THE ENGLISH ARTICLE SYSTEM AND FARSI SPEAKERS

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ABSTRACT

The significance of the learner's errors has been the focus of many studies in second language acquisition research. This study is an attempt to review some of the issues discussed in SLA research as well as to propose an operational framework for comparing some of the problematic areas of English syntax for Farsi speakers. The study is limited to the comparison of the English article system with its counterpart in Persian. Having compared the two equivalent systems in both languages, the results of an error analysis will be reported and discussed. It will be shown that L1 transfer would most likely happen for Farsi speakers learning the English article system where the NP carrying the article appears in subject position.

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INTRODUCTION

Second language acquisition (SLA) has been the focus of many studies in applied linguistics during the last three decades. The literature in this regard is so rich that it has almost been considered as a separate field from that of applied linguistics. Sharwood Smith (1992), for example, maintains that they are two different disciplines and their relationship is that of two *good friends*. Whether they are friends, sisters, divorced, or separated, the research into the acquisition of L2 can bring fruitful insights to the practitioners engaged in teaching foreign languages.

Amongst important issues in SLA research is the significance of the learner's errors. Where do they come from? Are they due to the transfer of L1 structures/lexicon into the L2, or are they induced due to some interlanguage (IL) grammar? Are the L2 errors the same as the L1 errors? Answering these questions will bring about an understanding of the nature of these errors and their probable causes which in turn may facilitate the practice of second language teaching.

The writer of this paper, like many other practitioners, has for long considered the problems of L2 learners of English, in particular that of Farsi speakers. He has observed that amongst the

problematic areas of English for native Farsi speakers is the acquisition of the English article system: errors persist even in advanced learners and are probably subject to fossilisation. What is peculiar about the article system which makes it so difficult to learn? Is there any specific complexity within the English article system or a contrastive element in Farsi which plays a role in the acquisition of the English article system?

To find out probable explanation(s) for the above questions the following research was formed. We will first begin by reviewing the major theoretical frameworks in the field. Contrastive Analysis (CA) Hypothesis will be discussed followed by the Error Analysis movement and their contributions to the development of Interlanguage Theory. Then we will briefly discuss the acquisition order hypothesis and will revisit the literature for a practical framework of EA. Furthermore, a detailed contrastive analysis of the English article system and its counterpart(s) in Farsi will be put forward. Then, an EA of Farsi speakers will be reported and the results obtained will be analysed. Finally, conclusions are made and suggestions for further research will be proposed.

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

The role of first language has long been considered villain in second language learning, perhaps the main obstacle to successful learning of the target language. The CA hypothesis which held sway over the field of applied linguistics for over two decades took the position that the learner's L1 will interfere with his/her acquisition of L2. The CA hypothesis held that *'where structures in the L1 differed from those in the L2, errors that reflected the structure of the L1 would be produced'* (Dulay et al, 1982:97; Lado, 1957:2). These errors were believed to be due to the influence of the learner's L1 habits on the L2 production and were labelled *'negative transfer'*. On the other hand, if the structures of the two languages were similar, it was predicted that there was an automatic use of the L1 structure in the L2 performance resulting in a correct utterance. The latter process was labelled as *'positive transfer'*. The CA hypothesis was based on the contemporaneous theoretical frameworks in the fields of psychology and linguistics. The hypothesis maintained that language learning, like other forms of learning, was a matter of habit formation. In this behaviouristic view errors were unwanted and had to be avoided. So it was crucial to identify the potential problematic area of the target language for specific learner's L1 background so as to enable the teachers to avoid unwanted utterances before a right set of habits were established.

The theory was so appealing to the researchers and teachers that a large body of data challenging it was ignored for years. Gradually the linguists began looking at real data from language learners. Many of the errors which were found could not be attributed to interference as they resembled errors learners from other language backgrounds made in learning the same language. In fact, as the inquiry extended, most of the CA predicitons were disconfirmed. The challenging data resulting from a decade of psycholinguistic research has revealed: the majority of the learner's grammatical errors do not reflect the learner's L1; there are a number of errors in areas of grammar that are similar in both L1 and L2; learners make grammatical errors which they would not have made had they used the rules of their first language; there are more L1 influence on phonological errors than on grammar errors. In short, attentive teachers and researchers noticed that a great number of student errors could not possibly be traced to the native language of the learner (see Dulay et al, 1982; Schumann and Stenson, 1974).

Error Analysis movement

During the 70s arising from the failur of CA to account for the learner's errors, the applied linguists began to look elsewhere for explanations of interference in SLA. The approach which emerged again followed the lead from the current theories in psychology and linguistics. With the rise of Chomskyan linguistics and Piagetian psychology, errors were viewed in a different way. Errors, in this perspective, are considered to serve two main purposes. They, firstly, provide data from which one can get inferences about the language learning process. Additionally, they indicate *'which part of the target language students have most difficulty producing correctly'* (Dulay et al, 1982:138). The new

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movement tried to follow an inductive approach, that is, to draw inferences concerning difficult areas from studying the actual errors. The analysis of errors, as Corder (1974) suggests, proceeds as follows:1) selection of a corpus of language deciding on the size, medium, and homogeneity of the sample ;2) identification of the sample; 3) classification of the errors; 4) explanation of the causes of errors; and finally evaluation of the errors. Like any other approach, EA has advantages as well as weaknesses. The description of errors, the product aspect of learning, is the advantage of EA in comparison to CA. While CA is prescriptive in nature, the descriptive aspect of EA makes it more plausible as well as acceptable. EA classifies errors according to a directly observable characteristic that each error has. Errors are classified on the basis of the proper linguistic element(s) they lack. For instance, if some elements are omitted from a sentence, the sentence would be classified under the category of *'omission errors'*, if the sequence in which the elements of a sentence are tied to each other is misordered, the sentence would be categorised under *'misorder errors'*, and the like.

While the description of errors is an advantage for EA, the explanation of errors, the determination of the origin(s) of errors, as Dulay et al mention, is an inadequate task being taken care of in EA. The explanation of language acquisition, the process aspect of learning, consits of different factors that are to be fully taken into account. Thus, it is not a straightforward task. The reason is that a particular error does not necessarily have a single source; the sources are multiple. Moreover, the specification of an error is not a descriptive task. Due to this fact, researchers are cautious as far as the explanatory aspect of EA is concerned.

Interlanguage Theory

EA movement paved the way for an *interlanguage theory*. Trying to justify the explanatory aspect of EA, applied linguists found that the majority of errors produced by L2 learners had neither the characteristics of the L1 nor the L2. In addition to that, they found that learners from different L1 backgrounds produced similar types of L2 errors when put in a given contact situation. It seemed that as Corder (1967) had made explicit, a similar *'hypothesis testing'* available for L1 acquisition was also in order when L2 learners tried to approximate the target language system. Corder saw the making of errors as strategy, evidence of learner-internal processing. Thus, errors were not villain in L2 learning, rather they were signs of language internal processing which when put together with hypothesis testing could indicate the improvement towards approximating the target language. This process has been considered to be on an interlanguage (IL) continuum and, as Selinker (1972) suggested, operated in five stages: 1) language transfer; 2) overgeneralisation of target language rules; 3) transfer of training (i. e. rule enters the learner's system as a result of instruction); 4) strategies of L2 learning; and 5) strategies of L2 communication.

As it stands, IL theory seems to account for a wide range of errors. It starts from the early L1 transfer errors and carries on to advanced strategies of L2 communication. However, Selinker also noted that certain learners might never reach the final ideal L2 competence. That is, they do not reach the end of the IL continuum. They stop learning when thier IL contains at least some rules different from those of the target language system. He referred to this as *fossilisation*. IL theory, in short, has three main principles. Firstly, the L2 learner's IL system is permeable, in the sense that rules that constitute the learner's knowledge at any one stage are not fixed, but are open to amendment. Secondly, the L2 learner's IL is constantly changing. That is, there is a constant revision and extension of rules in the process of L2 approximation. Finally, despite the variability of IL, it is possible to detect the rule-based nature of the learner's use of the L2. That means, language-learning is systematic. (see Ellis, 1986:47-63)

Order of Acquisition

The close association of IL theory with the evidence accumulated from EA, especially of learners with different L1 backgrounds, appeared to provide a broad perspective that perhaps SLA was in many ways like L1 acquisition. An examination of this position is outside the scope of this study. What is important about the similarity of L1 and L2 learning processes is the introduction of the *acquisition order*. As it is well-

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known the acquisition of L1 goes through different stages at which certain structures are learnt earlier than others. For example, it is claimed that lexical categories are learnt first by the child acquiring L1: functional categories are acquired much later (i.e. the acquisition of the article system). Is the same order of acquisition which exists for the L1 applicable for the L2 acquisition? The answer is *yes and no*. There are many factors involved in L2 learning such as age, motivation, attitude, experience of the L1 which make the acquisition of one task easier or more difficult. As Dulay et al pinpoint, '*certain structures in English, such as articles, are particularly susceptible to variation across subjects*' (1982:202). That means, if there is a natural or universal order in which L2 learners acquire *certain* syntactic and morphological structures, it varies according to different subjects.

To sum up the discussion of the significance of learner's errors, one may say that the strong version of CA hypothesis which claims to identify the problematic area of the target language is untenable. However, this is not to exclude the possibilities of the L1 interference. Indeed there is evidence for such an interaction. A weak version of the same hypothesis which predicts that *marked* areas of the target language are good candidates for difficulty and are subject to possible transfer of L1 *unmarked* structures is tenable (see Eckman, 1977). Hence, it seems that a contrastive analysis may still be useful for the explanatory aspect of this research.

On the other hand, in order to describe the problematic areas of difficulty in L2 learning, we seem to be in need of an analysis of the learner's errors. By doing EA we can observe the real problems occurring in the learner's utterance and probably identify the IL stage in which s/he is. In this way we, as practitioners, can help our pupil in selecting the right strategy to develop his IL.

CA English vs Persian

As mentioned earlier, among the most common errors of L2 learners of English are errors in the article system. Inappropriate article usage is perhaps one of the most easily noticed markers of '*foreigner language*'. Even learners of many years standing, who are fluent in all other aspects, can be recognized as non-native speakers through occasional inappropriate article (in broader term, '*determiner*') usage. At the same time articles are extremely frequent in English. For example, in one frequency count, the definite article appears in first place and the indefinite article in fourth (see Carroll et al, 1971 cited in Berry, 1991). Many writers have noted that this area of grammar is a source of great difficulty for learners (see Pica, 1984; Willis, 1990). The problem seems to pertain to most learners up to the end of their learning stages, in many cases the acquisition never finalises and remains as a fossilised IL structure. What is specific about the acquisition of the English article system which makes it so difficult to achieve for L2 learners, i.e., Farsi speakers? This research intends to find out explanations for this problem and if possible pinpoint the causes of this difficulty. To do this, it seems that a contrastive analysis of the English article system with its equivalent counterpart(s) in Persian is warranted.

The English article system

Articles are usually divided into definite (**the**) and indefinite (**a** or **an**). Though the morphological forms of the article are very limited, their frequent occurrences in the language cover a variety of functions essential for the syntactic coherence of the discourse.

We will begin our discussion with the definite article. The concept of definiteness has been the subject of a vast number of studies (see Hawkins, 1978). There have been different viewpoints in this regard. However, for the purpose of this paper we will only focus on the core features of the definite article. Halliday and Hassan maintain that,

> '*the definite article has no content. It merely indicates that the item in question is specific and identifiable; that somewhere the information necessary for identifying it is recoverable*' (1976:71).

That is to say, **the** has no independent notional content such as proximity, possession, etc. The '*identifying*' role depends on the circumstances in which it occurs. Circumstances have been classified to different taxonomies. Quirk et al (1985), for example, enumerate eight situational-type occurrences of **the**: immediate situation, larger situation, direct anaphoric

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reference, indirect anaphoric reference, cataphoric reference, sporadic (instituational reference, logical use with certain adjectives and reference to body parts in propositional complements), as well as **the** used in generic sentences and proper names. According to Halliday and Hassan there are two broad functional uses for **the:** endophoric reference to items within the text (cataphoric for forward-pointing, anaphoric for backward-pointing reference); and exophoric reference to items outside the text (reference to particular or unique item(s)/subclass/class in specific situations). A wider classification is proposed by Hawkins based on his *Location Theory*. His category for definite article includes the anaphoric use (signalled by various linguistic devices e.g. direct repetition, use of synonyms, associative anaphora, etc).

The proposal of Hawkins assumes that the referent set is uniquely identifiable by the hearer (or assumed to be so by the speaker) through a complex interaction of various pragmatic parameters. The parameters could be reduced to the knowledges shared by the interlocutors: knowledge of the context, knowledge of the situation/context of utterance, specific localised knowledge, general and schematic knowledge within the wider universe of discourse. A word of caution: the speaker's possession of any of these knowledges does not mean that the learner necessarily has specific previous knowledge of such definite referents, but merely that at the time of utterances/he is assumed by the speakers to have access to sufficient information through reference to the above knowledges to recognise the existence of the referent set, to locate and uniquely identify it within the relevant set of entities or the relevant schematic set. Pragmatic abilities of the interlocutors enable them to apply various types of knowledge. In some cases, this is anaphoric discourse knowledge of some type (e. g. *A girl was attacked as she was playing in a wood near Inverness. **The attack** took place as the girl was...*); in other cases it is knowledge of the immediate situation (e.g. *Open **the window**, please)*, of specific localised knowledge (e. g. *Turn left when you get to **the Inn**, and go along...)*, of wider general and schematic knowledge within the universe of discourse (e.g. *She looked up but was blinded by **the sun**.)*, or combinations of the above, for instance, anaphoric with schematic or localised knowledge (e. g. *I went to a football match last night. **The referee** was hopeless).* In the case of the hearer's lack of knowledge (e.g. *I telephoned the Registrars this morning. **The man I spoke** to was very helpful./ Can you pass me **the letters on that table?/ The end of a holiday** is always **the worse time.)***., the cataphoric element locates the referent so as to avoid uttering unnecessary anaphoric reference to an indefinite NP. There are, of course, more restrictions in the use of **the** which are outside the scope of this essay.

The indefinite article **a** by definition occurs in an indefinite singular NP environment to denote the countability of the noun pharse. This special syntactic distribution of **a**, however, signals an important conceptual meaning such as individuating or particularising. The basic core function of **a** can be stated as: to introduce a single indefinite, individuated entity into the discourse and to relate that entity to the wider general set of entities denoted by the head noun. The use of **a** indicates that there must exist other referents of the same general set that are not included in the particular act of reference. This function is often called its *instantial* use or *specimen of a category* use (Hewson, 1972:87).

The relationship of the single, individuated instance or specimen to the wider general set is determined by the degree of specificity/genericness assigned to the entity by the context of utterance. Thus, when the contextual reference is totally generic, the relationship of single, individuated entity to the general set is foregrounded and can be viewed as that of a stereotype representing an implicit superordinate general class (e.g. ***A kettle** is a device for boiling water.)* In such generic cases, **a + noun** takes on the meaning roughly as *one, representing every one of its class or group*. Where the reference is to a totally specific entity, the relationship of the single, individuated entity to a superordinate general set is in the background. The singleness, individuateness aspect of the reference upermost and the relation-to-set aspect weakest (e.g. *I dropped **a kettle** on my foot this morning).* In such cases, the meaning of **a + noun** might be characterised as *one*, meaning *this particular one of its class or group.* In non-specific and non-

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generic examples, the strength of the relationship of the single individuated entity to the general set varies according to the pragmatic restrictions of the context, sometimes appearing stronger, sometimes weaker, depending on the degree of specificity/genericness assignable to the entity as it is shown in the following examples.

1. *I decided to buy* ***a kettle*** *yesterday.*
2. *Choose* ***a kettle*** *from our range, madam.*
3. *I'll have to buy* ***a kettle*** *when I go shopping.*

Like the definite article there are more restrictions on the use of the indefinite article.

Definiteness / Indefiniteness in Persian

When we study Persian syntax we can observe that there is no definite marker as such, rather there is a kind of specificity *marker*. So in Persian there is a contrast between specific vs non-specific marker. The following diagram illustrates specificity with respect to definite, indefinite, and generic NPs.

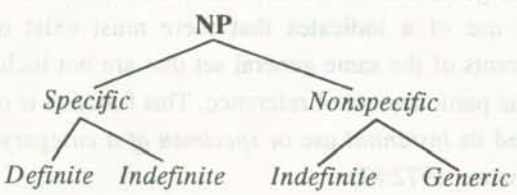

Diagram 1: Specificity / nonspecificity in Persian

As the diagram indicates, definites are always specific, whereas indefinites are ambiguous with respect to specificity. Generics, on the other hand, are always nonspecific.

Specific noun phrases, definite, or indefinitie have one feature in common: they denote a specific individual. In other words, they pick a certain type of individual out of a set of individuals. The difference between the definite NPs and specific indefinite NPs is that the former are presumed to be known to the hearer, whereas the latter are not. The following diagram will help the reader visualise these facts.

Specific	
Indefinite	**Definite**
Known only to the speaker	Known to the speaker and the hearer

Diagram 2: Specificity vs definite / indefinite

The set of indefinite NPs overlaps with the set of specific NPs, as illustrated by the diagram; since only some of the indefinite NPs are specific.

The above diagram also shows that definite NPs are the subset of specific NPs. Karimi (1989) suggests that

> *'universal grammar (UG) has a single category of specific/definite (= presumed known) whose interpretation can differ from language to language, but which may play a role in every language'* (1989:62).

This is due to the fact that every language has either a definite or a specific marker, but not both. For example, Persian, Turkish, Albanian have a specific marker, while English, German, French have a definite marker.

In Persian specificity is usually markerd by a particle called **RA** (or **-o-** the spoken equivalent). Karimi argues that specific NPs in direct object position are always marked by **râ**. She brings a handful of examples and concludes that there is overwhelming evidence suggesting that **râ** is present following a direct object if and only if that NP is specific. The following examples given by Karimi (1989:60-70) should illustrate the point.

First, any relative clause modifying an NP adds to its descriptive content. Therefore, it is set up to favour a specific reading, as in (1).

1. *ketâb-i -ro ke diruz darbâr -aš harfmi-zad -im*
book-REL **-râ** that yesterday about-it talk PRES-hit we
xarid -am
bought I
'I bought the book we were talking about yesterday'

The absence of **râ** from the example in (1) results in an ill-formed string.

Second, **râ** is obligatory when the direct object is a proper noun as in (2). It is well-known that proper nouns are specific.

2. *a. hušang-o did -am* *b. *hušang did -am*
'I saw Hushang'

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Third, **râ** is obligatory when the direct object is pronoun as in (3). Again, it is well-known that pronouns are always specific.

3. *a. un -o did -am b. *un did -am*
   Him/her -râ saw -I
   'I saw him/her'

Fourth, the pronoun **it** translates a pharse followed by **râ**, whereas **one** translates a generic NP.

4. *a. râmin pirhan xarid man ham yeki xarid -am*
   Ramin shirt bought I also one bought -I
   'Ramin bought a shirt, I bought one, too'
   *b. *râmin pirhan xarid man ham un -o xarid -am*
   Ramin shirt bought I also that **-râ** bought I
5. *a. man mi -xâst -am pirhan -e sabz -o be -xar -am*
   I PRES-wanted -I shirt -EZ green **-râ** SUBJ-buy-I
   ammâ ramin un -o zud -tar xarid
   but Ramin it **râ** soon -er bought
   'I wanted to buy the green dress, but Ramin bought it first'
   *b. *man mi-xâst -am pirhan -e sabz -o be -xar -am*
   ammâ râmin yeki zud -tar xarid

The noun pharse *pirhan* **'shirt'** in (4) is generic. Therefore, it may only be replaced by *yeki* **'one'** as in (4a). The pronoun **it** in this case will result in an ill-formed string, as in (4b).

The NP *pirhan-e sabz* **'the green shirt'** in (5), however, is specific. Therefore, **'it'**, not **'one'**, is an appropriate interpretation, as illustrated in (5a) and (5b).

Finally, as one might expect, the presence of **râ** is obligatory when the NP is headed by a demonstrative determiner, since demonstratives always indicate a specific reading. This is illustrated in (6).

6. *a. in sib -o mi -xor -am*
   this apple **râ** PRES -eat -I
   'I eat this apple'
   *b. * in sib mi -xor -am*

The place of a specifier within a noun phrase can be shown as in the following diagram.

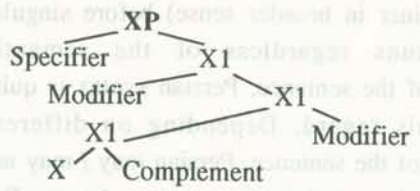

Diagram 3: Specificity marker of the noun phrase

It is interesting to note that since Persian has a free word order, in the sense that the direct object can freely move to the subject position without necessarily changing the voice of the sentence into passive, the specificity marker **râ** will also move to the subject position as in (1), (2), and (3) above. In the cases where the specific NP has a subject function, there would be no specific marker, instead the specificity may be marked by the next modifier in the hierarchy. For example, in the case of anaphoric references the specificity will be marked by means of demonstratives. Where there is cataphoric reference, the specificity is marked by addition of a spoken form **'i'** to the head noun. This specificity marker has different functions as illustrated in (7) and (8).

7. *ketâb -i ke diruz xarid -am*
   book -REL that yesterday bought I
   'The book I bought yesterday'

8. *hagh -i bayân*
   right-EZ expression
   'The right to express'

Where specificity is understood by a wider universe discourse, there would be no specificity marker as in (9).

9. *xoršid bâlâ âmad*
   sun rose
   'The sun rose'

Difiniteness / indefiniteness in Persian, unlike English, is not heavily governed by syntax, rather it is the semantics of the discourse which determines the use of the appropriate specific marker in a given context, if any marker is necessary. As one can observe, unlike English syntax which dictates the use of indefinite

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article (determiner in broader sense) before singular countable nouns regardless of the semantic interpretation of the sentence, Persian syntax is quite flexible in this regard. Depending on different interpretations of the sentence, Persian may / may not use an indefinite marker in a noun phrase. For example, in (4) above *'pirhan'* **shirt** which has, to some extent, a generic sense is used without any indefinite marker. If, however, an indefinite marker is used before the same head noun, it implies a shift of focus on the number of shirts one may have bought as in (10).

10. *râmin yek pirhan xarid*
    Ramin one shirt bought
    'Râmin bought a shirt'

If an indefinite marker is added after the head noun, it implies the greatest indefiniteness of the head noun as in (11).

11. *râmin pirhan -i -xarid*
    Ramin shirt -EZ bought
    'Ramin bought a shirt'

There is a difference between the use of indefinite **-i** in (11) and that of the definite **-i** in (7) and (8). The **-i** in (11) is called *'Yaye vahdat'* which means the sign of singularity and is very frequent in Persian (see Windfuhr, 1979).

Having compared the definite / indefinite structures in English and Persian, one may observe that it is very difficult to apply markedness theory to this area of syntax in the two languages concerned here. Apparently the two languages have different realizations for definiteness. While syntax plays a major role in determination of definite / indefinite markers in English, semantics seems to have the main role in the case of Persian. The analysis can predict that if any L1 transfer happens in the acquisition of the English article system, it would probably occur in structures where the NP carrying the article is placed in subject position. However, one may notice that the CA conducted here can also give us insights about the explanations of the source of difficulty Farsi speakers may face in learning the English article system. For instance, how would different specific referents (e.g. anaphoric, cataphoric, etc) cause difficulty for Farsi speakers? or how might specificity affect the performance of the learners in dealing with the indefinite article? These questions we will shortly come to.

EA of Farsi speakers

Method

In order to analyse the article errors of Farsi speakers it was decided to elicit their errors in a series of tasks. The subjects were 15 postgraduate students studying in Edinburgh and Newcastle in various disciplines. They were all assumed to have an acceptable proficiency in English required by UK universities. However, for the purpose of this research they were categorised as advanced and intermediate learners. Advanced learners were those who at the time of the study had already spent a few years living in UK, while the intermediate group were students who had spent only a year.

A general text concerning education was adapted to serve as two tests (see Appendix). Test 1 was a gap filling test where subjects were required to fill the missing articles. In order to control the general layout of the test, some unnecessary gaps were also created. The subjects were asked to fill the gaps only if it was necessary. The purpose of this test was to lead the students to the potential areas of syntax where articles are plausible so that by consciousness raising see how they could recall the omitted articles. The second test, however, was a kind of error correction task in which the subjects had no cue to the potential area of distortion. Aside from the difficulty format of the second test which has its own effect on the results, the purpose of this test was to see how sensitive the subjects were to the English article system. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate how each item functioned in the discourse of each test as well as their syntactic position.

The tests were given to a native speaker of English and the responses gathered for test 1 showed no variation from the original text. This added to the validity of the tests. That means, the test was assessing some essential factors within the English article system. However, in test 2 they were items which

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Table 1: Specification of articles in test 1

	Definite			Indefinite	
	Anaphoric	Cataphoric	Universal	Specific	Non-spec
Items	* 2 S	5 DO	16 OP	1 PRED	7 ADV
	4 OP	9 S		3 OP	14 OP
	8 S	13 PRED		6 DO	
	10 OP	15 OP			
	11 S				
	12 S				
Total	6	4	1	3	2

*Numbers indicate the sequence of the items in the test

Table 2: Specification of articles in test 2

	Definite			Indefinite		
	Ana.	Cata.	*Inap	Spec.	Non-spec	Inap.
Items	9 S	2 DO	3 PRED	4 OP	1 DO	7 PRED
	13 S	6 PRED	10 S		5 PRED	
	15 S	8 OP	14 OP		12 DO	
	16 DO	11 OP				
Total	4	4	3	1	3	1

* Inappropriate use of article
DO: direct object S: subject OP: object of preposition
PRED: predicate ADV: adverb

according to the native speaker were acceptable in their present form. It was decided to exclude the problematic items 7 and 13 from the analysis of results in test 2. The tests were, then, administered to the subjects and the responses were gathered for analysis.

Results

Tables 3 and 4 demonstrate how each group scored on the tests.

Other important results are as follows. The mean percentages of correct responses in test 1 are 48 and 77 for intermediate and advanced groups respectively.

Discussion

Table 3 reveals interesting results. It apears that the definite NP which required universal knowledge was the least problematic area for all the subjects. This is a clear evidence that Persian syntax was not a factor since the Persian equivalent does not require any specificity marker as is shown in (9) above. Perhaps the fact that Persian specificity depends on a large extent on the semantics of the discourse had its effect on the identification of this definite entity. Moreover, advanced learners identified more cataphoric references than anaphoric ones (%82 / %66), while intermediate subjects did the opposite (%31 / %40), though the difference for the latter does not seem to be significant. It is apparent that advanced subjects had more experience in English so they could gather more information from the immediate discourse available to them. An observation of the data reveals that the majority of anaphoric references were, in fact, in subject position. As mentioned before, Persian does not

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Table 3: Correct responses to each category in test 1

	Definite			Indefinite	
	Anaphoric	Cataphoric	Universal	Spec.	Non-spec
ADV	28	23	7	18	10
%	66	82	100	86	72
INT	19	10	6	16	7

*Numbers indicate the sequence of the items in the test

	Definite			Indefinite	
	Anaphoric	Cataphoric	Universal	Spec.	Non-spec
%	40	31	75	66	44

ADV: Advanced subjects INT: intermediate subjects
% : percentage of correct responses

Table 4: Correct responses to each category in test 2

	Definite			Indefinite	
	ana.	cata.	iapar.	Spec.	Non-spec
ADV	13	17	4	0	12
%	46	25	19	0	57
INT	1	0	4	2	2
%	3	0	17	25	8

usually use a written specifier in this position, instead there is a tendency to use demonstratives (the second category in diagram 3). Interestingly, a number of students had used demonstratives in this position which may indicate a transfer from their L1.

In studying the indefinite categories we find that specific entities were more identifiable, the second least problematic area. The contexts of these NPs reveal that they are all related to members and groups of people. The Persian equivalent structure would also use a specific marker suggesting that perhaps positive transfer was in order.

The results of table 4, however, should be viewed with some caution. The method of the test may foreshadow the results due to the psychological factors in the structure of the test. Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising to observe that intermediate subjects failed to a great extent in responding to this test; few could detect the errors. Those who did found specific indefinite article easier. The advanced students, on the contrary, found nonspecific indefinite articles least problematic. They, furthermore, did better on identification of cataphoric errors than that of anaphoric. Since the results of this test are foreshadowed by the test method, further analysis does not seem to be warranted. Nevertheless, test 2 demonstrates the point that the English article system is a hidden problematic area from the view point of the learners.

Conclusion

We began our study by questioning the significance of the learner's errors in L2 acquisition. Several frameworks were reviewed in this regard. We argued that no single available theory can account for the causes of the learner's errors. It was proposed that a combination of CA and an analysis of the learner's errors might be illuminating in this research. Based on

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CA of English and Persian it was found that the two languages differ from one another in that the former uses definite markers, while the latter uses specific marker. It was also illustrated that syntax has a major role in the use of definite marker in English, whereas semantics has that role in Persian. It was predicted that if any transfer of L1 were to occur, it would most likely happen where the NP carrying the article appear in subject position.

The analysis of subjects' performance on two article elicitation tasks suggested that Farsi L2 learners of English had problems identifying the English definite marker when it was in subject position. It was also found that depending on the distance of specific references from the immediate context of the NP, subjects behaved differently.

Any attempt to generalise from the findings of this limited study should be taken cautiously. Since there was no strong hypothesis in the research, no significance test was applied. Therefore, the conclusions will be restricted to the behaviour of intact group concerned here. A further research may follow the same procedures adopted here but with a wider population and varieties of tasks. It must use tests of significance if further generalisation is intended. A further question could be how different categories are recognisable by learners acquiring the article system.

The findings of this research, however, once again supported the idea that the aquisition of the English article system is delayed for most L2 learners until the very final stages of learning.

Appendix

Instructions

PART A: Here is a small passage. Some words have been taken out of it. You must decide what goes in each blank. 1) Before you wirte anything, read the passage quickly. 2) Then read it carefully and write a word in each blank *only if it is necessary*. The word must fit the sentence. Write only **ONE** word. 3) When you finish, read over the passage again to see if all your words fit.

Education otherwise

Education otherwise is ... support group for families who ... teach their children out of school ... group, which was started in 1977 by ... small group of parents, wants to ... encourage alternatives to ... school system, and to encourage parents to be responsible for their children's education. It also believes that children should have ... right to express opinions about their own education.

Education otherwise has ... membership of 1200 families. This is double what it was two years ago and it gets 200 enquiries ... month from parents who are thinking about education their children at ... home. Jane Everdell, ... enquiries secretary, thinks that ... actual number of children learning out of school is far higher than the membership of ... organization: 'We lose about 20% of our membership every year, not because ... children go back to school, but because ... families no longer need us. We estimate that there must be 6000-8000 children in ... Britain who are begin educated out of school.'

According to *Education otherwise,* there are several reasons why parents keep their children out of school. Some have strong philosophical or religious objections to .... schools; some think their children are not doing well enough academically. Others think it is ... only answer to ... particular problem, like bullying. In addition, parents are becoming aware of ... effects of government cuts in education spending. In ... past parents took their children out of school when there was a particularly serious problem. Now more parents are choosing quite deliberately to teach their children at home.

PART B: This is the continuation of the previous passage. As you read you will find some grammatical mistakes. 1) Underline the errors. 2) Add your correction at the top of each word.

Example: *Many members thinks that way of teaching ...*

You should write: *Many members* ***thinks*** *that* ***way*** *of teaching ...*

Many members thinks that teaching children only at home is not ideal. They would like to see system of schooling that involves the parents and considers wishes and feelings of children. An alternative school which includes these ideas is the Kirkdale School in South London. It was started in 1956 as self-help co-

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operative of parents, some of whom were teachers, who wanted their children's school to be 'extension of home'. Its main principles are loving relationships, curiosity as motivation for learning, and a self regulation as only form of discipline. School has no head teacher, no compulsory lessons, and uses no punishments. The Kirkdal usually has about 30 puplis, between ages of 3 1/2 and 12, and has the ratio of one teacher to every eight puplis. Parents are involved in every aspect of the school, from the teaching and management, to cleaning. The children have a full say in what they do. Some of parents use school in combination with home learning.

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