific reference the speaker has a particular referent in mind, and can identify it by, for instance, a relative clause or adding a modifier *certain*. What causes the confusion to English L2 learners in choosing the appropriate article is the fact that specific indefinites refer exclusively to objects. Hawkins (1978) proves that the notion of specificity is based on excluding other possible referents and possible understanding by the hearer that there is one referent that the speaker refers to among an infinite number of referents.

Based on the research that will be described bellow, the notion of specificity influences to some extent the article choice by English L2 learners. Therefore, I give bellow simplified definitions of definiteness and indefiniteness as well as specificity and nonspecificity by Ionin (2003 as cited in Ekiert, 2007):

1. Definiteness refers to a situation when a referring noun phrase is known to both speaker and hearer, and moreover, is unique in the context. In other case, the noun phrase is indefinite. The following examples illustrate this definition:

   definite: I read a book. *The book* was interesting.

   indefinite: I read *a book* yesterday.

2. Specificity refers to an indefinite noun phrase that the speaker has in mind and intends to refer to. In other case, the noun phrase is nonspecific. The following examples illustrate the definition:

   specific indefinite: I read *an interesting book*, which my cousin gave me.

   nonspecific indefinite: Mary reads *a book* (but I don't know which one).

Another semantic concept that has recently been introduced by Ko, Ionin, and Wexler (2010), which also affects article use by English learners, is presuppositionality. It is defined as

"presupposition of existence" (Ko, Ionin, & Wexler, 2010, p. 120), i.e. both the speaker and the hearer presuppose the existence of a referent. The difference between presuppositionality and definiteness is explained more precisely in Ko, Perovic, Ionin, & Wexler (2008) as "the presupposition of *existence of a discourse referent*", while definiteness "marks the presupposition of *existence of a unique referent*" (p. 120). A determiner in Standard English that can encode indefiniteness and presuppositionality is *some*, depending on the context. Indefinites can have both presuppositional and non-presuppositional readings. Hawkins (1978) explains that assertions and presuppositions can be differed from each other under negation. The difference between definites and indefinites when it comes to presuppositional readings is that definite noun phrases have to be appropriately used from a pragmatic point of view, logically possible to exist and be unique in the contex. Indefinite phrases, on the other hand, are only optionally located within the pragmatic sets that are applied to the definite articles.

As an overview of this section, Table 1 with listed environments and types of articles is given. It is based on a table given in Ekiert (2007, p.11), which has been modified and adopted for this paper.

Table 1. *Types of articles and environment in which they appear.*

Type	Environment	Features	Articles	Examples
1	Attributive indefinites Non-referential indefinites	- known to the hearer - specific reference	a, 0	It is *a frightful place*. My sister is *a doctor*.
2	Referential indefinites First-mention nouns	- known to the hearer + specific reference	a, 0	I'm looking for *a pen*.
3	Associative anaphora (previous mention) larger situation use (specified by entailment, definition, world knowledge, unique in a given context)	+ known to the hearer + specific reference		I found a pen. *The pen*… I'm just going to *the post office*. *The sun* was shining. Well, what happened to *the professor* then?
4	Generic nouns	generalisation + known to the hearer - specific reference plural nationality noun or an adjective	a, the, 0	*0Camels* can close their noses. *A camel* can close its nose. *The camel* can close its nose. *the Chinese* *the poor*
5.	Idioms Other conventional uses	/	a, the, 0	*twice a day* *go to school* *on the other hand*

Since neither presuppositionality nor specificity affect the article choice by English L1 speakers, and since they cannot be morphologically marked by an article, but can only be derived from the context, there will be no further elaboration of this aspect. However, its implications for English L2 learners will be presented in the section on the influence of semantic universals on article choice.

2.2   Previous research on acquisition of English L2 article system

A lot of research related to the article choice by English L2 learners has been carried out. This research area refers often to the research of children's acquisition of the English article system, both in naturalistic and experimental settings. This section will provide information on previous research of English article system by L2 learners. Investigating the L2 acquisition of English articles is especially interesting when the L1 of English learners does not have an article system, as it is in our case. In this section an overview of possible explanations for L2 learners' article choice will also be given.

The first studies of the L2 acquisition of articles were conducted by Master (1987), Parrish (1987), Tarone and Parrish (1988), and Thomas (1989), which is listed in Ekiert (2007). Despite ambiguous results of the studies, they provided the research field with significant information about the English article system. Some of the early studies (Huebner, 1983; Master 1987; Parrish, 1987; Thomas 1989) show that English L2 learners use and acquire the definite article before the indefinite article. Moreover, learners tend to overuse the definite article, which Huebner and Master call "the-flooding" (Ekiert, 2007, p. 4).

Furthermore, Ekiert (2007) also introduces some recent studies on the L2 acquisition of articles, which have been extensive: Butler, 2002; Chaudron & Parker, 1990; Ionin, 2003; Jarvis, 2002; Lardiere, 2004; Leung, 2001; Liu & Gleason, 2002; Robertson, 2000; White, 2003; Young, 1996. Since the researchers use different methodologies in their studies, it becomes difficult to compare the findings. Nevertheless, the methodologies of the studies are thorough, which helps in a more systematic analysis of the acquisition of English article system by English L2 learners.

Furthermore, Bergeron-Matoba (2007) mentions that many studies have dealt only with the grammatically appropriate or inappropriate use of articles by English L2 learners. Bley-Vroman (1983) referred to this type of analysis as the "comparative fallacy" (p. 4), saying that the learner's interlanguage itself is worthy to be investigated, not only in terms of grammatically erroneous use.

2.2.1 Role of L1

Definiteness and indefiniteness are universal properties of human languages. According to Ekiert (2007) there are at least three aspects in which languages may differ:

a   a way of encoding indefinite referents,

b   a way of marking of indefiniteness, and

c   deciding on the nouns which take indefinite marking

However, each language has its own way of distinguishing it. In Croatian, definiteness and indefiniteness are expressed in a different way than in English. While English has an article system, Croatian as a Slavic language distinguishes definiteness from indefiniteness with word order, verbal aspects, and demonstratives, depending on the context.

The L1 interference was the first issue to which researchers have paid attention when investigating the acquisition of the English L2 article system. According to Zdorenko and Paradis (2008), studies that compare the acquisition of the L2 article system by learners whose L1s lack articles with those learners whose L1s have an article system show that an L1 might influence the L2 acquisition of articles. The studies that Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) refer to are the following: Master (1987), Murphy (1997), Wakabayashi (1997), Trademan (2002), Hawkins et al. (2006), Snape et al. (2006) and Ionin et al. (2008).

Bergeron-Matoba (2007) lists many studies concerning the acquisition of the English article system by L2 learners whose L1 lack articles: Chinese (Zobl 1982; Robertson 2000; Lardiere 2004, 2005), Czech & Slovak (Young 1996), Hmong (Laos) (Huebner 1979), Japanese (Parrish 1987; Wakabayashi 1997; Goto Butler 2002; Snape 2006; Hawkins et al. 2005, 2006), Korean (Ionin, Wexler & Ko 2003), Polish (Ekiert 2004), Russian (Ionin & Wexler 2003), and Turkish (White 2003). Furthermore, he states that other studies that compared the acquisition of the English article system by speakers of languages with and without articles have shown that learners whose L1 does not have articles have more problems with the choice of articles in English. Moreover, the studies concerning speakers of languages that have no articles have shown the overuse of the zero (Ø) article in their interlanguages, even at the advanced stage (Bergeron-Matoba, 2007).

In Croatia, Zergollern-Miletić (2008 as cited in Balenović & Medved Krajnović, 2013) conducted research on the acquisition of the English L2 article system and the perception of definiteness and indefiniteness by Croatian native speakers who were advanced English L2 learners. The findings of the research showed that the L2 learners used articles inappropriately with abstract nouns and that they omitted articles when a noun is defined by an adjective. They also substituted

the definite article for indefinite and vice versa. As the conclusion of the study, the author suggests that Croatian L1 learners of English need to become aware of the concept of definiteness and indefiniteness in Croatian in order to apply it on appropriate article use in English, despite the fact that Croatian lacks articles.

Bergeron-Matoba (2007) states that there are two possibilities from which L2 learners can derive their knowledge on article choice. First, it can be gained from the learners' L1. Secondly, it can be obtained directly from UG if their L1 does not linguistically encode definiteness and indefiniteness, or any other semantic universal expressed by articles. In his study, Bergeron-Matoba (2007) investigates the role of lerners' L1 in the acquisition of English L2 article system. He argues that Japanese L1 learners of English whose production he investigated have "an underlying knowledge of definiteness" (Bergeron-Matoba, 2007, p. 12) regardless of the fact that their L1 lacks article system. In the following sections two main hypotheses in the research area of the English L2 article system are presented.

2.2.2   Article Choice Parameter

The first hypothesis about the acquisition of English L2 articles is related to the notions of definiteness and specificity. This hypothesis is developed by Ionin (2004, 2007 as cited in Balenović & Medved Krajnović, 2013) and is called the Article Choice Parameter. Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) summarised the hypothesis in this way: "A language that has two articles distinguishes them as follows:

 The Definiteness Setting: Articles are distinguished on the basis of definiteness.

 The Specificity Setting: Articles are distinguished on the basis of specificity" (p. 229).
Hawkins et al. (2006) explain that definiteness indicates the knowledge of both speaker and hearer to be relevant, whereas in their definition of specificity only the speaker's knowledge is taken into consideration.

To be more specific, Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004 as cited in Hawkins et al., 2006) assume that there is a parameter of Universal Grammar which determines how to interpret article use in languages with a two-article contrast. They claim that semantic features of definiteness/indefiniteness and specificity are available in UG to L2 learners during the period of L2 acquisition. Some learners use both semantic features when deciding between the use of the definite and the indefinite article in their interlanguages. The analysis of interlanguages by Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004) shows that English L2 learners make stabile choices in article use. This is crucial because of the role of the UG in the L2 acquisition. According to Hawkins et al. (2006), the Article

Choice Parameter assumes that L2 Learners' interlanguage grammars are UG-driven, which means that L2 learners have access to semantic features of definiteness/indefiniteness and specificity, but further exposure to the language should lead them to realize that only definiteness/indefiniteness is relevant for the English article system.

Hawkins et al. (2006) argue that although the Definiteness and Specificity Settings are proposed as UG features for encoding the English L2 article system, definiteness and specificity are not the only notions based on which English L2 learners can decide on the use of articles, because in some languages articles encode, for instance, proximity of the referent to the speaker etc. Ko, Ionin, and Wexler (2010) say that the Article Choice Parameter signals differences in article systems. In Samoan, for example, articles encode specificity, whereas in English they encode definiteness. After finding that English L2 learners' article use is influenced by both UG features, definiteness and specificity, the inappropriate use of articles based on specificity can be related to the interlanguage setting of the parameter to specificity.

Specificity is the most thoroughly investigated UG semantic feature of them all that influence the article choice in languages. The role of specificity in the article choice of English L2 learners proved to be an interesting topic of research. Bergeron-Matoba (2007) reports that the distinction between the definite and indefinite or zero article for lower level learners is based on the parameter of specificity. They use the definite article in contexts that are definite and specific, as well as indefinite and specific. In contrast to that, they rarely use it in indefinite and nonspecific contexts. Ionin and Wexler (2003) and Ionin, Wexler and Ko (2003) also found a similar tendency in their studies of Korean and Russian L1 learners of English. Therefore, it appears that marking of specificity rather than definiteness is a general tendency for learners whose L1s do not have the article system. Furthermore, since there is a language such as Samoan, which uses articles to distinguish specific and nonspecific referents, the use of specificity seems to be a natural option for L2 learners.

Ekiert (2007) also mentions the importance of specificity in the article choice referring to early studies of the acquisition of the English L2 article system in SLA (Master, 1987; Parrish, 1987; Tarone and Parrish, 1988; Thomas, 1989). Those studies showed that from a semantic point of view, English L2 learners relate the definite article with specificity and the indefinite article with nonspecific referents. Thus, they overuse the definite article in specific indefinite contexts.

Nevertheless, not only definiteness and specificity are semantic features of UG that influence the article choice, as Ko, Ionin and Wexler (2010) state. They suggest that the article choice parameter should be reconsidered to cover all the relevant semantic features in article acquisition,

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that are definiteness, specificity, and presuppositionality. Otherwise, the article choice in L2 acquisition is not influenced by parameter setting at all. The role of presuppositionality in L2 acquisition has not been widely investigated. First, as Ko, Ionin and Wexler (2010) state, it was investigated by Kaneko (1996), although not under that name. Kaneko's findings showed that Japanese L1 learners of English overused the definite article instead of using an indefinite article in partitive contexts. Ko, Ionin and Wexler (2010) state that the hypothesis about semantic universals in the Article Choice Parameter consequentially implies that English L2 learners from other L1s that lack the article system are also affected by presuppositionality. The evidence that confirms this hypothesis was gathered from their research on Croatian, Korean and Russian L1 learners of English.

2.2.3 Fluctuation Hypothesis

There is a number of studies that observe certain variability in learners' article use. Based on her research, Ionin (2004, 2007 as cited in Balenović & Medved Krajnović, 2013) formed a hypothesis that explains this variability. The hypothesis is called Fluctuation Hypothesis and it states that:

⧉ "[English] L2 learners have full access to Universal Grammar principles and parameter-settings [and]

⧉ [English] L2 learners fluctuate between different parameter-settings until the input leads them to set the parameter to the appropriate value" (Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008, p.230 and Hawkins, et al., 2006).

That means that English L2 learners will fluctuate between definiteness and specificity, until they are exposed to sufficient input to set the parameter correctly. The Fluctuation Hypothesis could be applied especially to English L2 learners whose L1 lacks articles.

A part of the research whose results support the Fluctuation Hypothesis is the study by Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004), described in Hawkins et al. (2006). They investigated the interpretation of English articles by two groups of intermediate to advanced proficiency L2 learners whose L1s lack articles. The results have shown that L2 learners interpreted the noun phrase with the definite article as indefinite referent in specific contexts considerably more often than in nonspecific. Moreover, English L2 learners percieve the noun phrase with the indefinite article as definite referent in nonspecific contexts considerably more often than in specific. At the same time, the definite article marks definiteness, regardless of specificity, and the indefinite article marks indefiniteness. Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004) interpret the results in a way that the informants are fluctuating between the two values of the Article Choice Parameter. The fluctuation is considered to be a temporary phase of development. The learners on higher proficiency levels have more input so that there is less

fluctuation in their language production. Other participants chose articles based on some unexpected patterns. The study concludes that English L2 learners whose L1 lacks articles allow articles in L2 to have both values of the Article Choice Parameter. Hawkins et al. (2006) conclude that further exposure to input will lead them to restrict the choice to just one parameter. In case of English, the L2 learners should restrict the choice to definiteness, and not specificity, or any other pattern.

In their study, Hawkins et al. (2006) wanted to prove Ionin's Fluctuation Hypothesis in English L2 learners whose L1 lacks articles (Japanese) based on singular nouns, which can be interpreted as definite or indefinite, specific or non-specific, depending on the context. The results of the study have shown that the speakers whose L1 does not have articles choose *the* in definite and specific contexts, but not when a NP is non-specific. Thus, this case confirms the Fluctuation Hypothesis. Analysing individual differences, the study has shown that most participants used *the* in indefinite specific contexts, showing that they fluctuated between patterns of definiteness and specificity. Some learners, however, had already reached the stage of not selecting the definite article *the* in indefinite contexts at all, and they set definiteness as the appropriate value for English. The authors say that interlanguage of L2 learners whose L1 lacks articles goes through a developmental stage that is influenced neither by the L1 nor the L2.

Furthermore, there appears the question of the cause of the fluctuation. Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) state that in Ionin et al. (2004) the Fluctuation Hypothesis deals only with learners of a mother tongue without articles, in which case transfer of the Article Choice Parameter setting from the L1 is not possible. In the following study, Ionin et al. (2008) compared the article use by English L2 learners whose L1s have and do not have articles. There were two possible results:

1. fluctuation preceedes transfer, in which case all L2 learners should fluctuate between definiteness and specificity in their article choice;
2. transfer preceedes fluctuation, in which case all L2 learners whose L1s have the article system should transfer semantic features for using articles from their L1 to their L2.

The results confirmed the second possibility. Moreover, Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) refer to a study by Hawkins et al. (2006), which examined article use in adult Japanese L1 and Greek L1 learners of English. The study was important because Japanese lacks articles, whereas Greek has the article system. The evidence of the study also supported Ionin et al.'s (2008) conclusion that transfer overrides fluctuation.

In order to give further support of the evidence from the above mentioned studies about the role of L1 transfer and the Fluctuation Hypothesis, Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) conducted a longitudinal study with child learners of English, with both L1s that have and do not have articles. This study showed that there were some similarities between L2 acquisition of the English article system in children and adults. On the one hand, both adults and children had problems with the indefinite article, and learners whose L1s lacked articles omitted articles inappropriately. On the other hand, the study showed a more limited role of L1 influence in the children's developmental patterns and rates of article acquisition, compared with the previous work on adult L2 acquisition of articles. Moreover, it showed that in children's acquisition of the article system fluctuation overrides transfer, which is opposed to the conclusions in Ionin et al. (2008) abouth the L2 adults' acquisition of the article system. Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) also give evidnce that child L2 learners acquire the target system faster than adult L2 learners, even when their L1 lacks articles.

2.2.4   Influence of semantic universals on article choice

This section presents the research of effects that semantic universals have on article choice. As already mentioned, the semantic features that play an important role in the acquisition of the English article system by L2 learners are primarily definiteness and indefiniteness. Although a definition of definiteness and specificity is already given in one of the previous sections, here is an additional definition by Ionin, Zubizarreta and Philippov (2009, p. 338): "If a Determiner Phrase (DP) of the form [D NP] is . . .

a. [+definite], then the speaker assumes that the hearer shares the presupposition of the existence of a unique individual in the set denoted by NP.

b. [+specific], then the speaker intends to refer to a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP, and considers this individual to possess some noteworthy property."

The main hypothesis about semantic universals is that English L2 learners whose L1s lack articles through UG have direct access to semantic universals, which have the strongest influence on their choice of articles. Ionin et al. (2004 as cited in Ionin, Zubizarreta & Philippov, 2009) proposed that definiteness and specificity are semantic universals which underlie article choice cross-linguistically.

The fluctiation in child L2 learners' acquisition of the English article system is a result of direct access to semantic universals. As already mentioned, semantic universals that influence the article choice are definiteness and specificity. When the L1 does not have articles, learners fluctuate between these semantic options. In other words, L2 learners sometimes mark definiteness with *the* and indefiniteness with *a*, whereas sometimes they use *the* for expressing specificity and *a* for

nonspecificity. Ionin, Zubizarreta and Philippov (2009), therefore, speculate that when definiteness and specificity are in conflict, English L2 learners will probably use the definite and indefinite article interchangeably.

Thus, Ionin et al. (2004) conducted a research study with two groups of adult English L2 learners residing in the USA, Russian L1 learners and Korean L1 learners, in order to test the influence of semantic universals on article choice. The results showed that both definiteness and specificity had significant effects on article use. Inappropriate article use was mainly found in the contexts of specific indefinites and nonspecific definites. The researchers concluded that the results could not be attributed to L1 transfer, because Russian and Korean are typologically very different although both languages do not have articles. According to the evidence of the study, the patterns of article use supported the view that English L2 learners have access to semantic universals through UG. Therefore, Ionin et al.'s findings are the basis for other research of acquiring the English article system by learners of other L1s that do not have the article system, such as Japanese (Hawkins et al., 2006) and Mandarin Chinese (Trenkic, 2008), supporting the conclusion that influences of specificity on L2 learners from L1s that lack articles are not a result of L1 transfer. Nevertheless, L1 transfer effects were found for English L2 learners coming from L1s with articles, such as Spanish (Ionin et al., 2008) and Greek (Hawkins et al., 2006).

Other studies (Ionin et al., 2008 and Ionin, Zubizarreta & Philippov, 2009) that prove the effects of specificity on the article choice in English L2 production show that specificity is related more to indefinites than to definites. Ionin, Zubizarreta and Philippov (2009) have found in their study that adult L2 learners are influenced by specificity with both definites and indefinites, whereas child L2 learners are influenced by specificity with indefinites to a much greater degree than with definites.

Another semantic universal that has been mentioned in the first part of this paper, that along with definiteness and specificity influences article choice, is partitivity as a sub-type of presuppositionality. Its influence on article choice by English L2 learners was investigated by Ko et al. (2008). Their study has shown how semantic universals affect article choice by English L2 learners who come from two typologically different L1s that lack articles, Croatian L1 learners and Korean L1 learners. The results have shown that L2 learners' article choice is related to the partitivity feature. English L2 learners overuse the definite article with partitive indefinites. Similar results were obtained from studies by Kaneko (1996) for Japanese L1 learners as well as by Ionin (2004) and Ko et al. (2006b) for Korean L1 learners. Some studies relate partitivity to child L1 acquisition of English

(Wexler, 2003; Ko et al., 2006). The study by Ko et al. (2008) reiterates that inappropriate article use by L2 learners is related to the access to semantic universals. In this research study, partitivity was proven to be one of the semantic universals that have a great influence on acquisition of the English article system regardless of the L1. The L2 learners used the definite article in partitive contexts. More specifically, the evidence showed no interaction between partitivity and specificity, which suggests that the two semantic features are independent factors when it comes to English L2 article choice. The L2 learners overused *the* in partitive specific contexts most often, which indicates that both partitivity and specificity contribute to overuse of the definite article. Since there was almost no random overuse of *the* in nonpartitive nonspecific contexts, this means that article errors in L2 are not random, but are a consequence of the access to semantic universals. The study supports the conclusion that L2 learners have to deal with two independent problems in L2 acquisition of English articles. Firstly, they have to learn that the definite article is used when there is common knowledge between speaker and hearer. Secondly, they have to learn that the definite article requires the uniqueness presupposition.

What is interesting in the study for the Croatian context is that the influence of specificity on article choice is rather weak or non-existent. The Croatian L1 learners seem to be influenced only by partitivity. Ko et al. (2008) tried to interpret the results by L1 transfer, more specifically, that Korean learners have access to specificity, but Croatian L1 learners do not. Nevertheless, this woud be impossible, because Russian L1 learners of English from previous studies have shown to have strong specificity effects. Since both Russian and Croatian are similar in terms of articles, the results should be similar. It was found that Croatian L1 learners were more proficient than Korean learners, which caused lesser influence of specificity. It was suggested that the problem regarding partitivity is overcome later than the problem with specificity in the course of L2 acquisition. Hence, advanced learners may overcome specificity effects more easily than partitivity effects. Since the Croatian L1 learners were more proficient in English than the Korean L1 learners, they overcame specificity more easily than partitivity. Ko et al. (2008) conclude the study by putting forth with the hypothesis that the article use of more advanced L2 learners is influenced by the partitivity pattern, while the article use by less advanced L2 learners is influenced by the specificity pattern. According to Ko et al. (2008), the issue about semantic universals should be tackled in reference to L2 proficiency.

According to another study by Ko, Ionin and Wexler (2006) that also deals with the effects of semantic features (definiteness, specificity, and partitivity) on the acquisition of English articles, English L2 learners associate the definite article with specificity and partitivity. However, when there is no semantic trigger for use of the definite article, English L2 learners do not misuse *the* with

indefinite noun phrases. The results support the theory that L2 learners have access to semantic universals which are not found in their L1 or their L2, but which are available through UG.

2.2.5 Use of zero article and article omission

One of the interesting observations from the research on article use in L2 production is the use of zero article, that is, the omission of articles. In Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) there is a list of research studies that deal with the erronious article omission. Those studies are Huebner (1985), Parrish (1987), Robertson (2000) and White (2003), and they present the use of zero article in oral L2 production.

Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) also noticed that neither Ionin et al. (2008) nor Hawkins et al. (2006) focused on the inappropriate use of zero articles. In Ionin et al. (2004) and Ionin et al. (2008), there were few cases of these errors. In Hawkins et al. (2006), the inappropriate article omission was produced by Japanese L1 learners in cases of plural countable nouns, but the authors do not tackle them in their discussion. Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) assume that the authors of both studies expected a low rate of article omission because their investigation involved more formal and written method of filling in the blanks with the definite, indefinite or zero article. In contrast to that type of investigation, Lardiere's (2004) examination of Chinese L1 learner's use of articles showed less than half article omissions in written contexts than in spontaneous oral production.

As regards the article omission, Ekiert (2007) mentions interpretations of zero article production in the early research of the article choice. She refers to two studies (Master, 1997 and Parrish, 1987) that report that the zero article prevails in the early stages of L2 acquisition regardless of the context. According to Parrish (1987), the zero article is acquired first, followed by the definite article, and finally the indefinite article. Ekiert (2007) also refers to Thomas (1989), who described a very similar phenomenon in her research, describing the article omission as "the zero article overgeneralization" (p. 349). Master (1997) and Parrish (1987) do not explain the article omission as the consequence of L1 transfer. Parish (1987), however, emphasises the difference in English L2 article acquisition between the learners whose L1 has the article system from those whose L1 lacks articles, showing that English article use, especially in the early stages, is clearly influenced by the L1. Therefore, the zero article in the early phases of English L2 acquisition by learners from L1s that do not have articles can hardly be considered a use. Ekiert (2007) supports her claim about article omission as the main problem in article use among L2 learners having different L1s by reporting the results of the research about definiteness being encoded before indefiniteness.

3   The study

3.1   Research aim and research questions

The aim of this study was to find about how Croatian L1 young learners of English use articles with singular common nouns in their oral production. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- Is there any difference in the acquisition of the definite and indefinite article?
- Is there any variability in the process of L2 article acquisition?
- What are the types of appropriate and inappropriate article use?

3.2   Sample

The sample that was analysed in this study is a part of the Croatian national research project *Acquisition of English as a foreign language from an early age: Analysis of learner language* with the general aim of investigating English L2 interlanguage development of Croatian L1 young learners. It was also looked into different aspects that influence development of learners' interlanguages. The project was sponsored by the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sport. The project investigations included longitudinal analysis of learners' production in the period between 2007 and 2010. This study included analysis of language production of four Croatian L1 young learners from their fourth to eighth year of English L2 learning.

3.3   Instruments and procedure

The analysis was conducted with longitudinal data. It was based on the recordings of individual oral production tasks throughout four years. The researcher was allowed to elicit additional information on the topics and objects in the picture. In the first year of recorded production, which was the fourth year of English L2 learning, young learners were supposed to describe two pictures. In the first picture one could see a family house with rooms, furniture and different objects such as a computer, a TV set, a bath tub, a kitchen table and toys in it. In one room there was a boy playing a computer game, and in another a woman was sitting on the sofa and reading a book. The second picture depicted a park where children and adults were walking, eating ice-cream and looking at animals. Except for describing the pictures, the participants were supposed to answer questions about themselves (e.g. where they lived, who with, what their place looked like, and what one could see there, if there was a park nearby where they lived, if and when they went to the park, and what the park looked like).

The task in the second year included similar tasks as in the previous year. Although the context of pictures used in the task was same as in the first year of recording, there were more objects and people in the pictures. The first two pictures showed a living room and dining room with family members performing different activities (eating dinner, watching TV, taking a nap, and studying). The other two pictures referred to free time. One could see people around a lake in the countryside fishing, walking, sitting on a bench, and a scene at a beach where people were sunbathing, swimming and enjoying their drinks. The participants were supposed to say where they lived, who with, what their place looked like and about their eating habits. They also had to answer the questions about a park near where they lived, if and when they went to the park, what the park looked like, whether they went on holiday during summer, where and who with.

In the third year of recording production the task involved describing a picture of a house, which was divided in four smaller pictures. Each picture showed one or two family members doing something in each room of the house (bathroom, living room, bedroom and hall). The learners were asked if they would like to live in such a house, and what they liked or disliked about it. The task also involved talking about what their favourite room at home was, where they had their meals, who in the family cooked meals, and if they themselves were able to cook.

The task in the fourth year involved describing a picture showing a kitchen in mess, in which the father was washing the dishes, the children were running around or playing, and the mother was outside hanging the washing. Furthermore, as in the tasks in previous years, the learners were supposed to refer to themselves, comparing the picture to their kitchen at home and saying if they liked the kitchen at the picture, and describing their ideal kitchen.

The analysis focused on article use with singular common nouns. Since the task was not a forced-choice elicitation task, all the nouns in the learners' language production were specific. That is why the article use was set as appropriate or inappropriate in definite or indefinite contexts. Zero articles were always considered incorrect, as an omission of an article, since proper names and plural nouns were not included in the analysis. However, all articles, in idioms or fixed expressions were taken into consideration, regardless if it was the case of the definite, indefinite or zero article. Article use in fixed expressions and idioms was taken as a separate category in the analysis. Parts of the language production that a learner repeated after the researcher or that were difficult to understand were not analysed. Except for the articles, the use of the number *one* instead of the indefinite article was also included in the analysis.

Here are some examples of the categories that were analysed:

a   appropriate use of the definite article *the*

PETRA: in **the** second picture I see one room

ANA: small rooms in the… in **the** house

b   inappropriate use of the indefinite article *a*

LUKA: Err, mum cook the dinner for **a** family (family has already been mentioned)

ANA: we stay on **a** holiday

c   appropriate use of the indefinite article *a*

ANA: I don't like because they have **an** old TV

JASMIN: one man is sitting and reading **a** newspaper

d   inappropriate use of the definite article *the*

LUKA: mum cook **the** dinner…

PETRA: at this picture I see **the** kitchen…

e   appropriate article use in fixed expressions (also zero article):

LUKA: I **have a shower**.

JASMIN: A boy is **watching Ø TV**.

ANA: **On the other** picture …

f   article omission (inappropriate zero article)

LUKA: a girl is playing with **Ø** book

JASMIN: and **Ø** man is cooking…

g   use of the number *one* instead of the indefinite article

PETRA: there's also **one** big window with flowers on it. It's **one** table… little table…

JASMIN: Err… I see **one** girl is sleeping…

3.4   Results and discussion

Firstly, the development of article use for each learner was observed and the patterns that emerged in their language production were looked into. Afterwards the patterns and regularities in each learner's production were compared and discussed in terms of the research questions. The data on use of articles in the first, second, third and fourth year production is displayed in the Tables 2 to 5.

As shown in Table 2, in the first year production Learner A generally did not use a lot of articles. The learner used both definite and indefinite article appropriately. However, he tended to omit definite articles when they were necessary (e.g. *He play in *Ø water*). In the second year production there was an increase in article use. The learner used indefinite articles more appropriately than definite articles. He still omitted articles in some contexts when they were necessary (e.g. *we have *Ø flower* or *There is a window and of *Ø window they see the building*…). It is interesting to notice that the learner could use articles appropriately in most fixed expressions. It does not have to be a result of acquiring the English article system, but of learning those phrases as chunks of language. In the third year production the appropriate use of the indefinite article continued to show. In contrast to that, the learner sometimes used the definite article in inappropriate contexts (e.g. *it's better in *the house* or *in the room I have *the bed*). In the fourth year production the learner did not use articles in inappropriate contexts. Nevertheless, he omitted articles in some important phrases, which in the fourth year of learning should not occur (e.g. *err… there is *Ø mess in the kitchen*). The acquisition of the definite article appeared to be slower than the acquisition of the indefinite article. The learner used articles appropriately in fixed expressions when they occurred in his production and very rarely used number *one* instead of the indefinite article.

Table 2. *Descriptive data on article use by Learner A*

	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year
appropriate use of indefinite article *a*	2	10	16	6
appropriate use of definite article *the*	5	3	16	5
inappropriate use of indefinite article *a*	0	2	0	0
inappropriate use of definite article *the*	0	3	6	0
appropriate article use in fixed expressions	0	5	2	0
article omission	2	4	13	3
use of *one* instead of indefinite article	0	1	1	0

According to data from Table 3, Learner B showed great variability in article use in the first year production. The learner mostly omitted articles or used them incorrectly. He omitted articles in cases when a noun was mentioned for the first time (e.g. *Er, *Ø man is eating*; **Ø man is playing with a dog*). Furthermore, in the second year production the learner's tendency to omit articles continued. This happened again especially with the indefinite article (e.g. *Err, *Ø woman is standing*; *Err *Ø man*

is err reading on the stairs). In the third year production this tendency showed a sudden decline. However, this does not mean that the learner has mastered the use of the indefinite article, which is shown in suddenly increased use of number *one* instead of the indefinite article (e.g. *Err… I see **one** girl is sleeping*; *Err… **one** man is sitting*). In the fourth year production the learner's article use seemed to be stable and acquired on the acceptable level. One interesting piece of evidence which was found in the language production was overuse of indefinites. In the following example the learner used both the indefinite article and the number *one* one after another: *there's **a one** child sitting on a chair*. This could mean that the learner had not yet completely mastered the use of the indefinite article and that he used the number *one* instead of it and that the process of distinguishing the indefinite article and the number *one* was still in progress. Learner B also had one fixed structure in which he did not use the article, although it was necessary (e.g. *err… it is *Ø mess*). The explanation for that might be the fact that the whole expression was not appropriately structured (***there is** a mess*).

Table 3. *Descriptive data on article use of Learner B*

	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year
appropriate use of indefinite article *a*	2	9	8	4
appropriate use of definite article *the*	0	6	3	3
inappropriate use of indefinite article *a*	2	0	0	0
inappropriate use of definite article *the*	4	3	1	0
appropriate article use in fixed expressions	2	2	1	1
article omission	9	15	2	1
use of *one* instead of indefinite article	0	1	9	0

Table 4 shows data on Learner C's article use in the language production. In the first year production the learner used the indefinite article more appropriately than the definite article. This learner's language production also showed the use of the number *one* instead of the indefinite article (e.g. *… and here's **one** boy, he's looking*…). The learner omitted articles in the first year production, which continued throughout the following years. This applies especially to the definite article (e.g. *On this picture is one family, with *Ø family is one cat*), but also to the indefinite article when listing (e.g. *I see *Ø bath… toilet… window*…) and in constructions with adjectives (e.g. *this is *Ø young couple*). This type of article omission occurred significantly in the second and third year

productions. In the second year production the learner showed high appropriateness of article use in fixed expressions, such as *I think they're just **going out for a walk***. After the second year the learner did not use the number *one* instead of the indefinite article any more. In the third year production Learner C showed great fluctuations in article use. She had mastered the use of the definite article better than the use of the indefinite article, because as previously mentioned, the indefinite article is more frequently omitted than the definite article. In the fourth year production the learner showed a slight improvement in article use. However, the above mentioned occurrences existed to a lesser extent.

Table 4. *Descriptive data on article use of Learner C*

	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year
appropriate use of indefinite article *a*	5	6	10	6
appropriate use of definite article *the*	1	1	10	5
inappropriate use of indefinite article *a*	0	1	0	1
inappropriate use of definite article *the*	4	0	1	3
appropriate article use in fixed expressions	1	10	6	1
article omission	4	11	13	4
use of *one* instead of indefinite article	4	3	0	0

The analysis of Table 5 shows some patterns and similarities that relate to the research questions. The first issue addressed in this paper is the difference in the acquisition of the definite and indefinite article. With increasing age and years of learning English the learners acquired either the definite or the indefinite article better. Learners A, B and C acquired the indefinite article faster than the definite article. In contrast to that, Learner D seemed to use the definite article more appropriately. Similar results are displayed in Balenović and Medved Krajnović (2013), where there was higher accuracy in the use of the indefinite article than of the definite article. They explained the results with the context of learning. Croatian learners are exposed more to the indefinite than to the definite article throughout the early instruction of English as a second language in primary school. In contrast to those results, Ekiert (2007) reports that definiteness is encoded before indefiniteness.

Table 5. *Descriptive data on article use of Learner D*

	First year	Second year	Third year	Fourth year
appropriate use of indefinite article *a*	0	1	6	3
appropriate use of definite article *the*	2	6	25	4
inappropriate use of indefinite article *a*	0	0	0	0
inappropriate use of definite article *the*	1	4	9	1
appropriate article use in fixed expressions	1	5	4	3
article omission	2	3	13	2
use of *one* instead of indefinite article	6	14	13	1

The second research question refers to the variability throughout the whole process of L2 article acquisition. Our data shows great variations in the learners' use of articles. The second and the third year are periods when the learners fluctuated most between the correct and incorrect article use. In those periods the inappropriate use of articles or article omission exceeded the appropriate use of articles. Those variations in appropriate and inappropriate article use confirm the learners' interlanguage development, and moreover, do not mean that the acquisition of the English article system was not developing properly. Despite high variability in the previous years, in the fourth year production by the learners suddenly showed more proficient use of articles with only few occurrences of the inappropriate use of articles and article omission. The period of noticeable variability could be seen as a period of setting the right parameters for the appropriate article use.

The issue of variability in article use is tightly connected to the last research question, that is, the type of appropriate and inappropriate article use. A very often noted type of inappropriate article use is substitution of the indefinite article with the definite (e.g. *I live in a flat... I... better... it's better in* ***the** *house*; *In the room I see* ***the** *bed*...). This behaviour is observed in many studies on article use (Balenović & Medved Krajnović, 2013; Ko, Ionin, & Wexler, 2010; Ekiert, 2007).

Another type of inappropriate use of English articles is the omission of the indefinite article in front of the nouns mentioned for the first time (e.g. *Err, so we have got TV and couch...; I see* ***Ø** *radio, television, desk, windows, plants...; I see* ***Ø** *clock, lamp...; I have also* ***Ø** *bath...; it's* ***Ø** *living room*). Another case of omission of articles could be noticed in adjective + noun combinations (e.g. *In* ***Ø** *dining room; I have got* ***Ø** *big... balkon?; this is* ***Ø** *young couple; I have* ***Ø** *bigger closet*...). This

tendency is also mentioned in Balenović and Medved Krajnović (2013) with an explanation that learners percieve a noun to already have a defining element in front of it. It is possible that the learners' L1 influences this inappropriate article use. Ekiert (2007) reports article omission as the main problem across L2 learners from different L1 backgrounds.

Furthermore, when learners do not use the indefinite article, most of them often use the number *one*. Balenović and Medved Krajnović (2013) explain this as the influence of the L1, which does not have articles, and in which sometimes the number *one* can be used to express the indefinite referrent. In some cases it is appropriate to use *one* instead of the indefinite article (e.g. *Err... **one** man is sitting*; *They are **one** family*: ***one** man is fishing and another man is standing out... near him*). In other cases, however, it could be seen as an inappropriate article use (e.g. *err one man taking fish... and ***one** man watching him*). There was great variability in the use of the number *one* among the learners whose productions have been analysed. The one thing that was common to all learners was that the number *one* was found in their production in time of great variability, that is, in the second and third year production, when their interlanguage experienced great fluctuations and changes. According to Ekiert (2007), L1 speakers of Slavic languages are influenced by discourse context not shared with a speaker, which affects their use of English articles in a negative way.

When it comes to the use of the indefinite article, there was no record of the *an* form of the indefinite article. Nevertheless, there was no need of using this form of the indefinite article because there were no familiar nouns beginning with a vowel in the learners' productions. Therefore, this type of article use can be disregarded.

It is interesting to mention that some learners were able to correct their inappropriate utterances. For instance, Learner A wanted to use the definite article instead of indefinite in case when he could not remember the word he wanted to use. In the following utterance, he used the indefinite article, as appropriate in the given context:

Learner A: *I live in **a**... I live in **the**... zgrada... build-?*

Interviewer: *Building*

Learner A: ***A** building...*

The analysis shows that the learners used articles extremely appropriately in fixed expressions that were familiar to them and that had been acquired as chunks. They used articles in those phrases easily and there were significantly more appropriate usages with few inappropriate ones in unknown or little-known phrases. Some of the most common fixed expressions with appropriate articles are, for example, ***a bit** different*, ***a bit** smaller*, *there are **a lot of** stuff in it*, ***a lot of***

trees, ***a lot of*** *space*, ***having a bath***, ***having a shower***, ***going out for a walk***, ***there is a mess***, *it's* ***in a mess***, *the kitchen is* ***in a mess***. These examples could prove the importance of the L2 instruction in the acquisition of English articles and that English L2 learners acquire the language as chunks.

4   Conclusion

The results of the analysis show that there are different issues important for the acquisition of the English article system by Croatian L1 learners. It is important that the L2 learners develop awareness about articles, which in our study was shown by increased use of articles in their language production throughout the four years. Nevertheless, there was a lot of misuse or substitution of articles as well as omission and fluctuations throughout the whole period.

The results of our analysis show that over time there is an increase in the appropriate use of both the definite and the indefinite article by Croatian L1 learners, which answers to the first research question. The data also suggests that Croatian L1 learners of English acquire the indefinite article prior to the definite article. It confirms the results of some previous studies on Croatian L1 learners (Balenović & Medved Krajnović, 2013).

Moreover, the analysis has shown the variability and inconsistency in appropriate article use, especially in the middle of the recorded period. This proves that the acquisition of the English article system is a variable process. The analysis does not look into the causes of the variability, although it could be seen as a confirmation of the Fluctuation Hypothesis, according to which the variations in use of the definite and the indefinite article reflect the development of the learners' interlanguage. Furthermore, misuse and substitution, omission of articles and the use of the number *one* with indefinites suggest the influence of the L1 on the development of the English L2 article system, particularly because Croatian lacks articles and expresses definiteness/indefiniteness with some other linguistic means, one of them being the number *one*. Mostly appropriate use of articles in fixed expressions confirms the importance of early instruction of the English as a second language and its influence on acquisition.

A useful follow-up of our analysis could be a more precise quantitative analysis of correct and incorrect article use and a study on reasons that stand behind the particular use of articles, such as the use of the number *one*, the omission of articles or their substitution.

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Summary

Ovaj rad bavi se kvalitativnom analizom točne i netočne upotrebe engleskih članova u jezičnoj produkciji četvero hrvatskih učenika. Jedan od najzahtjevnijih područja engleske gramatike za strane govornike je usvajanje engleskih članova. Članovi u engleskom jeziku izražavaju određenost ili neodređenost, pa stoga postoje određeni član *the* i neodređeni član *a/an*. Među ostalim, i neke druge semantičke kategorije utječu na usvajanje engleskih članova kod učenika engleskog kao stranog jezika. Pojavljuju se i velike nepravilnosti pri usvajanju članova u učeničkim jezicima. Osim toga, na usvajanje engleskih članova utječe i materinji jezik učenika. Stoga su evidentne razlike između usvojenosti članova kod učenika čiji materinji jezici sadrže članove i učenika čiji jezici nemaju članove. Hrvatski jezik je jedan od jezika koji ne posjeduje članove, već koristi neka druga lingvistička svojstva za izražavanje određenosti ili neodređenosti. Iz toga su razloga engleski članovi oduvijek hrvatskim učenicima bili problematični za usvajanje. Upravo zato su engleski članovi vrlo zanimljiva tema za istraživanje među hrvatskim učenicima engleskog kao stranog jezika.

Ključne riječi: engleski kao drugi jezik, članovi u engleskom jeziku, koncept određenosti i neodređenosti