Morphophonological or Syntactic Transfer in the Acquisition of English Articles by L1 Speakers of Syrian Arabic?

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1. Introduction

It is a well documented phenomenon in L2 studies that learners of English have difficulty acquiring articles. Recent studies have suggested the presence of a binary feature parameter for English articles; definiteness and specificity. Informants whose L1s lack articles (e.g. Russian and Korean) fluctuate between taking articles to encode either definiteness or encode specificity (Ionin 2003, Ionin et al 2004). In contrast, learners of L1s that encode definiteness (e.g. Greek and Spanish) do not show similar patterns of fluctuation. Languages under investigation in this study are Syrian Arabic and French.

2. Previous research

Most studies of English article acquisition have provided empirical evidence that absence of articles in the first language of L2 learners of English leads to problems in producing the right form in the appropriate context; substitution or omission errors (Parrish 1987, Robertson 2000, Ionin and Wexler 2003 and White 2003). Robertson (2000) found that errors of L1 Chinese speakers were omission errors; there were no cases of a misuse of the definite article in contexts where the indefinite should be used or vice versa. The same pattern of omission errors was found by White (2003) in the written and spontaneous data of L1 Turkish speaker of English. However, recent studies (Ionin 2003, Ionin et al 2004,) propose a new account for substitution errors of articles; the fluctuation Hypothesis (Ionin 2003) (see section 2.1) and the Article Choice parameter (section 2.2).

2.1 The Fluctuation Hypothesis FH (Ionin 2003)

Ionin (2003) compared article production of L1 Russian and Korean speakers of English in three studies; a written elicitation task, forced-choice elicitation and a written translation task. She found that both L1 Russian and Korean speakers of English tend to insert *the* in contexts where *a/Ø* is required or *a/Ø* in contexts where *the* is required. Article errors are not random but they reflect a "principled" pattern for article choice; overusing *the* in indefinite specific contexts and *a/Ø* in definite non-specific contexts. She proposes that L2-learners have UG constrained grammars and have access to different UG parameter settings; while L1-learners quickly converge on the target parameter setting, L2 learners go through a stage of "fluctuation". Ionin proposes the fluctuation hypothesis:

The Fluctuation Hypothesis

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 (Ionin 2003, p.23).

In terms of article choice, the fluctuation hypothesis (FH henceforth) predicts that L2-English learners of (-article) languages sometimes divide articles on the basis of definiteness, and sometimes on the basis of

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specificity. With sufficient input, L2 learners may succeed in setting the Article Choice parameter (section 2.2) to the appropriate setting for English, definiteness.

2.2 The Article Choice Parameter ACP (Ionin, Ko and Wexler 2004)

Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004a) tested subjects of [-article] languages; L1 Russian and L1 Korean speakers of English ranging in proficiency from intermediate to advanced, on use of articles in a forced choice elicitation task. They found similar patterns of substitution errors to Ionin (2003). In other words, L2 learners of English vary in their interpretation of English articles *the* and *a*. to illustrate in example 1, they allow *the* to have an indefinite, specific reading:

(1) Meeting on a street:
Roberta: Hi, William! It's nice to see you again. I didn't know that you were in Boston.
William: I am here for a week. I am visiting *(a, the, –)* friend from college – his name is Sam Brown, and he lives in Cambridge now.

Similarly, they sometimes allow *a* to have a definite but non-specific reading. The distribution of *the* and *a* in their responses on the forced-choice elicitation tasks are presented in table 1:

Table 1: Article choice (based on Ionin, Ko and Wexler 2004: 30, tables 12 and 13)

	+def (target *the*)		**-def (target *a*)**	
L1 Russian (n = 26)	the	a	the	a
+spec	79%	8%	36%	54%
-spec	57%	33%	7%	84%
L1 Korean (n = 39)				
+spec	88%	4%	22%	77%
-spec	80%	14%	4%	93%

The above table illustrates L1 Russian and Korean speakers selection of articles; *the* in indefinite specific contexts and *a* with definite non-specific ones. When L1 learners of [-article] languages acquire an L2 that encodes definiteness they go through a stage of fluctuation. Ionin et al argue that in two-article languages, articles are distinguished either on the basis of specificity or on the basis of definiteness proposing a discourse related a semantic parameter; the Article Choice Parameter (Ionin et al 2004) (ACP henceforth):

The Article Choice Parameter (for two-article languages)

A language which has two articles distinguishes them as follows:
1. Setting I: Articles are distinguished on the basis of specificity (e.g. Samoan)
2. Setting II: Articles are distinguished on the basis of definiteness (e.g. English)

Given the Fluctuation Hypothesis, L1 speakers of [-article] languages will either fluctuate between definiteness and specificity when learning a language that encodes the features [+definite] or [+specific], or will select the appropriate value for the target language (if input provides unambiguous evidence for the appropriate setting). It is predicted that learners will not choose just the inappropriate setting, since the input would not license such a setting. So L1 Russian and L1 Korean learners of English who fluctuate misinterpret *the* as being associated with definiteness and specificity, and *a* with non-specificity and indefiniteness until the input leads them to set this parameter to the appropriate value (definiteness) for English. However, L1 speakers of [+article] languages learning a [+article] L2 like English are predicted

not to fluctuate. This has been confirmed in recent studies by Hawkins et al (2006) and Snape (2006) (see section 2.3).

2.3 Hawkins et al (2006), Snape (2006)[1]

In a similar forced choice elicitation task to the one used by the studies mentioned in sections 2.1 & 2.2, Hawkins et al (2006) and Snape (2006) show that L1 speakers of [+articles] languages learning English as an L2 do not show patterns of fluctuation between definiteness and specificity unlike L1 speakers of [- article] languages. Hawkins et al (2006)[2], found that L1 Greek learners of English ranging in proficiency between upper intermediate to advanced did not fluctuate, and Snape (2006) found a similar performance by L1 Spanish learners of English. Both Greek and Spanish share the definiteness setting of the Article Choice Parameter with English; in other words they grammaticalize definiteness.

In the light of the above, an interesting question is whether phonological absence of one article in the L1 (Arabic) affects the process of article acquisition in the L2 (English)? The current study addresses this issue.

3. Empirical study

Following the line of research outlined in sections (2.2 and 2.3), this study reports the acquisition of English articles by L1 Syrian Arabic and L1 French speakers of English. Spoken Syrian Arabic as most varieties of Arabic has a phonologically overt definite article *al* which is a bound morpheme, prefixed and attached to the noun it defines The definite article in Arabic like English is invariable for number and gender[3]. See example (2):

(2) usa:fir ila: dimašq bi-*al*-sayya:ra da:ʔman
travel-I to Damascus by-the-car always
I always travel to Damascus by car

Though there is a definite article in Arabic, the indefinite article with singular NPs is phonologically absent. The following example (3) illustrates that[4]:

(3) Ištarayt Kita:b
bought-I book
I bought a book

Where English marks indefinite singular nouns with a/an, indefinite singular nouns in Arabic are bare. So a bare NP is interpreted freely as indefinite specific (4i) or indefinite non-specific (4 ii)

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[1] Both studies offer a feature based account consistent with UG; based on Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz 1993, 1994), Harley and Noyer (1999) and The Morphological Underspecification Hypothesis (McCarthy 2004). This is beyond the scope of this study.

[2] The feature based account assumes that L2 speakers' ILGs are UG-derived. However, the ILGs of [- article] Japanese speakers of English differ from the grammars of native speakers as they have identified different features. In other words, they fail to acquire some features (for a more detailed discussion see Hawkins et al 2006).

[3] the distribution of the definite article in Arabic doesn't correspond in all aspects to the distribution of articles in English (Rai, J 2000).

[4] The presence of nunation **(")** which is termed tanwiin in Arabic and nunation by western philologists; the vowel signs written double, at the end of a noun indicates indefiniteness. However, this view of indefinite marker is hardly tenable because it is still a "real puzzle" for Arabic grammarians (Fassi Fehri, 1993, p.216, Lyons 1999, pp.93-94).

(4) i) jurid Tom mukabalt najma sinamaʔja. Isma Nicol. [-definite, +specific]
wants Tom meet star movie . name-her Nicole
Tom wants to meet a movie star. Her name is Nicole

In (4i) a movie star refers to a specific person; her name is Nicol. However, in (4ii) a movie star refers to anyone; there is no specific person in the mind of the speaker:

(4) ii) jurid Tom mukabalt najma sinamaʔja. La yahum man takun [-definite,-specific]
wants Tom meet star movie . doesn't matter who she is
Tom wants to meet a movie star. It doesn't matter who it is

By contrast, French has an article system like English which marks (in)definiteness but unlike English; French articles mark nouns not only on the basis of (in)definiteness but number and gender as well (examples taken from Hawkins and Towell, 1997):

(5) a) Achetez une nouvelle Panthéra GT6. ***La*** Panthéra GT6 vous va!
Buy a new Panthéra GT6. ***The*** Panthéra GT6 suits you!

b) Je me suis trouvé ***une*** belle maison en Ecosse
I have found myself ***a*** lovely house in Scotland

3.1 Predictions and Research hypothesis:

Since Arabic and French differ in overt morphology that marks (in)definiteness, the predictions and research question can be presented as follows:

a) If both language groups, L1 Syrian Arabic and L1 French learners of L2 English, transfer the marking of definiteness from Arabic/ French into their interlanguage grammars (ILGs) for English, it is predicted they will behave similarly in [+definite, +/-specific] contexts.
b) If L1 French learners of English transfer the marking of indefiniteness from French into their interlanguage grammars (ILGs) for English, they will behave differently to the L1 Syrian Arabic speakers in [-definite, +/-specific] contexts.

The research questions that the study seeks to answer are given in A and B:

A. Will Syrian Arabic (SA) speakers fluctuate between *the/a* with indefinite specific NPs in English as speakers of [-article] languages do? This is predicted if L1 transfer occurs at the level of morphophonology; learners start from bare NPs
B. Will SA speakers recognise from early on that only *a* (with count singulars) and *Ø* (with count plural/mass NPs) co-occur with indefinites? This is predicted if L1 transfer occurs at the level of syntax; learners start from an interpretable [-definite] feature on an abstract D in SA

3.2 Participants

The total number of participants in this study is 84; 57 L1 Syrian Arab learners of English, 18 L1 French learners of English and nine English controls. All participants were of the same educational background: university undergraduates or postgraduates. Both the L1 Syrian Arab and L1 French learners took the Oxford Quick Placement Test (2001, henceforth OQPT) and were placed as Lower Intermediate (henceforth LI), Upper Intermediate (henceforth UI), Advanced (henceforth AD) and Very Advanced (henceforth VAD) according to their scores in the test. Personal details were taken from each participant: gender, date of birth, place of birth, length of formal English teaching, length of residence in an English

speaking country (ESC) and they were asked if they had knowledge of another language apart from English. Table (2) gives details of participants; number in each group, age range, length of formal English teaching, and length of residence in an English speaking country.

Table (2) participants' details:

L1 Groups	Age range	Formal English teaching (in years)		Length of residence in ESC (in months)	
Syrian Arabic		Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Dev
LI (n=19)	18-25 (mean=20.05)	11.11	2.338	.54	.007
UI (n=17)	18-30 (mean=23)	14.18	2.813	.54	.854
AD (n=16)	20-30 (mean=25.44)	15.81	3.829	1.51	2.345
VAD (n=5)	28-37 (mean=31)	20.40	4.636	3.42	3.372
French		Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Dev
LI (n=5)	19-24 (mean=21)	11.60	3.55	.02	.007
UI (n=5)	20-29 (mean=23.40)	11.60	4.67	1.22	2.39
AD (n=6)	18-34 (mean=21.50)	11.17	8.3	7.68	11.87
VAD (n=2)	19-23 (mean=21)	9	5.01	4.50	.50

3.3 Method

The empirical study consisted of three main tasks; a forced-choice elicitation task, an oral production task and a written production task, followed by the OQPT to test English proficiency of the L1 Syrian Arab and L1 French learners of English. In this paper I will present results of the forced-choice elicitation task which will be described in section (3.3.1).

3.3.1 Forced-choice elicitation task:

To test the research questions addressed in section (3.1) a forced choice elicitation task similar to the one used by Ionin et al (2004) is used in this study. The test consisted of 88 short dialogues, involving 3 turns and an article gap in the third turn. 68 dialogues were relevant to this study. The dialogues were designed to avoid priming effects so no definites or indefinites appear before the gap. A contrast was made between count singular, count plural and mass Ns to check whether in indefinite singular contexts, L1 Syrian Arabic speakers are able to associate *a* with singular nouns[5]. The 68 dialogues were contexts priming (i) definite, specific interpretations; a contrast was made between NPs that are definite by virtue of being previously mentioned in discourse (anaphoric) and NPs that are definite by virtue of association with another constituent. (24 items); (ii) definite, non-specific interpretation (8 items; 4 in a narrow scope and 4 in no scope contexts), (iii) indefinite, specific interpretations (12 items with no scope); (iv) indefinite, non-specific interpretations by virtue of being in narrow scope contexts and those in non-scope contexts (24 items).

[5] Hence Arabic lacks overt indefinite morphological marker with indefinite singular NPs (see section 3).

To minimize the tiredness effect for participants[6], the first two turns in the dialogues were translated into Arabic/ French and the last one was in English. The participants were instructed to read the dialogues carefully and choose one of four possible items that followed the dialogue; ***the, a, an or Ø***. All the items in the task were randomized. An explanation of lexical items (unfamiliar to non-native speakers such as 'Waterstones' or 'Homebase') was provided on a separate sheet. This was to make sure that the participants' responses were not influenced by lack of vocabulary knowledge They were instructed to choose the item that they felt most appropriate in the context and once they had made a decision to move to the next dialogue and never go back to correct earlier items. Example (6) illustrates the indefinite specific context type:

(6) [-definite, +specific]
A: I visited Colchester's famous old-fashioned tea shop today.
B: Oh yes?
C: they served me_____cakes I haven't had for years.
a the Ø an

4. Results

After the raw data was entered into SPSS software and checked for errors, a reliability analysis to check the internal consistency of the scale was carried out; Cronbach's alpha for item analyses was > .7. Results on the forced- choice elicitation task are divided into results on definites (section 4.1) and results on indefinites (section 4.2) and then subdivided by noun type; singular, plural and mass per language group and per proficiency level.

4.1 Definite contexts

Results of participants' choices in [+definite, +/- specific] contexts were as predicted for both the L1 Syrian Arab and L1 French groups; learners respond in a target-like way through all proficiency groups. Table (3) displays the results of the L1 Syrian Arabic speakers for all proficiency levels and the native controls on [+definite, +specific] contexts, singular, plural and mass[7]. It shows how often they select ***the, a/n, Ø*** in raw scores and percentages:

Table (3) choice of articles in [+definite, +specific] context (L1 Syrian Arabic):

L1 Group	**count singular**		**count plural**		**mass**	
	target article *the*					
Syrian Arabic	***the***	***a***	***the***	***Ø***	***the***	***Ø***
LI (n=19)	139/152 (91%)	9/152 (6%)	134/152 (88%)	15/152 (10%)	103/152 (68%)	38/152 (25%)
UI (n=17)	133/136 (98%)	3/136 (2%)	125/136 (92%)	10/136 (7%)	106/136 (78%)	25/136 (18%)
AD (n=16)	126/128 (98%)	2/128 (2%)	119/128 (93%)	6/128 (5%)	105/128 (82%)	23/128 (18%)
VAD (n=5)	40/40 (100%)	0/40 (0%)	38/40 (95%)	2/40 (5%)	35/40 (88%)	5/40 (12%

[6] As the forced choice was one of three tasks the subjects had to take.
[7] All NPs for both [+definite, +/- specific] context are grouped together as the performance of both language groups was almost target like apart from some trivial performance errors.

The shaded values in the above table indicate that the L1 Syrian Arab speakers of English select the definite article appropriately though there is selection of the default form *Ø* with definite Mass NPs. A similar pattern is found in the L1 French speakers of English Table (4) displays results of the L1 French group on [+definite, +specific] contexts, singular, plural and mass. It displays how often they select *the, a/n, Ø*:

Table (4) Choice of articles in [+definite, +specific] context (L1 French and native controls):

L1 Group	**count singular**		**count plural**		**mass**	
	target article *the*					
French	***the***	***a***	***the***	***Ø***	***the***	***Ø***
LI (n=5)	38/40 (95%)	2/40 (5%)	28/40 (70%)	7/40 (18%)	29/40 (73%)	11/40 (27%)
UI (n=5)	37/40 (93%)	3/40 (7%)	33/40 (83%)	6/40 (15%)	30/40 (75%)	9/40 (23%)
AD (n=6)	47/48 (98%)	1/48 (2%)	43/48 (90%)	5/48 (10%)	43/48 (90%)	5/48 (10%)
VAD (n=2)	16/16 (100%)	0/16 (0%)	15/16 (94%)	1/16 (6%)	16/16 (100%)	0/16 (0%)
English (n=9)	67/72 (93%)	5/72 (7%)	72/72 (100%)	0/72 (0%)	68/72 (94%)	4/72 (6%)

As the prediction is that both language groups should show a similar pattern of response, because of L1 transfer, in [+definite, -specific] singular contexts, these were included in the forced-choice elicitation task to confirm this prediction. Table (5) illustrates selection of *the* and *a* in [+definite, -specific] context for the L1 Syrian Arabs, L1 French learners of English across all proficiency groups together with results of the native controls:

Table (5) Choice of *the, a & Ø* in [+definite, -specific] contexts:

L1 Group	LI	UI	AD	VAD		NS
Syrian Arabic	(n=19)	(n=17)	(n=16)	(n=5)	**English**	(n=9)
the	144/152 (95%)	122/136 (90%)	127/128 (99%)	39/40 (98%)		72/72 (100%)
a	5/152 (4%)	13/136 (9%)	1/128 (1%)	1/40 (2%)		0/72 (0%)
French	LI (n=5)	UI (n=5)	AD (n=6)	VAD (n=2)		
the	39/40 (98%)	39/40 (98%)	47/48 (98%)	16/16 (100%)		
a	1/40 (2%)	1/40 (2%)	1/48 (2%)	0/16 (0%)		

So far results suggest that both language groups perform in a native like way in definite contexts in both specific and non specific contexts consistent with prediction (1, section 3.1).

4.2 Indefinite contexts:

Results on indefinite contexts are split by noun type and proficiency level; first results on singular NPs (section 4.2.1) and then results on plural and mass NPs (section 4.2.2) showing a comparison between the intermediate groups of both L1s and the native controls followed by results of the advanced proficiency

groups. To recall, it was predicted (section 3.1) that the suppliance of articles by the L1 Syrian Arabic speakers would be different from the L1 French speakers' suppliance of articles.

4.2.1 Indefinite singular

Table (6) gives the results of the intermediate proficiency groups together with the native controls in [-definite, +/-specific] singular contexts:

Table (6) selection of *the vs. a* in [-definite, +/-specific] singular contexts:

L1 Group	-definite (singular) Target article *a*			
Syrian Arabic	LI (n=19)		UI (n=17)	
	the	***a***	***the***	***a***
+spec	39%	58%	21%	79%
-spec	1%	97%	1%	99%
French	(n=5)		(n=5)	
+spec	10%	90%	2%	98%
-spec	0%	100%	2%	98%
English	(n=9)			
+spec	0%	100%		
-spec	0%	100%		

The shaded values display obvious differences between the groups. Non-target like selection of the article by L1 Syrian Arabic speakers who select ***the*** in indefinite specific singular contexts more than indefinite non-specific contexts (both LI and UI groups). L1 French speakers of a similar proficiency level make the appropriate selection of the article. The native controls' behavior is as expected.

A one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey tests was performed between the intermediate groups and native controls; proficiency as between subjects factor. Multiple comparisons for the intermediate groups revealed a significant difference between the Syrian Arabs and the native controls and the Syrian Arabs and French groups on use of ***the*** and ***a*** in indefinite singular specific contexts ($p<0.05$)

Table (7) displays the advanced groups' results both L1 Syrian Arabic and L1 French on indefinite specific/no specific singular context.

Table (7) selection of ***the*** vs. ***a*** in [-definite, +/-specific] singular context:

L1 Group	-definite (singular) Target article *a*			
Syrian Arabic	AD (n=16)		VAD (n=5)	
	the	***a***	***the***	***a***
+spec	30%	70%	0%	100%
-spec	2%	98%	0%	100%
French	(n=6)		(n=2)	
+spec	4%	96%	0%	100 %
-spec	0%	100%	0%	100 %

Non-target like behavior in indefinite specific singular contexts is evident for the L1 Syrian advanced group but English like grammar for the very advanced group. Predictable target like selection for ***a*** by L1 French speakers. In indefinite non-specific singular context both language groups in a native like way.

A one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey tests was performed between the advanced groups and native controls; proficiency as between subjects factor. Multiple comparisons for the adavnced groups revealed a significant difference between the Syrian Arab advanced and the native controls on use of ***the*** and ***a*** in indefinite singular specific contexts ($p<0.05$) but no significant difference between the Syrian Arab advanced and French groups probably because of the small number of the French groups.

4.2.2 Plural and Mass

This section illustrates results on plural and mass NPs in indefinite specific and non specific contexts for both L1lanaguge groups and the native controls. Table (8) displays results of the intermediate groups and the native controls.

Table (8) selection of ***the*** vs. ***Ø*** in [-definite, +/-specific] plural and mass contexts:

L1 Group	-definite (plural & mass) Target article ***Ø***			
	LI		UI	
Syrian Arabic	(n=19)		(n=17)	
	The	***Ø***	***the***	***Ø***
+spec	24%	65%	18%	74%
-spec	9%	77%	6%	82%
French	(n=5)		(n=5)	
+spec	5%	63%	5%	75%
-spec	4%	75%	4%	79%
English	(n=9)			
+spec	3%	94%		
-spec	2%	98%		

A clear difference between the two L1 language groups in selections of ***the*** and ***Ø*** in [-definite, +specific] plural and mass contexts can be seen. Both the lower intermediate and the upper intermediate L1 Syrian speakers select ***the*** in [-definite, +specific] but not in [-definite, -specific] contexts. The L1 French speakers select the article appropriately.

A one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey tests was performed between the intermediate groups and native controls; proficiency as between subjects factor. Multiple comparisons for the intermediate groups revealed a significant difference between the lower intermediate Syrian Arabs and the native controls on use of ***the*** and ***Ø*** in indefinite plural and mass specific contexts ($p<0.05$) but no significant difference between the Syrian Arab and French groups.

Table (9) displays results of the advanced groups. The shaded values indicate that the L1 Syrian Arab speakers of English select ***the*** in indefinite specific contexts more frequently than in indefinite non-specific ones.

Table (9) selection of the vs. Ø in [-definite, +/-specific] plural and mass contexts (advanced group results):

L1 Group	-definite (plural and mass) Target article ***Ø***			
	AD		VAD	
Syrian Arabic	(n=16)		(n=5)	
	the	***Ø***	***the***	***Ø***
+spec	20%	77%	18%	82%
-spec	5%	89%	6%	88%
French	(n=6)		(n=2)	
+spec	8%	81%	6%	94%
-spec	1%	92%	0%	94%

Table (9) shows that the L1 Syrian Arab speakers are predominantly selecting ***the*** in indefinite, specific contexts. This is consistent with them taking ***the*** to encode either definiteness or to encode specificity. Table (9) shows a significant difference between the Syrian Arab and the French speakers

A one-way ANOVA with post-hoc Tukey tests was performed between the advanced groups and native controls; proficiency as between subjects factor. Multiple comparisons for the adavnced groups revealed a significant difference between the advanced Syrian Arabs and the native controls on use of ***the*** and ***Ø*** in

indefinite plural and mass specific contexts ($p<0.05$) but no significant difference between the Syrian Arab and French groups.

In indefinite non specific singular, plural and mass contexts both language groups across the four proficiency levels seem to select the target article; ***a*** with singular NPs and ***Ø*** with plural and mass NPs, in an almost native-like way, suggesting that the L1 Syrian Arab speakers are able to acquire a morpheme that is absent in their L1. However, results with indefinite specific NPs initially suggested fluctuation; L1 Syrian Arab speakers predominantly select ***the***; this is consistent with them taking ***the*** to encode either definiteness or specificity. Does this mean that L1 transfer occurs at the level of morphophonology; learners start from bare NPs (research question A, section 3.1)? L1 French subjects show no fluctuation consistent with prediction 2, (section 3.1). Do these results support the fluctuation hypothesis consistent with Ionin et al (2004 a)? As item means always conceal differences, further analyses were carried out to check the relevance of relative clauses (see section 4.3).

4.3 Relevance of the relative clause:

Further analyses were carried out to check whether the predominant selection of ***the*** in indefinite specific contexts was affected by presence of a relative clause (RC) modifying these NPs. Since the L1 French speakers and native controls hardly ever selected ***the*** in indefinite contexts, they are not included in this analysis. Table (10) displays the use of ***the*** by Syrian Arab speakers at group level in indefinite specific singular contexts, subdivided into those with RC modifiers and those without RC modifiers:

Table (10) selection of ***the*** vs. ***a*** in RC vs. Non-RC modified singular NPs:

Group	Context [-definite, +specific] singular			
	RC modified		**Non-RC modified**	
	The	***a***	***The***	***a***
LI (n=19)	53%	44%	0%	100%
UI (n=17)	25%	75%	6%	94%
AD (n=16)	38%	63%	6%	94%
VAD (n=5)	0%	100%	0%	100%

Table (10) shows a clear difference in choosing ***the*** between indefinite specific RC modified and non- RC modified singular NPs across the four proficiency levels. In Non- RC modified NPs selection of ***a*** is native like.

Table (11) selection of ***the*** vs. ***a*** in RC vs. Non-RC modified plural and mass NPs

Group	Context [-definite, +specific] plural & mass			
	RC modified		**Non-RC modified**	
	The ***Ø***		***the***	***Ø***
LI (n=19)	25%	70%	21%	58%
UI (n=17)	24%	73%	8%	77%
AD (n=16)	26%	73%	10%	83%
VADS (n=5)	20%	80%	13%	87%

Table (11) shows a clear difference in choosing ***the*** between indefinite specific RC modified and Non- RC modified plural and mass NPs across the four proficiency levels.

The shaded values in tables (10 and 11) suggest that much of the fluctuation between *the* and *a* in indefinite specific contexts is due to the presence of a relative clause post modifying the NP consistent with transfer from the L1.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Ionin et al found that L2 English learners of [-article] L1s tend to fluctuate between definiteness and specificity until the input leads them to set the appropriate value of the parameter for English: definiteness. Hawkins et al and Snape found that L2 learners of English of [+article] languages show no fluctuation. In this study, results on definite contexts, both specific and non specific, suggest that both language groups select the definite article in an almost native-like way with singular nouns, consistent with them transferring L1 properties from Arabic and French. However, SA speakers tend to insert a default form *Ø* with both mass and plural nouns, which is grammatical in English but inappropriate to the context[8]. This is evident in the lower proficiency groups, but decreases in the higher proficiency groups for both L1 language groups. In indefinite contexts, specific and non-specific, the L1 French speakers are native-like in their performance. However, the L2 grammar of L1 Syrian Arabic speakers is clearly different from the grammar of natives in the domain of articles. Although initial results suggest fluctuation, further analysis provides evidence that they transfer L1 syntactic properties into their L2 grammar.

To conclude, Syrian Arabic has a syntactic [-definite] D that transfers into L2 English article acquisition as SA speakers correctly identify *a* as a marker of indefiniteness (with singular NPs) early in acquisition. Much of the fluctuation is due to the presence of an RC modifier, not the indefinite specific context per se, consistent with the Full Transfer/ Full Access theory (Schwartz & Sprouse 1994, 1996). It seems that realization of an indefinite morphological marker in the L1 facilitates the process of L2 acquisition; L1 French in both indefinite specific and non specific NPs and absence of a morphological form leads to some non native like behavior in the early stages of acquisition but convergence to target like grammar in the higher proficiency groups.

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[8] This is an omission error rather than being a substitution error. This non-target like behavior on definite specific mass nouns could be explained because of parametric variation across languages (for further discussion see Chierchia, 1998a).

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