

# There Aren't Many Difficulties with Definiteness: Negative Existentials in the L2 English of Turkish and Russian Speakers

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## 1. Introduction

It has long been noted that second language learners and speakers (henceforth, L2ers) have problems in acquiring article systems, particularly in the case of L2ers whose mother tongues (L1s) lack articles (e.g., Huebner, 1985; Robertson, 2000; Thomas, 1989; see also papers in Garcia-Mayo & Hawkins, 2009). A variety of production errors have been reported. These include omission of articles in contexts in which they are required (see (1a)), as well as inappropriate patterns of suppliance, such as substitution of definites for indefinites (see (1b)) or vice versa, and oversuppliance in contexts where no article would be required, for example with indefinite mass nouns, abstract nouns or plurals (see (1c)).

- (1) a. And she made phone call to someone.  
b. She take the bath.  
c. I was like in the Space.

There have been a number of suggestions that at least some of these error types are the result of problems relating to how, if at all, a [ $\pm$ definiteness] feature is represented in the interlanguage grammar. For example, there have been suggestions that: (i) L2ers whose L1s lack articles fluctuate between definiteness or specificity as the feature that determines article choice in the L2 (e.g., Ionin, Ko, & Wexler, 2004); or (ii) permanent morphosyntactic deficits are implicated in cases where the L2 realizes an uninterpretable definiteness feature not found in the L1 (e.g., Tsimpli & Mastropavlou, 2008).

In contrast, in this paper, we show that English L2ers can achieve native-like restrictions on definiteness in existential constructions, suggesting no representational deficit as far as this feature is concerned. We focus on the so-called Definiteness Effect (DE) (Milsark, 1977, amongst others). We investigate unconscious knowledge of this restriction on the part of Turkish-speaking and Russian-speaking learners of English, comparing the performance of the L2ers to the performance of native speakers of English. We also examine the performance of Turkish and Russian speakers judging their mother tongues. We show that L2ers' treatment of English accords with the behaviour of English native speakers rather than with the behaviour of Turkish or Russian native speakers.

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## 2. The Definiteness Effect in English, Turkish and Russian

Definiteness in English DPs is realized by means of articles, as well as other determiners, such as demonstratives, possessives, quantifiers and numerals; in addition, proper names and pronouns are definite. In the case of the English existential *there*-insertion construction, there is a restriction, such that indefinite DPs are permitted while definite expressions are excluded. This applies to articles (compare (2a) and (2b)), as well as other determiners (compare (2c) and (2d)). The restriction also applies in the case of negative existentials, as can be seen by comparing (2e) and (2f).

- (2) a. There seems to be a fly in my soup.  
 b. \*There seems to be the fly in my soup.  
 c. There are some flies in my soup.  
 d. \*There is every fly in my soup.  
 e. There isn't a fly in my soup.  
 f. \*There isn't the fly in my soup.

Milsark (1977) distinguishes between weak versus strong expressions and argues that this distinction lies at the heart of the restriction on definiteness: only weak expressions can occur in the existential *there* construction.<sup>1</sup> Definite DPs are classed as strong, whereas indefinite DPs are weak.

There are cross-linguistic differences in how definiteness is realized. Turkish and Russian, the L1s in the studies reported below, differ from English in various respects. Firstly, these languages do not express a definiteness contrast via articles. Turkish is a language that has an indefinite article (unstressed *bir*) but no definite article, while Russian has no articles at all. As illustrated in (2c) and (2d), realization of the weak versus strong distinction in English is not limited to the article system; definiteness can be expressed by means of other determiners. The same is true in languages lacking articles, which nevertheless show definiteness restrictions. Secondly, Turkish and Russian, unlike English, permit definite expressions in negative existentials, as described below.

Turkish is a null subject language, with no overt expletives. In Turkish, the existential verb in affirmative cases is *var* ('exist'), whereas negative existentials are expressed by means of *yok* ('not exist'). As is the case for English, affirmative existentials observe a restriction against definite expressions, only weak determiners being permitted (Enç, 1991), as can be seen by comparing (3a) and (3b).

- (3) a. Bahçe-de bir çocuk var.  
 garden-LOC a child exist  
 'There is a child in the garden.'  
 b. \*Bahçe-de her çocuk var.  
 garden-LOC every child exist  
 'There is every child in the garden.'

However, Turkish, unlike English, does not show a definite/indefinite contrast in negative existentials. Instead, both indefinite and definite DPs are grammatical, as shown in (4a) and (4b).

- (4) a. Bahçe-de çok ağaç yok  
 garden-LOC many tree not-exist  
 'There aren't many trees in the garden.'

<sup>1</sup> There are certain exceptions, including cases which are definite in form but indefinite in meaning, as in (i) and (ii). We do not investigate such cases.

(i) There was the most amazing animal at the zoo.

(ii) There was every reason to be surprised.

- b. Tören-de her ülke yok  
 ceremony-LOC every country not-exist  
 'There isn't every country in the ceremony.'

Russian, like Turkish, is a null subject language, with no overt expletives. Russian also has a single form *net* to express non-existence which differs from the form used in affirmatives, namely *est'*. Existentials in Russian pattern like those in Turkish: affirmative existentials show a DE, as can be seen by comparing (5a) and (5b), while negative existentials show no such restriction. Both (5c) and (5d) are grammatical, even though the DP is definite in the latter case (see Beaver, Francez, & Levinson, 2005; Borschev & Partee, 1998; Padučeva, 2000, amongst others).

- (5) a. V ofise est' kakoj-to koshelek.  
 in office exist some-NOM purse-NOM  
 'There is some purse in the office.'
- b. \*V ofise est' tvoj koshelek.  
 in office exist your-NOM purse-NOM  
 'There is your purse in the office.'
- c. V ofise net nikakogo koshel'ka.  
 in office not-exist no-GEN purse-GEN  
 'There isn't any purse in the office.'
- d. V ofise net tvoego koshel'ka.  
 in office not-exist your-GEN purse-GEN  
 'There isn't your purse in the office.'

To summarize, affirmative existentials show the same definiteness restrictions in Turkish, Russian and English (realized via determiners other than articles), whereas negative existentials differentiate Turkish and Russian from English, with only English showing a definite/indefinite contrast. Consequently, assuming L1 transfer, it might be expected that both Turkish-speaking and Russian-speaking learners of English would have problems with English negative existentials. However, in this paper, we show that L2ers whose mother tongues are Turkish or Russian come to know how restrictions on definiteness play out in English. We further show that this knowledge is independent of how the DE operates in the L1s in question.

### 3. Previous research on DE in L2

Spontaneous (or relatively spontaneous) production data has previously been examined for evidence of the DE in L2 English. For example, in a case-study of an advanced English L2 speaker with L1 Turkish, White (2003) found no DE violations, although the subject did make some errors in article suppliance (in the form of omission). Lardiere (2005), in her case-study of a steady-state L2 speaker with L1 Chinese, similarly reports no DE violations, Chinese being another language without articles. White (2008) reports no DE violations in elicited production data from intermediate level Turkish-speaking and Chinese-speaking learners of English.

However, a number of questions arise from these studies, suggesting the need for further investigation. In particular, none of these studies reports on production of negative existentials. Any success with affirmative existentials in L2 might be attributable solely to L1 transfer; it is only through investigation of negative existentials that one can determine whether transfer provides an adequate account of any knowledge of the DE shown by L2ers. This is our focus in the present paper.

## 4. Experiments

We report here on the results of a series of experiments. First, we summarize the main results of two L2 experiments reported in more detail in White, Belikova, Hagstrom, Kupisch, and Özçelik (2009) and Belikova, Hagstrom, Kupisch, Özçelik, and White (2010). For these experiments, we devised an acceptability judgment task incorporating contexts and, crucially, testing negative existentials as well as affirmative. We investigated whether L2ers whose L1s are Turkish or Russian observe the DE in English in both affirmative and negative existentials. After reporting on our previous experiments, we describe two additional experiments, not previously reported, in which Turkish speakers judged Turkish sentences and Russian speakers judged Russian sentences. Because these experiments share the same methodology, we describe the task first.

### 4.1. Acceptability judgment task

Subjects took the task individually (on a computer). Each test sentence was preceded by a short context. The inclusion of the context is crucial; it is important to ensure that the interpretation of the target sentences is existential, since there are alternative interpretations that permit both definites and indefinites (for example, list and deictic readings in English, focus in Turkish). Subjects were instructed to read the context and then to decide whether the sentence that appeared beneath it was natural or unnatural in the given context. If subjects judged a sentence to be unnatural, they were asked to type in a correction.<sup>2</sup>

Examples are presented in Figures 1 to 4 (English), Figure 5 (Turkish) and Figure 6 (Russian). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate natural affirmative and negative existentials with weak determiners; Figure 3 shows an unnatural affirmative existential with the definite article; Figure 4 illustrates an unnatural negative existential involving a proper name (i.e., a definite expression, hence strong). Figures 5 and 6 illustrate negative existentials involving proper names in Turkish and Russian respectively, such sentences being grammatical in both languages.

Tom has to make copies of a report but the photocopier has broken down. He asks the secretary what to do. She suggests using another machine, saying:		
<i>There's a reliable copy machine downstairs.</i>		
How natural is this sentence in this context? If you choose 'unnatural', please correct the sentence.		
natural	not sure	unnatural
Correction:		

Figure 1. English: Natural affirmative existential.

<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the corrections is to ensure that subjects are indeed addressing DE violations, for example, by replacing strong determiners with weak ones. Irrelevant corrections (such as changes in tense) are treated as if no correction had been made. Items where correction involved article omission are removed from the analysis – there were very few of these.

John was having a party. When Mary arrived, John suggested that she should join the other guests outside. He said: <i>There aren't many people inside.</i>
How natural is this sentence in this context? If you choose 'unnatural', please correct the sentence. natural                      not sure                      unnatural Correction:

Figure 2. English: Natural negative existential.

Anne is feeling sick, so she makes an appointment to see Dr. Salter. She arrives early and the nurse tells her to go right in, saying: <i>There's the doctor here already.</i>
How natural is this sentence in this context? If you choose 'unnatural', please correct the sentence. natural                      not sure                      unnatural Correction:

Figure 3. English: Unnatural affirmative existential.

Some students have problems with an assignment, so they ask the secretary whether the statistics professor is available to help them. She says: <i>No, there isn't Professor Black in his office today.</i>
How natural is this sentence in this context? If you choose 'unnatural', please correct the sentence. natural                      not sure                      unnatural Correction:

Figure 4. English: Unnatural negative existential.

İstatistik dersindeki bazı öğrenciler en son verilen ödevi çok zor bulur ve bu yüzden bölüm sekreterine gidip, ona istatistik hocasının onlara yardım etmek için müsait olup olmadığını sorar. Sekreter de şöyle cevap verir: <i>(Some students in the statistics class find the latest homework very difficult, so they go to the departmental secretary and ask her whether the statistics professor is available to help them. The secretary says:)</i> Yardım etmek isterdim ama maalesef Erdal Hoca bugün ofisinde yok. <i>(I would like to help, but there isn't Professor Erdal in his office today.)</i>
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Figure 5. Turkish: Natural negative existential.

Сергей Смирнов опаздывает на свою новую работу. Один из сотрудников спрашивает менеджера, что им делать, пояснив:  
(*Sergej Smirnov is late for his new job. One of his co-workers asks the manager what to do, explaining:*)

Смирнова все еще нет на месте.  
(*There isn't Smirnov at his workplace yet.*)

Figure 6. Russian: Natural negative existential.

#### 4.2. Sentence types

The English version consisted of 90 semi-randomized test items. Eighteen sentence types were tested, with 5 test items per type, including grammatical and ungrammatical existentials, apparent exceptions to definiteness restrictions (namely, deictic and list readings), and sentences controlling for other aspects of (in)definiteness. There were 10 ungrammatical types (for a total of 50 ungrammatical items) and 8 grammatical types (40 grammatical items). As far as the DE is concerned, there were two types of grammatical cases (containing either indefinite articles or weak quantifiers) and four types of ungrammatical cases (involving definite articles, proper names, possessives or strong quantifiers).

The task (contexts and test sentences) was translated into Turkish and Russian. The Turkish and Russian versions included fewer items, due to the absence of a definiteness contrast with articles in these languages, leaving a total of 60 test items in the Turkish version and 55 in the Russian version, again divided into the relevant subtypes.

In this paper, we report only on the overall results from the test items involving existentials (see White et al., 2009, and Belikova et al., 2010, for more detailed results on the various subtypes of existentials, as well as the other sentence types). The items in (6) illustrate grammatical and ungrammatical English affirmative existentials with articles and other determiners. These items test whether L2ers are sensitive to the DE in situations where the L1 and L2 behave alike. The items in (7) illustrate the equivalent sentence types for English negative existentials. These test sensitivity to the DE where the L1 and L2 behave differently; for example, (7d) is ungrammatical in English but its equivalents in Turkish and Russian are grammatical.

- (6) a. Grammatical *there*-insertion with indefinite articles  
There's a reliable copy machine downstairs.
- b. Ungrammatical *there*-insertion with definite articles  
There's the most reliable copy machine downstairs.
- c. Grammatical *there*-insertion with weak determiners  
There are several people sitting in the garden.
- d. Ungrammatical *there*-insertion with strong determiners  
There are your keys on your desk.
  
- (7) a. Grammatical *there*-insertion with indefinite articles  
There isn't a suitable bowl here.
- b. Ungrammatical *there*-insertion with definite articles  
There isn't the bowl here.
- c. Grammatical *there*-insertion with weak determiners  
There aren't many people inside.
- d. Ungrammatical *there*-insertion with strong determiners  
There aren't most guests here yet.

#### 4.3. Experiment 1: Turkish-speaking L2ers

Our first experiment (White et al., 2009) was conducted with adult Turkish-speakers whose L2 was English. Subjects were attending an English-medium university in Istanbul, Turkey. Their average

age was 21 years and 6 months (range 19-28 years) and they had had an average of nine years and six months of instruction in English as a foreign language in school (starting from about age 9) and at university. On the basis of a cloze test, subjects were divided into two proficiency groups: intermediate ( $n=12$ ) and advanced ( $n=10$ ). There was also a control group of 10 native speakers of English.

In Figure 7, we present overall results on existential sentences, collapsing the sentence types that involve articles and other determiners. Mean acceptances of weak DPs (grammatical) and strong DPs (ungrammatical) cases are compared, in both affirmative and negative existentials. A 2 factor mixed ANOVA shows a significant effect for group ( $f(2, 29)=6.044$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), a significant effect for sentence type ( $f(3, 29)=370.084$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ) and a significant interaction ( $f(6, 29)=17.896$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ). Post hoc tests show no significant differences between native controls and advanced L2ers, while the differences between controls and intermediate L2ers are significant. The differences between grammatical and ungrammatical affirmatives are significant for all groups, as are differences between grammatical and ungrammatical negatives ( $p<0.0001$ ). Crucially, both the intermediate and advanced L2ers reject strong DPs in negative existentials, even though these are grammatical in Turkish. Indeed, the intermediate group is significantly more accurate at rejecting ungrammatical negative existentials (grammatical in the L1) than ungrammatical affirmative existentials (ungrammatical in the L1).

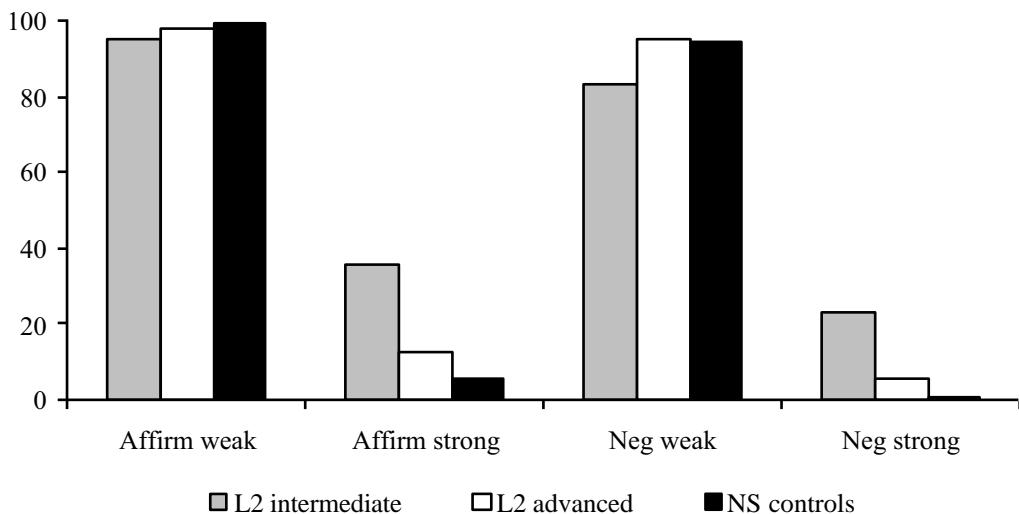


Figure 7. Turkish-speaking L2ers: acceptance of English existentials (in %).

#### 4.4. Experiment 2: Russian-speaking L2ers

Subjects in the second experiment (Belikova et al., 2010) were adult Russian-speaking L2 learners of English, of intermediate ( $n=10$ ) and advanced ( $n=15$ ) proficiency, as determined by the same cloze test as was used for the Turkish groups. There were 17 English native speaker controls, who were not the same as those who acted as controls for the previous experiment.<sup>3</sup> The L2ers were tested in Montreal, Canada. Their average age at the time of testing was 32 years and 10 months (range 19-42 years). Their knowledge of English was based on a combination of instruction in English as a foreign language in school and/or at university (starting from age of 12 years and 5 months, on average) and naturalistic exposure subsequent to arrival in Canada (starting from age 29, on average).

Results are presented in Figure 8, which compares acceptances of grammatical weak determiners to ungrammatical strong determiners, in both affirmative and negative existentials. A 2 factor mixed ANOVA shows a significant main effect for group ( $f(2, 39)= 6.1$ ,  $p<0.005$ ), a significant main effect

<sup>3</sup> The reason for having a different control group was that minor modifications were made to the task after it was taken by the Turkish speakers.

for sentence type ( $f(3, 39)=611.1, p<0.0001$ ) and a significant interaction ( $f(6, 39)=14.9, p<0.0001$ ). Post hoc tests show no significant differences between native controls and advanced L2ers, while the differences between controls and intermediate L2ers are significant. All groups show a significant difference in acceptance of grammatical and ungrammatical existentials, both affirmative and negative ( $p<0.0001$ ). Crucially, just like the Turkish speakers, both the intermediate and advanced L2ers reject definite DPs in negative existentials. Again, definite negative existentials, which are grammatical in Russian, are rejected by both intermediate and advanced L2ers to a greater extent than definite affirmative existentials, which are ungrammatical ( $p<0.02$ ).

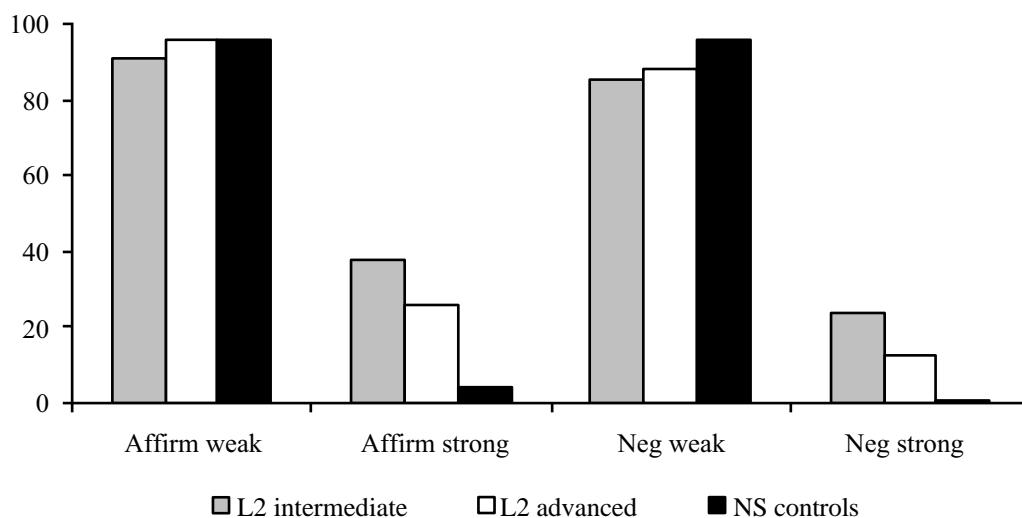


Figure 8. Russian-speaking L2ers: acceptance of English existentials (in %).

#### 4.5. Interim summary: L2 groups

To summarize so far, we found for both L2 experiments that advanced subjects do not differ from native speaker controls, fully rejecting strong DPs in affirmative and negative existentials. While the intermediate level subjects are somewhat less accurate than the advanced groups and the native speakers, they also clearly distinguish between weak and strong expressions in existentials, rejecting the latter even when they are permitted in the L1, as is the case in negative existentials in both Turkish and Russian.

To this point, it has been taken for granted that the L1s differ from the L2 with respect to definite expressions in negative existentials. This is an issue that is rarely discussed in the literature on existentials (for a recent exception, see Beaver, Francz, & Levinson, 2005). We now turn to an experiment which specifically explores whether it is indeed the case that strong negative existentials are acceptable in Turkish and Russian, using tasks where native speakers of Turkish judge Turkish sentences and native speakers of Russian judge Russian sentences.

#### 4.6. Experiments 3 and 4: L1 Turkish and Russian

As described above, our task was translated into Turkish and Russian and was essentially the same as the English task, except that there were fewer sentences in total. The Turkish task was administered in Turkey and was taken by 17 monolingual adult native speakers, while the Russian task was administered to 22 adult Russian native speakers in Russia and the Ukraine (the latter group having limited knowledge of Ukrainian).

Results are presented in Figure 9, which compares the performance of the Turkish and Russian speakers on affirmative and negative existential sentences involving weak and strong determiners.

Crucially, the results confirm that these two languages differ from English in that negative existentials with strong determiners are deemed acceptable. A 2 factor mixed ANOVA shows a significant main effect for group ( $f(1,37)=5.3$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), a significant main effect for sentence type ( $f(3,37)=337.1$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ) and a significant interaction ( $f(3,37)=337.1$ ,  $p<0.005$ ). The significant main effect for group and the interaction are due to the affirmative weak condition, which Russian speakers accept somewhat less readily than Turkish speakers; this is orthogonal to the issues that we are interested in. Importantly, according to paired t-tests, participants from both groups show a significant difference in acceptance of grammatical and ungrammatical affirmative existentials ( $p<0.0001$ ), and no difference between weak and strong negative existentials.

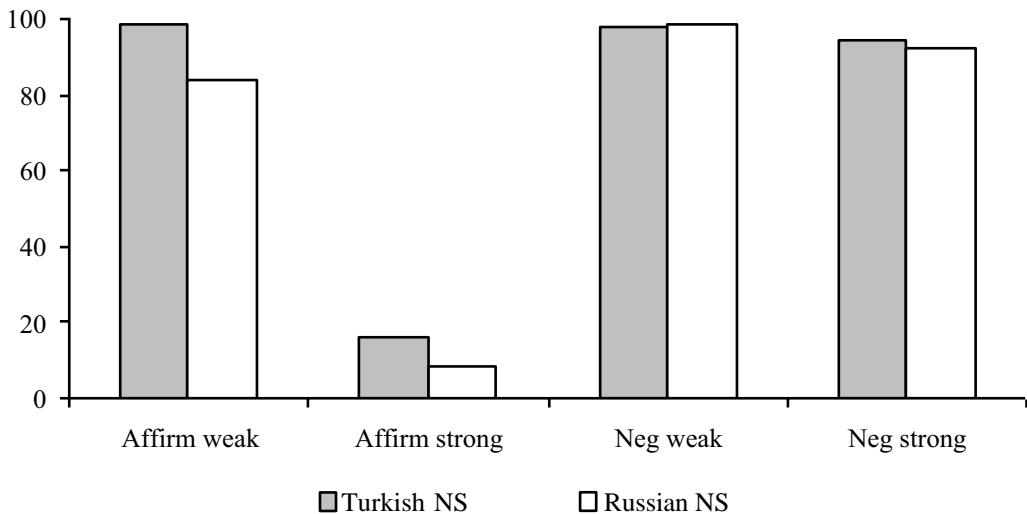


Figure 9. Native speaker acceptance of Turkish and Russian existentials (in %).

Finally, in Figure 10, we compare the results from all four experiments, focusing on native speakers and advanced L2ers. Here, it can be seen that both L2 groups (judging English), the native speakers of English (judging English), the native speakers of Turkish (judging Turkish) and the native speakers of Russian (judging Russian) perform very similarly on three of the four sentence types under consideration. In particular, affirmative and negative existentials with weak determiners are consistently accepted, while affirmative existentials with strong determiners are rejected. Where the groups differ is in the case of negative existentials with strong determiners: the L2ers pattern like native speakers of English in fully rejecting these sentences in their L2, in contrast to native speakers of Turkish and Russian who overwhelmingly accept them in their L1. A 2 factor mixed ANOVA shows a significant main effect for group ( $f(4, 76)= 26.9$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ), a significant main effect for sentence type ( $f(3, 76)=942.2$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ) and a significant interaction ( $f(12, 76)=85.5$ ,  $p<0.0001$ ). Post hoc tests show no significant difference between native English speakers and advanced L2ers, while the difference between each of the latter three groups and native speakers of Russian and Turkish (judging their L1s) is significant ( $p<0.05$ ). Participants show no significant difference in acceptance of affirmative and negative existentials with weak determiners. However, participants show a significant difference in acceptance of affirmative and negative existentials with strong determiners ( $p<0.0001$ ); the significant interaction is due to a difference in the performance of native speakers of Russian and Turkish (judging their L1s) and the other three groups of participants on negative existentials with strong determiners.

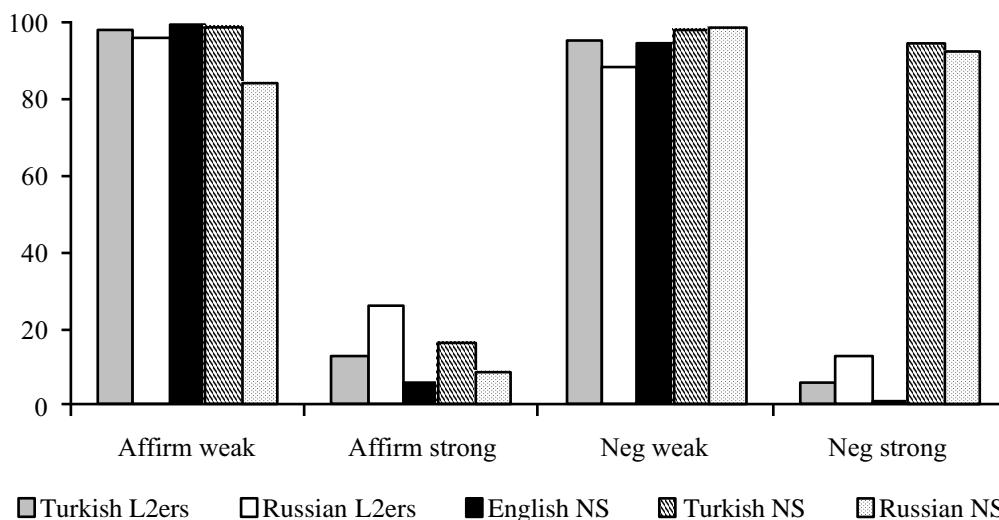


Figure 10. Comparison of acceptance of English, Turkish and Russian existentials (in %).

## 5. Discussion

To summarize, we have found that L2ers of intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency whose L1s are Turkish and Russian differentiate between grammatical and ungrammatical cases of *there*-insertion in English. They reject definite/strong DPs in affirmative as well as negative existentials, with the advanced L2ers showing no significant differences from the native speaker controls. We maintain that this behaviour reflects genuine knowledge of the DE, rather than being attributable to learning expressions like *there is a ...* as an unanalyzed chunk on the basis of input frequency, as argued by Trenkic (2007). Our L2 groups had no difficulty in accepting *there is the....* when it was appropriate (i.e., in list and deictic contexts). In addition, a chunk based explanation cannot extend to other weak and strong determiners, which are in general much less frequent in the input than articles but which were treated appropriately, with weak determiners being accepted and strong determiners being rejected.

Results from Turkish speakers taking the task in Turkish and from Russian speakers taking the task in Russian show that it is indeed the case that the DE in these languages works differently from English as far as negative existentials are concerned, indicating that successful performance by the L2ers cannot be attributed to L1 transfer, since they consistently reject strong negative existentials in the L2.

The absence of transfer effects is, seemingly, contrary to the Full Transfer Full Access Hypothesis (FTFA) (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996). Where the L1 and L2 differ, as is the case for negative existentials containing strong DPs, there was no tendency to treat English like Turkish or Russian. However, our subjects were of intermediate and advanced L2 proficiency and it could be that learners of lower proficiency would have performed differently. In piloting our task on low proficiency L2ers, we found that it was too difficult for them, hence we did not include such groups. In future research, it would be important to develop a task that can be undertaken by beginners or low proficiency subjects, in order to pursue the question of whether there is transfer initially with respect to definiteness restrictions, as predicted by FTFA.

In conclusion, our results suggest that L2ers do not suffer from any kind of deficit relating to realization of definiteness in existential constructions. In general, our findings suggest that researchers should be wary of taking problems with surface morphology (such as the commonly reported omission or misuse of articles) as indicative of deeper problems with underlying representations. On the contrary, L2ers are very sensitive to subtle restrictions on definiteness in the L2.

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