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WHAT DO ARTICLES MEAN – INSIGHTS FROM CROATIAN LEARNERS OF
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Abstract

This thesis examines the use of articles by Croatian learners of English. The fact that Croatian language does not have an article system makes it more difficult for Croatian learners to master English articles. Our study is focused on difficulties Croatian learners encounter when acquiring English article system. We analysed essays written by high school graduates. The analysis is supported by the theoretical background given in the thesis.

Key words: English article system, definiteness/indefiniteness, L2 learners, Fluctuation hypothesis

1. Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the use of articles by Croatian learners of English. In order to do that, we will examine the notions essential for understanding of the definite and indefinite article: definiteness, indefiniteness and specificity. Accordingly, the first four sections will focus on the theoretical background and our research study will be presented in section five. In section two we will discuss the role of articles in general. In section three we will present the theoretical background on definiteness and indefiniteness in both English and Croatian with special emphasis on how the notions of in/definiteness (and specificity as well) influence the article choice. Afterwards, we will focus on the grammatical representation of definiteness in Croatian. Section four is dedicated to the previous research studies that we find relevant for our study. We will start with the study on Fluctuation Hypothesis, followed by a brief overview of the two studies which show the difference between children and adults when acquiring English article system. Afterwards, we will focus on three studies that examine article acquisition by Polish, Chinese and Spanish learners of English. The last part of the section four will examine the studies with Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian speakers. Then, in section five we will focus on our research study. We will analyse essays written by Croatian high school students in order to examine which articles they had acquired and what types of errors they made. The study will show us how Croatian learners understand the meaning of articles. The final conclusion is given in section six.

2. The role of articles

Articles are words that specify nouns and often exhibit different functions (e.g. numeral, adjectival). Along with quantifiers (some, any), demonstratives (this, that) and possessives (my, your), articles fall under the word class of determiners in Standard English (Eastwood, 2009, p.1). In this section we will demonstrate the function and usage of articles in English with the help of *A University Grammar of English* by Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum (1973). We consider their grammar to have a very systematic and clear overview of the article system. However, we may include several examples from John Eastwood's grammar (2009) for the sake of better exemplification. Quirk and Greenbaum's (1973) starting point is to make a distinction between specific and generic reference (p.67). Therefore they set two systems of articles based on these two types of reference. Both types of reference may take definite and indefinite articles.

Both concrete and abstract non-count nouns are used with the zero article when they have generic reference as in the following example (p. 71):

- 1) He likes wine, music, games....

Regarding the specific reference, first-mention nouns take the indefinite article whereas the second-mention requires the definite article (p. 72):

- 2) *An* intruder has stolen *a* vase;
the intruder stole *the* vase from *a* locked cupboard.

Nevertheless, Hawkins (1978) gives an example where *the* can occur as a successful first-mention (p. 131):

- 3) What's wrong with Bill? Oh, *the woman he went out with last night* was nasty to him.

Hawkins (1978) names this type of a relative clause a 'referent-establishing relative clause' since it establishes a definite referent for the hearer without the need for previous mention. Eastwood (2009) refers to this category as '*The* with noun + phrase', and in this context *the* is

used because a phrase or clause that comes after the noun shows which one is meant (p.198).
The is used when something is unique in the context (Eastwood, 2009, p.198):

4) *The* Prime Minister is very popular. (The country has only one PM.)

However, if the clause does not give enough information to show which one is meant, we use *a/an*, as Eastwood (2009, p. 198) showed in the following example:

5) We live in *a* house overlooking the park.

We cannot use *the* if there are houses also overlooking the park.

Regarding the specific reference, many count nouns in abstract or specialized use take the zero article. It is mainly in idiomatic expressions (Quirk & Greenbaum, 1973, p. 73)

6) go by car	<i>but</i>	sit in <i>the</i> car
be in bed		make <i>the</i> bed
go to school		go into the school (a building)
(an institution)		

Intensive relation is also mentioned in Quirk and Greenbaum's grammar (1973. p. 75). The count noun complement in an intensive relation requires the definite or indefinite article. If the reference is indefinite, the indefinite article is used:

7) John became a businessman.

Definite reference requires the definite article:

8) John became the genius of the family.

In this section we gave several examples of article usage in order to explain the basic function and role of articles. In the next section we will examine the notions that lie behind the usage of the definite and indefinite article.

3. Definiteness and indefiniteness

In this section we will discuss the notions of definiteness, indefiniteness and specificity in order to see their relation to the English article system. Afterwards, we will investigate how Croatian language expresses these concepts.

3.1 Definiteness

Definiteness is a universal cognitive concept, which in some languages can be signalled by the use of definite articles (Trenkić, 2008). It includes the category of the hearer, i.e. a discourse referent is definite if the speaker intends to refer to it, and expects the referent to be uniquely identifiable to the hearer, too (Trenkić, 2008, p 4). The prototypical marker of definiteness in English is definite article *the*. However, plural and mass generics, which are pragmatically definite, are grammatically non-definite. Let's observe the following examples (Trenkić, 2008, p.4):

9a) I saw a cat. I gave *the* cat some milk.

9b) *The* winner of this tournament will receive a prize.

9c) I like cheese.

Trenkić (2008) proposes that when a language acquires a definite article, it is at first restricted to some areas of identifiability and only gradually expands from there. This absence of one-to-one correspondence between definite contexts and overt definiteness marking may present a particular difficulty in second language learning.

Indefinite article is usually perceived as an opposite of definite article but many linguists disagree. According to Chesterman (1991) they are not diametrically opposite concepts, while Hawkins and Lyons believe that indefinite article signals indefiniteness only indirectly, by the fact that the definite article did not occur (1973, 1991 as cited in Trenkić, 2008). Christopher Lyons (1999) claims that definite-indefinite distinction is not always expressed in noun phrases with an article, e.g. *this house* would usually be judged to be definite and *several houses* indefinite (1999, p. 2). He refers to the noun phrases with the presence of an article as simple definites and indefinites. Lyons (1999, p. 2) analyses definites through the categories of 1) familiarity and identifiability and 2) uniqueness and inclusiveness. Familiarity and identifiability are represented in the following examples:

10a) I bought *a* car this morning.

10b) I bought *the* car this morning.

The car in (10a) is clear (familiar) to the hearer as well as the speaker, whereas in *the car* in (10b) the speaker is aware of what is being referred and the hearer is probably not:

Hawkins (1978 as cited in Lyons 1999, p.3) wrote a lot about familiarity hypothesis and we will mention only some contexts where definiteness is elaborated. For instance:

11a) Put these clean towels in the bathroom please.

11b) The moon was very bright last night.

11c) An elegant, dark-haired woman, a well-dressed man with dark glasses, and two children entered the compartment. I immediately recognized the woman. The children also looked vaguely familiar.

11d) The fact that you've known them for years is no excuse.

Both examples show situational uses of *the* – in (11a) the hearer must realize that the reference is to the bathroom of that house, i.e. the house represents the situation, whereas in (11b) the situation is the whole world or as Lyons says ‘familiarity stems from general knowledge (1999, p. 4). Example (11c) represents anaphoric *the*. The woman and the children are not familiar from the physical situation, but from the linguistic context – they have been mentioned before. In (11d) the clause *that you've known them for years* follows the definite NP and answers to the question which/what fact. The familiarity of the fact consists of its association with the succeeding information (cataphoric use).

Lyons (1999) adds the categories of uniqueness and inclusiveness for contexts where identifiability cannot account for the use of the definite article (p.8).

12) I've just been to a wedding. The bride wore blue.

Although the bride associated with the wedding, the hearer would not be able to identify the bride, maybe not even recognise it in the street. This is an example of uniqueness: the definite article signals that there is just one bride at the wedding which triggers the association (Lyons, 1999, p. 8).

Indefiniteness is expressed through the article *a*, but there are also indefinites that do not contain indefinite article, e.g. cardinality (Lyons, 1999, p. 33):

13) Pass me those three books.

At this moment, we find important to say that Lyons classifies *a* and *some* ('sm') as cardinality expressions (1999, p.34). The problem comes when we realize that cardinals (i.e. numbers) occur normally with articles (the one house), which is not the case with *a* (**the a house*). Lyons believes the possible explanation could be that *a* is an unstressed form of *one* (1999, p.35).

3.2 Specificity and definiteness

According to the study by Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004), (systematic) errors of article misuse in L2- English result from the association of *the* with the feature [+specific] rather than the feature [+definite]. We find important to concentrate on both, since their analysis gives us insight into the nature of articles, as well as the reason for potential difficulties of L2 English learners. The features [+definite] and [+specific] are related to the mind (knowledge) of the speaker and/or of the hearer in the discourse (Ionin, Ko, Wexler, 2004). Chesterman (1991) claims that a definite NP has a referent which is assumed by the speaker to be unambiguously identifiable by the hearer (a known or identifiable referent); and an indefinite NP has a referent which is assumed by the speaker not to be unambiguously identifiable by the hearer (new or unknown referent). Definiteness and indefiniteness may include the concepts of identifiability, familiarity, inclusiveness/exclusiveness, and countability/uncountability (Lyons 1999, Chesterman 1991, J. Hawkins 1978 as cited in Zergollern-Miletić, 2008).

Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004) argue that specificity distinction can be achieved (or not) in both definite and indefinite contexts (p.10):

14a) I'd like to talk to the winner of today's race – she is my best friend.

14b) I'd like to talk to the winner of today's race – whoever that is; I'm writing a story about this race for the newspaper.

In (14 a) the speaker refers to a particular individual – the speaker's best friend, but in (14 b) the speaker is not referring to a particular individual, which means that the condition on specificity is not satisfied.

We find that it is important for L2 English learners to raise awareness on English article system in order to understand the functional use of articles and their semantic background. The notion of definiteness, and especially specificity, is sometimes disregarded in the process

of both teaching and acquiring English article system, so L2 learners do not always get the appropriate input, i.e. article system becomes difficult to acquire due to insufficient focus on in/definiteness as categories essential for understanding what article is. As a universal and pragmatic concept, definiteness is present in Croatian language as well.

3.3 Definiteness in Croatian

If definiteness is a universal concept then all nations possess the same logical categories in their conceptual systems, but express them in different ways. In language, we talk about grammatical, semantic and pragmatic categories. English for example has a grammatical category, i.e. definiteness is expressed in separate words that are called articles. Croatian is an articleless [- ART] language, however it would be wrong to say that definiteness as a language universal is not found in Croatian. Many linguists and grammarians have written about in/definiteness in Croatian, for example Silić (1992-1993), Kordić (1995). We often refer to Trenkić (2008, 2007, 2004), who has extensively written about articles in Serbian, because Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian, although separate languages, show the same features regarding in/definiteness. Since definiteness is not stated explicitly in Croatian (unlike English), there have frequently been opposite views on what Croatian determiners are and whether they can be considered as equivalents of English determiners. We find that it is not essential for our study to go into details of these disputes. Our concern is to represent the most common semantic equivalents of English articles in Croatian. Accordingly, we have decided to follow the patterns of Zergollern-Miletić (2008) and Ćulinović (2010), who, we believe, have given a very systematic overview of in/definiteness in Croatian.

Ćulinović (2010) explains that definiteness in Croatian is expressed in the following three ways: pragmatically by an information structure (theme-rheme), lexico-semantically by demonstratives and morphologically by definite/indefinite adjectives (p.9).

3.3.1 Word order

Words in a Croatian sentence are grammatically marked. This means that a word 'opens a place' for another in the sentence (Barić, 1997, p. 583). Precisely for this reason, word order

in Croatian is relatively free. Words can change place within the sentence without a relationship between the constituents being changed. We must mention that there is a rule in Croatian that a theme (old information) occupies the first place in a sentence, and a rheme (new information) comes afterwards (Barić, 1997, p.583). However, the meaning can be grasped even if the words occupy different place, as in Barić's examples (1997, p. 583):

15a) Dječak čita knjigu (A boy is reading the book.)
S V O

15b) Knjigu čita dječak. (The book is being read by a boy.)
Book –Acc. is reading boy-N.

If one asks a question 'Who is reading a book?', where book is old information, the answer would be:

15c) Knjigu čita dječak. (The book is being read by a boy.)

Due to a free word order, one can also say:

15d) Dječak čita knjigu. (A boy is reading a book.)

Even though new information is positioned initially, the meaning remains unchanged.

3.3.2 Definite and indefinite adjectives

Zergollern-Miletić (2008) claims that the category of in/definiteness is usually related with Croatian definite (long) and indefinite (short) adjectives (p. 84). In Croatian adjectives take different forms if they refer to something indefinite (*lijep čovjek*) or definite (*lijepi čovjek*). Indefinite adjectives (*neodređeni vid*) refer to the changeable characteristics of the nouns and they answer the question *kakav* (what kind) – *lijep dan, oštar nož* (Barić, 1997, p. 174), whereas definite adjectives (*određeni vid*) express a permanent characteristic of a noun or a particular characteristic that is in question. Zergollern-Miletić (2008) says that indefinite adjectives "qualify" what a noun denotes while definite adjectives "identify" (p. 82). They answer the question *koji* (which one). Indefinite adjectives are usually translated with indefinite articles while definite adjectives correspond to definite articles.

16a) Indefinite (*neodređeni*): Kupio sam jedan šešir **smeđ** i jedan **siv**. I bought **a brown hat** and **a grey hat**. (Barić, Lončarić et al., 1997 as cited in Zergollern-Miletić, 2008,

p.82)

16b) Definite (određeni): *Smeđi sam brzo izgubio, sivi nosim I danas. I lost the brown hat, the grey hat I still have today.* (Barić, Lončarić et al., 1997 as cited in Zergollern-Miletić, 2008, p.82)

Although some contexts require only one form of adjectives, the lines between in/definite adjectives are sometimes blurred. Zergollern-Miletić (2008) emphasizes that in everyday speaking and writing the difference between the two adjectives remains unexpressed. Likewise, when talking about familiarity and uniqueness expressed with in/definite adjectives, Zergollern-Miletić (2008) criticizes Croatian grammars for giving only few examples that are frequently taken from literature so they sound unnatural to the native speakers (p. 90).

3.3.3 Demonstrative pronouns

Apart from adjectives, another form of expressing definiteness in Croatian is through demonstrative pronouns *ovaj, taj* and *onaj*. They are similar to English demonstrative pronouns *this* and *that*, for they have deictic function and express definiteness (Trenkić, 2008). Zergollern-Miletić (2008) believes that definiteness is not directly expressed in Croatian, but when it is, demonstrative pronouns should be used (p.93):

17) Give me *the* book.- Daj mi (*tu*) knjigu.

However, this does not imply that demonstrative pronouns are translation equivalents of the English articles. Trenkić (2004) conducted an interesting study to examine the claim that the semantic domain of reference of Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian demonstratives could be wider than that of their English counterparts because they cover part of the domain of the English definite article. The results showed very similar percentage of demonstrative pronouns use for both languages which proves that Serbian demonstrative pronouns do not cover the referential field of English definite article. Respectively, Zergollern-Miletić (2008) concludes that Trenkić's study (2004) is applicable to Croatian and provides us with an example where definite article cannot be translated with Croatian demonstrative pronoun; neither can demonstrative pronoun be employed in English (p. 93):

18a) This is *the/that* (?) man who kicked my dog.

18b) To je *taj* (?) čovjek koji je udario mog psa.

3.3.4 Indefinite pronouns

Indefiniteness in Croatian is expressed with indefinite pronouns and quantifier *one*. Some Croatian linguists claim that the word *one* is an equivalent of English indefinite article, which would mean that Croatian language has articles (Silić, 1992-1993 as cited in Kordić, 1995, p. 98). The following examples (19, 20) are given by Zergollern-Miletić (2008, p. 94):

19) Ušao je neki/jedan čovjek. (A man came in.)

Determiners *jedan* (*one*) and *neki* (*some*) are most frequently used in indefinite contexts, thus they contribute to non-restrictiveness of a sentence (Kordić, 1995, p.100). Probably for this reason, Kordić (1995, 1995, p.100) mentions them as equivalents of Croatian *izvjesni*, fr. *un certain*, ger. *ein gewisser*.

20) U nekom seocu, koje se nalazi nedaleko od Napulja... (In a village not far from Naples...)

Some linguists/grammarians claim that quantifiers *neki* and *jedan* could be regarded as indefinite articles (Šarić, 2002 as cited in Zergollern-Miletić, 2008, p. 99) or that *jedan* is a Croatian equivalent of indefinite article (Silić 1992-1993 as cited in Zergollern- Miletić, 2008, p.97). Nevertheless, Zergollern-Miletić (2008) concludes that neither *neki* (*some*) nor *jedan* (*some*) can be regarded as articles and states that there is no word in Croatian that can be regarded as an article (p. 98).

To sum up, linguists agree that definiteness and indefiniteness exist in Croatian (Bosnian and Serbian). The question that remains subject to many discussions is whether we can say that Croatian language has a system of articles. We may conclude that Zergollern-Miletić (2008) and Trenkić (2004) reject this idea.

4. Acquisition of articles: preview research

In this section we will give a brief representation of the research related to the process of acquiring L2 article system. First, we will focus on the study by Ionin, Ko & Wexler (2004) that enables us to further understand the research on L2 article acquisition. Afterwards, we will present two studies – by Zdorenko & Paradis (2008) and Ionin et al. (2009) – that refer to the acquisition of articles in child second language English.

4.1. Fluctuation Hypothesis

Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004) claim that articles in general encode [+ definite] and [+ specific] features. English, unlike Samoan that was part of their research study, encodes definiteness, i.e. Standard English has no marker for the [+ specific] feature in its article system. It has two articles, *the* and *a*, which are used in [+ definite] and [- definite] contexts, regardless of specificity. They established a semantic parameter that is called Article Choice Parameter in order to show that L2-learners have access to both settings of that parameter. The most interesting finding of their study is the identification of two most frequent errors in adult L2-English learners with article-less L1 (Russian and Korean): overuse of *the* in indefinite contexts and overuse of *a* in definite contexts. These two errors are considered to be due to the feature [+ specific]. Ionin et al (2004) argue: 1) L2-learners have full access to UG principles and parameter settings, 2) L2-learners fluctuate between different parameter settings until the input leads them to set the parameter to the appropriate value (p. 20). Furthermore, they claim that L2-learners' errors are not random, but rather systematic. L2 learners can fluctuate between L1 and L2 settings, but also they show access to parameter settings that are present in neither their L1 nor their L2. However, their study is focused only on those learners whose L1 does not have any setting of the relevant parameter. Therefore, if (as in number 1) L2 learners have full UG access, they have access to all parameter settings, which means that they would fluctuate between possible parameter settings, or, as Ionin et al. (2004) conclude: "some of the time, they should divide articles on the basis of definiteness, and some of the time, they should divide articles on the basis of specificity. With sufficient input, the learners may succeed in setting the Article Choice Parameter to the appropriate setting for English, and divide articles on the basis of definiteness only" (p.23). As we have mentioned earlier, the most frequent misuse of articles by L2-learners occurs in those contexts where definiteness and specificity are in opposition. Ionin et al.' research (2004) showed the same: L2-English learners show no difficulties when using *the* with definites which are [+ specific], including previous-mention definites, but they overuse *a* with definites that they consider [- specific]. Obviously, L2-English learners associate *the* with the feature [+ specific], rather than with the feature [+ definite]. At this moment, it is essential that we clarify Ionin et al.'s (2004) view on specificity. They dispute Huebner's and Thomas' (1983,1989, as cited in Ionin et al., 2004, p. 48) views on specificity as 'wide scope' because, in that case, L2-learners who apparently associate *the* with specificity, should overuse *the* with all wide-scope indefinites. However, that is not what Ionin et al.'s study (2004) demonstrated. In the following two examples, both [- definite], the distribution of *the* article is quite different (p. 49):

21a) [- definite, + specific]

I am visiting (a, the, --) friend from college – his name is Sam Bolton, and he lives in Cambridge now.

21b) [- definite, - specific]

He is staying with (a, the, --) friend – but I have no idea who that is.

Russian speakers used *the* 37% of the time in contexts such as (21a) and only 9% in contexts such as (21b). Likewise, Koreans supplied *the* more frequently in context (21a) - (17%) than in context (21b) - (2%). Context (21a) is an example of *specificity as speaker intent to refer* (1. Sam Bolton, 2. Lives in Cambridge now), while in context (21b) the speaker does not intend to refer to a particular friend (having no knowledge of this friend's identity) (Ionin et al., 2004).

Ionin et al.'s research study (2004) gave a very useful insight into the mindset of L2- learners when acquiring English article system as well as detailed explanation of the most frequent types of errors that uphold the Fluctuation Hypothesis. They fluctuate between the overuse of *the* with indefinites and overuse of *a* with definites due to the association of *the* with the feature [+ specific], until the input leads them to set the Article Choice Parameter to the appropriate value – the definiteness value. We have to note that Trenkić (2008, p. 14) disagrees with the Fluctuation Hypothesis; her study found no evidence that specificity plays a part in L2 article choices. Actually, Trenkić (2008) proposes that the kind of specificity where the speaker thinks of a particular entity or an arbitrary member of a class was not present in her study. It was misrepresentation of articles as adjectives.

4.2. Comparison between children and adults in article acquisition

Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) conducted a study with 17 L2-English children from different L1s over the period of two years, using an oral elicitation task with picture books. Their results showed overuse of *the* with indefinites from both article-less L1s and L1s which have articles. They also found that the rates of *the* overuse decreased as the children's exposure to English increased. Their study that included 17 English L2 children with L1s without in/definite articles (Chinese, Korean, Japanese) and L1s with an article system (Spanish,

Romanian, Arabic) showed evidence that omission of articles is an error commonly produced by learners whose L1 is an article-less language.

4.3. Polish, Spanish and Chinese L2 learners of English

First, we will go through the research conducted by Monika Ekiert (2005) on a group of native Polish speakers in order to examine the second language (L2) developmental sequence of article acquisition by adult language learners in two different environments: English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Polish, just like Croatian, is a [- ART] language. Definiteness and indefiniteness are expressed through word order, verbal aspects, and demonstratives. The results showed that participants at all levels of proficiency commonly overused the *zero* article. The low-ability learners, though, had the highest rates. However, the instances of zero overuse were considerably higher than the instances of the overuse of either *a* or *the* at the intermediate-ability level. A significant finding in Ekiert's (2005) data is that learners at the intermediate level of proficiency show increasing accuracy in the use of the indefinite article *a* in non-referential (Type 4) and first mention (Type 3) as well as the phenomenon known as '*the-flooding*.' The high-ability participants in this study show high levels of accuracy in Type 4 and Type 3. However, Type 1 (generics) and Type 5 (idioms) are last to be acquired. Ekiert (2005) claims that the reason for this result lies in the fact that generics are generally rare in the input available to learners, and idioms must be learned as a whole, suggesting that most likely they are acquired as items and not as a system (Butler, 2002 as cited in Ekiert, 2005, p. 17). Overall, Ekiert's study (2005) brought up two interesting conclusions. The first one is that the ESL and EFL participants of similar degrees of proficiency showed very similar abilities regarding the use of English articles. This result supports the claim that there exists a natural sequence in the acquisition of the English article system. The second finding, interesting for our study as well, is the domination of *a* at early stages. This result contradicts the majority of L2 article acquisition studies in which *the* emerges early, and *a* late (Ekiert, 2005, p. 17)

Another interesting research is the one conducted by Ping Chen (2004). In his article, he explores how the pragmatic notion of identifiability is encoded in Chinese, an article-less language. He emphasizes the notion of identifiability being present in Chinese but expressed through three major types of linguistic devices – lexical (determiners), morphological (reduplication of monosyllabic classifiers and occasionally monosyllabic nouns) and

positional (preverbal and postverbal nominal positions). Similar to Croatian, demonstratives take the role of definite article, and *yi* -'one' + classifier develops uses of an indefinite article. His research shows that Chinese does not fully grammaticalize definiteness, i.e. we cannot say that definiteness as a grammatical category exists in Chinese.

In order to see how the Fluctuation Hypothesis functions when applied to an L1 with articles encoding definiteness we will observe the case of the native speakers of Spanish who participated in a study called ‘‘Article Choice in L2 English by Spanish Speakers’’ conducted by Maria del Pilar Garcia Mayo (2009). Except for the Fluctuation Hypothesis the study examines directionality effects, i.e. the observed tendency of L2 speakers to supply *the* more frequently than *a*. Mayo (2009) hypothesized that Spanish learners would not fluctuate between the features [\pm definite] [\pm specific] since they are expressed with morphological markers in Spanish (p. 58). Spanish learners should supply correct use of *the* in all definite categories and accurate use of *a* in all indefinite categories. In this case they would support Ionin et al.'s (2004) claim that transfer overrides fluctuation. They argue if any differences occur among the participants they would be due to their different proficiency level. They expected Spanish L2 learners of English to be more accurate in using the definite article in definite contexts than using the indefinite article in indefinite contexts. Their first hypothesis proved to be right – Spanish learners of English were highly accurate in the supply of both definite and indefinite articles and were unaffected by specificity. Their results supported Ionin et al.'s (2004) claims that transfer overrides fluctuation. The second hypothesis showed unexpected results since low-proficiency learners performed in a native-like way in the [+definite -specific] context. In the [-definite +specific] context the results were as expected- the advanced group supplied more correct articles than the low-intermediate group. Directionality effects were found only in the low-intermediate group but not in the advanced group. Mayo's study (2009) gives evidence that if a native language has a system of articles, it will highly influence the second language acquisition of articles.

4.4. Preview research in Croatian/Serbian/Bosnian

A great deal of research has been done on the acquisition of English articles in Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian (Trenkić, 2008, 2007, 2004; Zergollern-Miletić (2008); Ćulinović (2010); Maslo 2011). All of the studies are relevant for our study because, although separate languages, Trenkić (2004) asserts that Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian express in/definiteness in the same manner. We have discussed all the possibilities of in/definiteness occurrences in

Croatian in the section two so that we would now focus on most common errors in English article production in C/S/B learners. The study by Čulinović (2010, p. 24) showed that B1 Serbo-Croatian learners generally failed to use articles in L2 English. The learners used definite article largely and in majority of instances correctly, especially in those contexts where 'semantic options were not in opposition', such as [+def+spec/-def-spec] as opposed to [+def-spec] (Thomas, 1989, p.340 as cited in Čulinović, 2010, p. 24). Serbo-Croatian learners omitted more articles in Art+N sequences in predicative positions with verbs *be* (attributive) and *have* (referential indefinite), than in NP preceded by adjective (Art+Adj+N), just like in Trenkić's hypothesis (2007 as cited in Čulinović, 2010, p.25). There was much higher percentage of correct article uses in existential sentences with *be* than in existential *have* sentences, the possible reason for this phenomenon lies in learning there *is/are* + sentences as 'chunk' or idiomatic phrases (Thomas 1989, p. 351 as cited in Čulinović, 2010, p.25). Bosnian learners exhibited many problems with generics, i.e. *The telephone is a very useful invention* was written, in the majority of cases, without the definite article (Maslo, 2011, p. 11). Maslo (2011) concludes that the lack of articles in the Bosnian linguistic background is the reason why Bosnian speakers 'don't feel the necessity for the usage of articles' (p.11).

5. The study

5.1 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to see how Croatian learners perceive English article system and what errors they usually exhibit. We were governed by the hypothesis from Trenkić (2004), Čulinović (2010) and Ionin, Ko and Wexler's (2004) studies. Respectively, we were interested in the following questions:

- 1) Do Croatian learners tend to omit articles?
- 2) Do adjectives in Adj+N phrases exert negative influence on the article usage?
- 3) Do Croatian learners fluctuate between the notions of specificity and definiteness, i.e. can our study support the Fluctuation Hypothesis?

5.2 Sample

The sample consisted of 44 participants who were high school graduates in two different schools. Twenty nine participants attended grammar school and fifteen attended vocational (medical) school. They were all around the same age (18). The participants were involved in a research project ‘English Language in Croatia’ that was conducted in autumn 2002 by the professors from the Department of English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Proficiency level	Number of scripts	Number of learners
B1/B2	44	44

5.3 Instruments and procedure

We have analysed 44 essays written by high school participants at the intermediate level of proficiency. Letter writing task was a part of the research project in which participants had to write a 150-word letter to the editor of the magazine and explain why their best friend should get the award for the best friend. The title ‘Award for Best friend of 2002’ was followed by writing instructions that were supposed to be guidelines for their essay. They included: saying who the person is, what the person looks like, what the person does, a story about something they did together and the reason why their friend should get the award.

First, we calculated the number of both definite and indefinite articles that participants used. Afterwards, we counted the number of correct and omitted (missing) articles. We have also found and analysed the type of sentences that were most frequently used. In Table 1 we present all the semantic types and syntactic contexts for appearance of articles in order to exhibit all types of NPs that were found in the participants’ essays. The table is taken from Čulinović’s study (2010) that is based on the studies by Master, Tarone and Parrish, Hawkins and young (1989, 1988, 1978, 1996).

Feature	Environment	Article	Examples from our study
+def-spec	Generic noun	a/the/Ø	We even have the

			<p>same taste in <u>girls</u>.</p> <p>She likes <u>motorbikes</u>.</p> <p>She wants to be <u>a supermodel</u>.</p>
-def-spec	<p>Non-referential nouns</p> <p>Attributive indefinite</p> <p>Non-specific</p>	a, Ø	<p>He is <u>a great friend</u>.</p> <p>She is <u>a very special person</u>.</p> <p>She <u>is</u> still <u>a student</u>.</p> <p>She has a boyfriend almost three years.</p>

-def+spec	Referential indefinites	A	He is <u>a type of man you can always lean on</u> .
+def+spec	<p>Referential definite</p> <p>Previous mention</p> <p>Unique in a given context</p>	The	<p>(She gave me her favourite dress)</p> <p>The dress was beautiful.</p> <p>He was the best in <u>the class</u>.</p> <p>*<u>Teacher</u> was so confused.</p> <p>We got lost this summer in Spain, but we managed to find</p>

	Cataphoric reference		our way back <u>to the hotel</u> .
			I had <u>the pleasure to meet a person who became my best friend</u> .
	Locative clauses		*I have just looked at <u>a picture taken last summer</u> .
			*That picture is <u>on wall</u> in my room.
	Ranking adjectives		It wasn't <u>the first time</u> or <u>the last</u> that he helped me.
			She is <u>the most</u> friendly, carrying person I have ever met.
Proper names		The	*We go <u>on river Drava</u> .
Fixed phrases		The	<u>At the moment</u> he lives in Zagreb.
Fixed phrases		A	We had <u>a great time</u> .
			It is hard for him to <u>have a shower</u> .
			I can tell her everything and she won't <u>say a word</u> of it to anyone.
Fixed phrases		Ø	He <u>plays football</u> .

Table 2: Semantic types and syntactic contexts for appearances of articles

5.4 Results and discussion

5.4.1 Overall results

The 44 participants used altogether 274 articles. That means that an average participant used 6 articles per essay. We used two numbers to show the total number of articles. The first number represents the total number of articles that the participants used and the number in the brackets stands for the total number of articles that should have been used correctly.

	Total number	Correct	Missing	Incorrect
All articles	274 (321)	232/72%	89/28%	42/15%

Table 2: Overall usage of articles

Number of DP's	<i>a</i>	<i>the</i>	Correct <i>A</i>	Correct <i>the</i>	Missing <i>a</i>	Missing % <i>The</i>	Incorrect <i>A</i>	Incorrect <i>the</i>
274 (321)	135 (158)	139 (163)	104/65%	128/79%	54/35%	35/21%	31/23%	11/8%

Table 3: Overall usage of articles the/a

Our study included 44 essays written by 44 participants. The participants were relatively free in choosing their NPs and articles; however due to the same topic of the essay *Award for Best friend of 2002* and the given instructions, we could establish the pattern of the participants' essays, i.e. short sentences and very similar vocabulary. Respectively, we found the most frequent types of errors that will be analysed. In this small-scale study, we decided to show the use of articles by Croatian learners (frequency of correct, omitted and incorrect use). Likewise, we will describe the persistent errors and provide an explanation based on the outcomes of the previous research.

First, our study showed that our learners at the intermediate level of proficiency have a tendency to omit articles. Following Trenkić's hypothesis (2003 as cited in Zergollern-Miletić, 2008) that in the early age articles are omitted and later supplied in a greater extent, Zergollern-Miletić (2008) stresses that all L2 learners, even the most advanced ones, tend to omit articles. Our results are in line with this view because our participants exhibited more omitted than incorrect articles. As expected, indefinite article is omitted more frequently (35% for *a* omissions and 21% for *the* omissions) which is in accordance with the theory that the indefinite article poses greater problems to L2 learners since *the* is 'more direct, framed and logical' (Zergollern-Miletić, 2008, p. 10). Contrary to Ćulinović's (2010) results and to our surprise, we found a large amount of *a* usage (49% for *a* usage, 51 % for *the* usage). We believe this is due to their proficiency level, i.e. they were at the stage where the insecurity about indefinite article production had finished and they started to produce it extensively. As expected, our participants felt more secure about the definite article which was supplied correctly in more contexts (79%) than the indefinite article (65%). The study exhibited interesting data regarding NPs preceded by adjectives. They are in accordance with Trenkić's hypothesis (2008) about L2 learners from article-less languages misanalysing English determiners, including articles, as adjectives. Thirty four (77%) learners used the construction Art+Adj+N, among whom 21 (62%) failed to use an article. We conclude that, in case of Croatian learners, adjectives negatively influenced their article usage, i.e. the participants probably found it redundant to use both an article and an adjective before the NP. Our study showed more articles to be omitted than incorrect. Indefinite article was omitted in 35% of cases and definite article in 21% of cases. This was not surprising because learners whose L1 is an article-less language have a tendency to largely omit articles in all contexts (Ćulinović, 2010, p. 24). However, since our participants were high school graduates who had been learning English in educational settings for at least 8 years, we believe this result indicates their general poor performance in English articles. We will present the participants' errors by the order of their most frequent appearance.

22)[-definite -specific]

He is very good boy. (He is a very good boy)

It was wonderful afternoon. (It was a wonderful afternoon.)

I'm very good friend. (I'm a very good friend.)

She is perfect sister. (She is a perfect sister.)

This is an example of the speaker using the indefinite article to introduce a referent or referents to the speaker (Chesterman 1991, p. 24). The usage of the indefinite article implies that there are also other good boys (Chesterman 1991, p.24), not just *he* (his best friend). Chesterman claims that the definite article could equally be used in this context but the meaning would not remain the same. If we say *He is the good boy*, the property (good boy) becomes 'uniquely determining' or uniquely identifiable. Although we talk about [-definite -specific] context which should not cause trouble to the L2 English learners from article-less languages, the problem lies in their interpretation of the article system, i.e. we agree with Trenkić (2008) when she says that the L2 learners from articleless backgrounds do not supply articles for principally structural reason but misrepresent them as adjectives. Our results support Trenkić's claim when she says that 'Serbian (but Croatian as well) learners omit English articles significantly more when nominals are preceded with adjectives than with non-modified nominals, thus suggesting that articles and adjectives compete for the same (modifier) position in their interlanguage grammar, presumably because no position for articles (DP) could be transferred from their L1' (2004, p. 1425).

23) [+definite -specific]

We helped one girl who lost her parents. (We helped a girl who lost her parents.)

Everybody should have one friend like her. (Everybody should have a friend like her.)

She promised to meet me with one boy I liked. (She promised to meet me with a boy I liked.)

We have already discussed the connection between the numeral *one* and the indefinite article. Since the semantic equivalent of *a* is identical to the equivalent of *one* in many languages e.g. German, French, Turkish (Lyons, 1999, p. 34) and since numeral one is thought by some grammarians to represent an indefinite article in Croatian (see Silić, 1992-1993), it is not

surprising that L2 learners misuse one for the other. In our study 30% of participants employed *one* instead of *a*. We find important to make the learners aware of the cardinality of the numeral *one*, whereas *a* should be contrasted as ‘no more than [+Sg]’ i.e. one has some additional content besides (Lyons, 1999, p. 35). Eastwood offers a wide range of explanations for these ambiguities and we consider them to be well demonstrated (2005, p. 202-203).

24)[-definite +specific]

She has a brown hair. (She has brown hair.)

Ivana has a short black hair. (Ivana has short black hair.)

This type of phrase was present in the majority of essays and to many participants it seemed to cause difficulties or at least confusion. We could perceive *hair* in this context as an ‘inalienable-possession structure’ (Chesterman, 1991, p. 58). At the same time, *hair* is an uncountable noun which should not be preceded by an indefinite article. The only explanation for this type of error is the participants’ inclination to learn by heart the ‘chunks’ of phrases, i.e. verbs *have* and *be* often appear in contexts that require an indefinite article, i.e. as ‘set-existential verbs’ (Chesterman 1991: 56). Possibly they interpreted this type of phrase as similar to *She has a brother* or *She has a car*. These are the instances of ‘the referential use of *a* which implies that there exists at least one other referent that could potentially be referred to by the same expression’ (Chesterman 1991: 56). For this reason the indefinite article is required, not the definite article. However, this context required no article. It remains unclear why the participants failed to take into consideration the uncountable property of the noun *hair*. One could claim that if they had mistaken it for a countable noun, wouldn’t they have used the plural noun instead, i.e. *hairs*? We argue that the participants perceived *hair* in this context as a singular countable noun, although we do not exclude the possibility that *the* or *zero* article sounded strange so they chose *a* as a solution that ‘sounds better.’

25)[+definite +specific]

A boy I want to talk about is my best friend. (The boy I want to talk about is my best friend.)

The NP at the beginning of the sentence is an example of the cataphoric use of the definite article where ‘the referent is identified in a following relative clause’ (Lyons, 1999, p. 162). The indefinite article should not be used in this context, but the participants were not entirely aware of this semantic feature. We believe that the source of this error is the overgeneralization of the first-mention use of the indefinite article, i.e. since the noun boy is mentioned for the first time, the participant thought that it should have been preceded by an indefinite article. We could draw the parallel with the following example:

26)[+definite +specific]

Girls like him, especially Tamara, a girl who is sitting behind him. Girls like him, especially Tamara, the girl who is sitting behind him.

Firstly, the inserted clause exhibits the anaphoric use of the definite article where the referent is identified in the previous clause and secondly, *Tamara* is a proper name, i.e. it should signal that the indefinite article is not an option. Again, we find this to be the type of error based on the interpretation of *Tamara* being introduced for the first time in the text.

27)[-definite -specific]

He is always for the good party. (He is always for a good party)

In the summer we go to swim. (In summer we go to swim.)

The NP *good party* was introduced for the first time so why did the participant use *the* instead of *a*? Although similar to the first example (non-referential indefinite), here we wish to draw attention to abstract nouns since they tend to cause misinterpretation or rather vague understanding among L2 English learners. Using *the* more often than *a* in certain contexts is usually explained as a developmental error which occurs in the first step in article acquisition, since *the* requires ‘less specification’ than *a* (Hawkins 2007, p. 245 as cited in Ćulinović, 2010, p. 24). The sentence above is an example of *a* usage with a singular noun phrase as complement to describing something, especially a phrase with an adjective e.g. *big, beautiful*. (Eastwood, 2005, p. 199). We believe that, without a good knowledge of *a* usage, L2 learners opt for the definite article because they think *the* is applicable to more contexts than *a*, and therefore feel more secure to avoid the indefinite article. Furthermore, Chesterman says that

very few nouns appear to reject *the* in all contexts, two are *nature* (*'flora and fauna'*) and *mankind* (1991, p. 43). Even though the NP was a first-mention countable noun, the property of being abstract may deceive L2 English learners and lead them to wrong conclusions. Additionally, it is possible that the adjective *'good'* was perceived as something that defines the noun or makes it specific, it's hard to tell which one of the two since specificity is often mistaken for definiteness by L2 English learners from article-less languages (Ionin et al., 2004).

Overall, our study exhibited very interesting results. Our participants exhibited almost the same number of the indefinite articles than the definite articles. We find this to be a very positive trend since L2 learners start to produce the indefinite article rather late (Ekiert, 2004). However, they still feel more secure about the definite article because we found a larger amount of the correct article usage with *the* and lower number of its omitted instances. We did not find enough examples of definiteness/specificity opposition in order to support the Fluctuation Hypothesis. This may be due to a small sample and relatively small corpus (i.e. the sentences in essays are rather short, simple and, most important, chosen by the participants, which means that they could have chosen only those structures that they were familiar with). Negative influence of adjectives was present in a great number of essays. Nevertheless, we must mention that the participants showed tendency to overuse the indefinite article (23%) whereas we did not find an excessive use of the definite article (8%). Some cases of the article misuse expose the participants' insecurity and low proficiency in rather simple contexts. We believe this has something to do with articles being generally perceived as *'something that cannot be learnt'*, or as *'something that you simply have an ear for.'* There are two main reasons why we cannot agree with these claims. First, the theory we discussed in the first part confirms that English articles are a logical system and explanations for their usage can be found. Second, our results have shown that certain structures are mastered easily by Croatian learners. For example, our participants rarely failed to use the definite article before the adjective *'best'* as in *'the best friend'*. However, *'She has short hair'* often turned into *'She has a short hair.'* As we have already mentioned, *the* is considered to be *'direct, framed and logical'* (Zergollern-Miletić, 2008, p. 10). Moreover, the first example is easier to understand because the concept of marking *'something/someone better than others'* is present in Croatian as well, e.g. *najbolji* (the best), *najljepši* (the prettiest), *najpametniji* (the smartest). The indefinite article does not have any equivalent in Croatian (except for number

one) which means that L2 learners need to think of strategies to memorize the structures that require the indefinite article. The same happens with more demanding *the*-structures as in example 30. Since these contexts differ from Croatian and require thinking ‘outside’ of the native language, L2 learners usually come up with strategies that facilitate article acquisition. As mentioned in the previous sections, articles should be learnt above the memorize-the-rules level. Although they are function words, they do change the meaning of a particular context. Context-based approach with lots of examples, descriptions, sometimes even comparisons and contrasts with other languages, including the learners’ L1 can be very helpful. We believe that all activities that stimulate learning spontaneously, like reading, watching films, listening to the music, etc., upgrade the level of proficiency.

5.4.2 Comparison between grammar school and vocational (medical) school

Although it was not the primary concern of our study, we were interested in whether the grammar school participants would outperform their peers from the medical school due to their potential better linguistic knowledge that may be the result of numerous factors such as high school admission criteria, higher standards regarding English lessons, the number of lessons, etc. Our study included 44 essays written by 15 participants from vocational (medical) school and 29 grammar school participants. The results showed certain differences between the two schools in favour of grammar school participants.

	<i>Number of participants</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>The</i>	<i>Correct a</i>	<i>Correct the</i>	<i>Missing A</i>	<i>Missing The</i>	<i>Incorrect A</i>	<i>Incorrect the</i>
grammar school	29	107 (109) 3.6	103 (114) 3.4	86/79%	94/82%	23/21%	18/16%	21/19%	9/8%
medical school	15	28 (49) 1.8	36 (49) 2.4	18/37%	34/69%	31/63%	15/31%	10/36%	2/6%

Table 4: Usage of articles *a(n)/the* in grammar and medical school

Table 4 shows much greater supply of both articles in grammar school participants. These results are in accordance with the theoretical findings that L2 learners at higher levels of proficiency feel free to use articles, even if they are not always used correctly. As we expected, grammar school participants supplied more correct indefinite and definite articles and omitted them less frequently. Nevertheless, we must point out that indefinite article is used more frequently in grammar school participants which confirms that they are out of the 'the-flooding' stage and feel ready to tackle with the indefinite article. Both groups produced more incorrect articles with the indefinite article, particularly medical school participants who used it incorrectly in 36 % of cases, whereas they incorrectly used the definite article only in 6% of cases. The most interesting result is very high percentage of omitted indefinite article in the medical school (63%) and very low percentage of correctly used indefinite article (37%). The pattern of the definite article acquisition is similar in both groups but grammar school participants showed to be at more advanced level of proficiency. However, there is a great difference in the use of the indefinite article. Medical school participants showed very low level of proficiency, especially if we take into consideration the nature of the task, i.e. an essay where the participants had a control over their language. For example, omission of the definite article before the superlative (*He is best person*) is a type of mistake that was found only in medical school participants. Finally, grammar school participants exhibited much better overall language (writing) skills regarding their vocabulary, syntax and grammar, including articles.

6. Conclusion

The primary concern of our study was to analyse the use of articles by Croatian learners of English. We were also interested in how Croatian learners understand articles. For this reason we analysed the notions of definiteness and indefiniteness as well as the notion of specificity. The studies we mentioned showed that definiteness is a term we conceptualize in our minds and articles are its grammatical realizations. Since their first language does not grammaticalize definiteness, Croatian learners encounter difficulties when required to produce articles in English. The omission of articles and the type of errors they made led us to conclusion that they do not fully understand what articles mean (misinterpretation of articles as adjectives is a good example). Regarding the process of acquisition, Croatian learners

usually acquire the definite article first and only later they get the grasp of the indefinite article. The participants in our study were high school graduates whose essays were analysed in order to see their level of proficiency regarding the English article system. As expected, our participants showed a tendency to omit articles. Also, adjectives influenced negatively the learners' article production. Due to the relatively small corpus we did not find evidence to support the Fluctuation Hypothesis. Still, the overall results showed some positive trends: the indefinite article was not used significantly less than the definite article, both articles were supplied correctly in the majority of cases and there was no significant tendency to overuse any article. Regarding the comparison between the two schools, grammar school participants outperformed their peers from medical school on all levels.

The reason we focused a lot on the notions of in/definiteness and specificity in our theoretical part is because we hold that understanding the theory facilitates article usage. It can help L2 learners visualize contexts and then decide which article is to be used, if any. Finally, we would like to point out that our study was focused on the production of articles by Croatian learners and the contexts where their article supply was incorrect or omitted. However, we did not go into details on why Croatian learners encounter difficulties when producing them. We hope that in future there would be more research dedicated to the reasons behind the errors they make during the process of the article acquisition.

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Sažetak

U ovom radu nastojali smo prikazati način na koji hrvatski govornici doživljavaju kategoriju člana u engleskom jeziku te kako ga upotrebljavaju dok uče engleski kao strani jezik. U prvih nekoliko poglavlja osvrnuli smo se na teorijske spoznaje, a zatim prikazali istraživanje koje se temelji na pismenim radovima maturanata gimnazije i medicinske škole. Analizirali smo koje članove i u kojim jezičnim situacijama učenici najčešće koriste, kao i vrste pogrešaka koje se pritom pojavljuju. Interpretaciju rezultata potkrijepili smo teorijom.

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