

ENGLISH L2 DEFINITE ARTICLE INSTRUCTION AT THE SERBIAN L1 TERTIARY LEVEL

UDC 811.111' 36/37:378.18; 37.02.:811.111

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Abstract. *The study has two main goals: to assess in part the effects of current definite article instruction at the tertiary level in the Serbian L1/English L2 environment, and to analyze whether the use of the definite article in English could be represented by figure/ground alignment in the instruction process. One of the questionnaires used (consisting of fill-in-the-blank tasks) was meant to rate the participants' L2 definite article production in the contexts for its obligatory use. Another questionnaire consisted of illustrations of figure/ground alignment as cues for a translation task meant to assess whether the definite article would be used in situations where the referent of choice was presented as the figure. An analysis of the data indicated that the participants, who displayed various levels of knowledge of definite article use on the first questionnaire, scored identical (successful) results when establishing a link between the use of the definite article and figure/ground alignment. These results could prove useful for innovating the L2 instruction process in the Serbian L1/English L2 environment.*

Key words: *the definite article, Serbian L1, contexts for the obligatory use of the definite article, figure/ground alignment*

1. INTRODUCTION

Most textbooks used in the Serbian L1/English L2 environment rely on long-standing classifications of definite article use (inter alia Christophersen, 1939; Jespersen, 1943; Hawkins, 1978; Quirk et al., 1985; Master, 1997; Lyons, 1999; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002), which are based on the criteria of identifiability and familiarity. However, issues have been raised as to their exhaustiveness (Epstein, 2001), as errors in article use tend to persist even at advanced levels of proficiency, emerging either as omission of the required article or use of the incorrect article (Ionin, 2007; Ionin and Montrul, 2009; Trenkić, 2009; White, 2010; Verspoor to appear). Consequently, an attempt has been

Received October 03, 2019/Accepted December 11, 2019

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made to assess the outcomes of the existing definite article instruction process in the Serbian L2/English L2 environment, and to propose a possible alternative approach.

The purpose of this study was twofold. The first goal was to determine the L2 definite article production of a sample of Serbian L1/English L2 university students of English in seven obligatory contexts for the use of the definite article (Lyons, 1999; Huddleston and Pullum, 2002). The second was to evaluate whether figure/ground alignment (as defined in Cruse and Croft (2004) *inter alia*), as a means of construal, can potentially be used as an explanatory device in the definite article instruction process for this group of students. With this aim in mind, the relevant data was collected by means of two separate questionnaires, and further subjected to a quantitative and qualitative analysis.

The paper first presents the key theoretical points underlying definite article use, and the key theoretical points regarding figure/ground alignment. It then provides an overview of the quantitative data, followed by a qualitative analysis of the most representative samples, and ending with a final conclusion and implications.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Early classifications of the contexts for the obligatory use of the definite article were based on concepts that are still relied on in the instruction process today: identifiability and familiarity, and the related concepts of uniqueness and inclusiveness. One of the first notable classifications is found in the work of Jespersen (1943), where a shared feature of the various uses of the definite article was identified: the implication that in a multitude of referents, the speaker focuses on a single one/single group, as a result of it/their being 'familiar'. It is further stated that this process of selection occurs over a series of phases of familiarity (*ibid*, 417):

Phase I, complete unfamiliarity (characterized by the use of the indefinite article);

Phase II, nearly complete familiarity (the referent is rendered definite either through the broader context or immediate physical situation, and the use of the definite article is required);

Phase III, familiarity so complete that no article (determiner) is needed (characteristic of the use of names and vocatives, names of family members, meals always served at the same time of day, with nouns such as *church*, *prison*, etc.).

Jespersen adopted Christophersen's (1939) view that familiarity is a key precondition of definite article use, but considered familiarity of the referent to be a requirement only for the speaker, i.e. a referent was considered (un)familiar if it was (un)familiar to the speaker, while Christophersen included the addressee in determining whether or not a referent could be deemed familiar. From these two approaches, a distinction that pertains to referential relations in various languages emerged, including Serbian, i.e. the distinction between specificity (where the referent is known only to the speaker) and definiteness (where the referent is known to both the speaker and hearer).

Hawkins (1978) did not specifically use the term 'familiarity' when discussing the definite article, and instead referred to the process of 'locating' a particular referent. He proposed the existence of a shared set of elements, to which the referent of a definite noun phrase must belong. This set consists of entities known both to the speaker and the hearer, and is based on the previous discourse, the immediate or broader physical context, or a set of entities evoked through the process of association. A particular definite referent can therefore be located

within a certain shared (physical or mental) set via a definite noun phrase. Hawkins agreed with Christophersen that familiarity is achieved only if both the speaker and hearer are familiar with the referent in question, where familiarity is actually a form of possible identification on the part of the hearer.

Langacker (1991, 97) touched upon the use of the definite article in his work, linking it to the current discourse space, which is accessible to the interlocutors and where the referents of definite noun phrases are sought. To find them, certain conditions need to be met, including establishing mental contact with these referents and providing them with special status in the process. Contact is established the moment that the speaker refers to them. Using a definite noun phrase to refer to an element in a current discourse space means activating the presupposition that there is some kind of previous knowledge that exists regarding the referent in question (implicit or explicit non-linguistic knowledge of the world that the two interlocutors share), which renders the referent in question accessible to both the speaker and hearer.

One of the problems with these theoretical frameworks is that familiarity is considered a weak theoretical account of the use of the definite article, since there are situations in which this criterion cannot be met, while the definiteness of the referent in question is generated by the hearer being aware that such a referent does exist in a particular context. What further complicates the issue is that, in English, definiteness can be expressed in a variety of ways, including the use of proper nouns, possessives, personal pronouns and demonstratives. Furthermore, there are languages in which the function of demonstratives and articles can be considered adjectival. This is relevant for Serbian, since, as Trenkić (2002, 2004) stated, it often happens that when an adjective is included in the noun phrase in question, Serbian L1 speakers tend to omit the article entirely.

In addition, irrespective of the fact that there is no article system in the Serbian language, Đorđević (1989, 415) indicated that there was a potential way of classifying definite and indefinite article equivalents in Serbian, such as *jedan* for the latter, and possessives and demonstratives for the former. The connection established between demonstratives in Serbian and the definite article in English is hardly unexpected, since, diachronically speaking, the latter originated from the former (Lyons, 1999), and both are deictic elements (Diessel, 2006). However, as Trenkić (2004) states, the use of demonstratives in Serbian is meant to clarify referential relations, not establish them, and their function is similar to that of the definite article only in cases of anaphoric reference, or reference in the immediate situation. There are also claims that word order in Serbian is reminiscent of article use, and that noun phrases in sentence initial position could be said to have 'definite' status, as they are considered 'known information' (Đorđević, 1989, 410). However, Trenkić (2002, 2004) states that word order has to do with accessibility, i.e. that referents that are more accessible are presented prior to those less accessible, as well as that definiteness is connected to the given/new distinction as a category of knowledge, while word order is connected to the given/new distinction as a category of consciousness (2002, 114). Thus, word order in Serbian may just be a reflection of how the speaker perceives the state of consciousness of the hearer. Adjective forms are also said to be an equivalent for the definite article in Serbian, where *brz* would correspond to the use of the indefinite article, and *brzi* to the use of the definite article. Trenkić, however, states that the distinction between these two adjective forms is no longer being used. In a later study, Trenkić (2009) claimed the amount of repetition of a noun phrase can affect L2 definite article production: with every subsequent repetition, the presence of the referent is established more and more, becoming prominent, and that non-

native speakers consider any further prominence indicated by the definite article to be unnecessary. Coupled with her findings on the relationship between pre- or post-modification and the use of the definite article in the Serbian L1/English L2 environment (that an increase in the number of modifiers renders the referent more prominent, which in turn causes this particular group of non-native speakers to consider the use of the definite article unnecessary), it would seem that all these factors could combine to further confuse the issue of definite article use for Serbian L1/English L2 speakers.

The research results presented in this paper are based on the classifications of the contexts for the obligatory use of the definite article: that of Lyons (1999) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002). The former is based on the familiarity of the referent, and the latter on its identifiability. An overlap between Lyons' classification and that of Huddleston and Pullum was determined, which led to a final identification of seven contexts for the obligatory use of the definite article. The contexts are the following: situational use/sensory feature/physical situation; nonlinguistic knowledge/general knowledge; anaphoric use/prior mention; associative use/bridging cross-reference; anticipatory use; presence of modification, pre- and post-; and predication property.

So far, the question of a possible alternative approach to the instruction on L2 definite article use in the Serbian L1/English L2 environment has remained open. The most relevant existing research (Trenkić, 2002, 2004 *inter alia*) mostly focused on clarifying the existing issues, without proposing any concrete changes in terms of the instruction process. And yet, the aforementioned facts that the referent of a definite noun phrase is sought from within a group of other referents and singled out for prominence within it, and that its origins can be traced back to deictic elements, are reminiscent of profiling (Langacker, 1991) in relationships, which in turn brings to mind the figure/ground alignment. If one were to consider using it in the L2 definite article instruction process, it would require the use of visual representations of contextualized situations which would clearly indicate a figure and a ground, where the definite noun phrase in the accompanying text would introduce the referent that is to be perceived as the figure, while the other referents in the same setting would make up the ground against which it stands out.

Figure/ground alignment is a means of construal readily available to humans, which allows it to have general applicability. Taylor (2002), working within the framework of cognitive linguistics, listed eleven different cognitive capacities which may be understood as being of vital importance to the study of language which include figure/ground alignment. Its potential suitability also lies in the fact that our perception and attention systems underlay our use of language in general Talmy (2000). Langacker (2008a) stated that our representations of the various situations we perceive in a physical sense are mere mental representations which we imagine to exist, and it is these representations that we convey using language (*ibid*, 69). Meaning, therefore, is to be sought in these abstract representations of the relations between the elements that make up a particular situation, i.e. our conceptualizations and construal (see Ungerer and Schmid, 1996 *inter alia*). What is being proposed within CL is the possible motivation, or a possible sense underlying the use of various grammatical/syntactic structures for every instance of their use. In this case, it is the motivation behind the use of *the* specifically, irrespective of the context: the intention to present the referent as the figure against the background consisting of all the other referents, singled out as the focus of our attention.

In order to present a particular referent as a figure, we must first have a reference point against which to do so, which is related to the concept of 'grounding' (Langacker,

1991, 2008; Taylor, 2002), in the sense that without adequate grounding we would not be able to successfully signal to our interlocutor the exact referent to which we wanted to assign a particular status (figure or ground). Grounding, as Langacker (1991, 315) states, is the connection between language (and other) events through the perspective of the individual doing the conceptualizing, the one whose construal will be conveyed. The relationship between the ground and the events taking place on it/elements located within it is determined, among other things, with the help of tense and aspect, as well as nominal determiners (Ungerer and Schmid, 1996).

Figure/ground alignment has already been the topic of various linguistic studies: Talmy (1978) wrote about figure/ground on the level of inter-sentential space; Langacker (1991) stated that any event included in the dependent clause is conceptualized as the basis of the ground, and represents a kind of cause or precondition which brings about the event which is foregrounded, or presented as the figure, in the independent clause; Hanks (1992) presented the relationship between figure and ground at the level of the word, that is phrase, when he presented his idea of deictic linguistic forms which merge the figure and ground within the same linguistic expression, wherein the figure can only be determined in relation to the deictic center; Ungerer and Schmid (1996) who used the same relationship to explain the use of prepositional phrases to indicate location in sentences such as *The balloon flew over the house*. (ibid, 158); Diessel (2004) invoked the figure and ground relationship when analyzing dependent and independent clauses as part of a broader narrative. Any information that is foregrounded represents key and necessary information which makes up the structure of the narrative itself, while the information that is (back)grounded provides additional information, but is not part of the crucial flow of the narrative itself; Grundy (2004) discussed how the figure/ground alignment has been used so far in the EFL process; Langacker (2008) also analyzed the relationships between the subject, predicate and complement of the verb, where in those instances where the predicate is a transitive verb, the subject represents the figure, the object stands for the ground, which also provides them with a more 'central' role in the event being 'profiled', and the verb explains the relationship between the two; later in (2008a) he emphasized the role that context, and therefore grounding, had to play as something of essential importance to the language learning process (ibid, 81).

This paper attempts to apply figure/ground alignment as a visual representation of examples of definite noun phrases at sentence level, by directly providing a suitable context, and thus a set from which to select referents. The possibility of implementing such an approach to L2 definite article instruction was based on an assessment of the overall L2 definite article production of a sample extracted from the Serbian L1/English L2 population.

3. THE METHOD

The main goals of the study included:

1. Determining L2 definite article production in obligatory contexts for the use of the definite article (as outlined by Lyons, 1999 as well as Huddleston and Pullum, 2002) of a sample of Serbian L1 college freshmen and seniors.
2. Determining whether the definite article instruction process can be facilitated by the figure/ground alignment (with the referent of the definite noun phrase as the figure) in the Serbian L1/English L2 environment.

Two groups of English language students took part in this study: 90 students each from the English Departments of the University of Nis and University of Kragujevac, Serbia (180 in total). They were divided into a freshman and senior sub-group (45 students each). Their L1 was Serbian. Any students who had spent time abroad, either living there or attending school, were excluded from the study, as were students who had passed any of the standard tests used to assess knowledge of the English language, including TOEFL or CAE.

Two questionnaires were used in the study: one to evaluate L2 definite article production in a set of obligatory contexts for the use of the definite article, and a second to assess whether or not figure/ground alignment would have a positive effect on their production of the definite article. The former consisted of a fill-in-the-blank task (31 sentences with 31 slots each requiring a particular article), but the participants were not instructed on which type of word was required to fill in each blank. Of the 31 sentences, 21 required the use of the definite article, while the remaining 10 sentences were fillers (of them, five required the indefinite article *a/an*, and the remaining five the zero article \emptyset). The 21 sentences were designed based on the seven different contexts included in the classifications provided by Lyons (1999) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002). They were each represented by three different sentences to control for the variable of countability (following Master's (1997) claim that a discussion on the use of the English article system must include count ability). The three sentences contained a countable singular (CSg), countable plural (CPl) and an uncountable noun (UC) each, which belonged to the same semantic field (for example, *shelf*, *chairs* and *furniture*).

The second questionnaire was based on the use of visual representations of figure/ground alignment (for a detailed overview of the use of visual representations in data elicitation see Mackey and Gass, 2005). It consisted of a sequence of illustrations resembling newspaper comics (five) or individual illustrations (four), each providing a contextualized whole. Figure/ground alignment was achieved by means of shading. The sequence of illustrations always began with a representation of numerous elements of the same kind (for example different kinds of flowers), with a depicted individual who had to choose only one element/group of elements, ending with an illustration in which the choice had clearly been made.

These illustrations were accompanied by 15 sentences meant for Serbian to English translation. For the sequences of illustrations (marked 1, 2, 5, 6, 9 in the questionnaire), two pairs of sentences were used each time (*a* and *b*). With the exception of sentences 6a and 6b, the first sentence which accompanied the first illustration always indicated the intention of the depicted individual to select a particular animate/inanimate entity (the English version of the sentence required the use of the indefinite article to introduce the element). The second sentence which accompanied the final illustration in a row specifically pointed out the desired element (this time, the English version of the sentence required the use of the definite article). Exceptions to the indefinite/definite pairings included the two sentences accompanying illustrations 4a and 4b, both of which refer to different elements found in the same illustration. Sentences 8 and 8' both required the use of the definite article for two different elements included in the same illustration (the illustration in question may be described as being reminiscent of an optical illusion). Two fillers were also included, requiring the indefinite article in both instances. All the illustrations, save the 'optical illusion', were the author's own work.

Task completion took place during the participants' regular tutorials. No time restrictions were given. For counterbalance, some of the participants were randomly instructed to do first one and then the other questionnaire, and vice versa for the others.

4. THE RESULTS

The first step was to determine overall L2 definite article production, and to identify whether any differences could be noted between the sub-groups of freshmen and seniors. The results were analyzed based on L2 definite article production in terms of the type of context for the obligatory use of the definite article and the count ability of the noun included in the items of the first questionnaire. The results for the seniors are shown in Tables 1 and the results for freshmen are shown in Table 2.

Table 1 The percentage of correct uses of the definite article based on context and count ability (seniors)

Context	Chg.	CPI	UC
Modification	89.0%	97.8%	95.6%
Anticipatory use	94.5%	89.0%	96.7%
Associative use	95.6%	82.4%	95.6%
Non-linguistic knowledge	95.6%	70.3%	97.8%
Situational use	84.6%	63.7%	85.6%
Anaphoric use	56.0%	81.3%	74.7%
Predication property	83.5%	20.9%	51.6%

Table 2 The percentage of correct uses of the definite article based on context and count ability (freshmen)

Context	Chg.	CPI	UC
Non-linguistic knowledge	86.5%	66.3%	86.5%
Anticipatory use	78.8%	50.6%	80.9%
Modification	64.0%	53.9%	89.9%
Associative use	68.5%	66.3%	57.3%
Anaphoric use	93.3%	46.1%	33.7%
Situational use	66.3%	37.1%	47.2%
Predication property	55.1%	39.3%	36.0%

A comparison of the results of the two sub-groups yielded the following: a high percentage of seniors (ranging between 80 and 90%) provided correct responses in 15 of the 21 sentences; a lower percentage of freshmen (ranging between 60 and 80%) provided correct responses in 10 of the 21 sentences. The seniors averaged 17 correct responses (80.9%), 20% more in comparison to the freshmen who averaged 13 correct responses (61.9%). An independent samples t-test determined the difference to be significant at the $p=0.000$ level. Based on these findings, the following was hypothesized: if the two sub-groups, while showing a statistically significant difference in their L2 definite article production, scored similar average results on the second questionnaire, there would be reason to consider including figure/ground alignment in L2 definite article instruction in the Serbian L1/English L2 environment.

Table 3 presents the results obtained on the Serbian to English translation task based on a visual representation of figure/ground alignment for both the freshmen and seniors.

Table 3 The percentage of correct responses on the Serbian to English translation task (freshmen and seniors)

Target sentence	Seniors	Freshmen
1a He wants to pick a flower .	97.8%	94.4%
1b He will pick the flower .	78.0%	73.3%
2a He wants to buy a flower .	92.3%	98.9%
2b He will buy the flower .	69.2%	66.7%
3 Pass me a plate .	78.0%	72.2%
4a Please pass me the lemon .	63.7%	55.6%
4b Please pass me an orange .	92.3%	83.3%
5a He needs a flower .	93.4%	100%
5b He will buy the tulip .	62.6%	44.4%
6a He wants Ø fruit .	54.9%	56.7%
6b He will take an apple .	87.9%	93.3%
7 Would you like a drink ?	81.3%	74.4%
8 The tree is by the river.	85.7%	85.6%
8* The tree is by the river .	99.3%	95.6%
9a He is looking for a cat .	70.3%	80.0%
9b He took the cat .	83.5%	86.7%

In this questionnaire, the definite article was required in 7 separate instances, with both sub-groups providing 5 correct responses on average (a success rate of 71.4%). The indefinite article was required in 8 different instances, with both sub-groups scoring 6 correct responses on average (with a success rate of 75%), and the zero article in just one instance, with both sub-groups scoring less than one correct response on average. Consequently, no differences were determined between the sub-groups on this particular task.

As a result, when it comes to the indefinite/definite pairings of sentences, no differences in the numerical values of the results could be noted: in 1a and 1b, 71.66% of all the participants correctly translated both sentences; in 2a and 2b, 65.55%; in 5a and 5b, 51.66%; and in 9a and 9b, 61.66% of all the participants.

5. DISCUSSION

The obtained results are analyzed based on sub-group, context, alternative responses and the count ability of the nouns in question.

The sub-group of seniors achieved the highest scores of correct L2 definite article production on the following contexts for the obligatory use of the definite article: modification, anticipatory use, associative use, and non-linguistic knowledge, in decreasing order. The lowest scores were recorded for situational use, anaphoric use and predication property, in decreasing order. Four sentences from the latter group will be analyzed in more detail for insight into L2 definite article production.

Correct L2 definite article production was lowest for two of the three sentences illustrating obligatory use based on predication property. In *Beware of the dogs!* (A countable plural noun, with approx. 20% correct responses provided) the definite noun phrase is required due to inferences made based on the context (i.e. the possible set), and the possibility of establishing mental contact with the referent(s) in question in the particular

discourse space. The exclamation mark was a clear indication that the information was meant to be interpreted as a warning, rather than a statement of fact. The more frequently used response was that of the zero article, which does, like the definite article, convey an existential presupposition among other things, but also provides a generic reading, and therefore does not convey the construal of the speaker in this instance. The lack of correct responses could be linked to insufficient contextualized material provided in the example. Had the example been accompanied by a cue such as: *Notice on a gate*, then the expected response might have been more frequent.

The second example, *All of a sudden, the anger got so strong it made it impossible for her to speak*. (an uncountable noun, with approx. 50% correct responses provided), is an example where one half of the participants opted for the possessive adjective. This alternative response was not surprising considering the previous discussion on how referential relations are established in Serbian (Đorđević 1989: 415). Trenkić (2002) indicated that in the Serbian language definiteness is only inferred in cases where identifiability of the referent is possible, i.e. when the speaker assumes the hearer can identify it. This may well be one of those instances where specificity ‘cross cuts’ definiteness (Ionin 2007), and where the anger is interpreted as being [+specific], requiring nothing more than an adjective.

Second, there is the obligatory context based on anaphoric use: *They have a boy and two girls. The boy is still a baby*. (a countable singular noun, with approx. 60% correct responses provided) where the indefinite article was the second most-frequently provided answer. A significantly higher percentage of correct responses was expected for this particular context, not only because the definite article has its roots in deictic elements, but also because in the most widely used textbooks among the participants included in this study (Thompson and Martinet (2004) for the group of freshmen, Eastwood (1999) for the seniors, inter alia) this is one of the first, if not the first, use of the definite article that is referred to. If even the advanced participants struggled with one of the most ‘basic’ rules of definite article use, this could make the case for the introduction of an alternative set of instructions.

Third, there is the obligatory context based on situational use: *The chairs will have to be moved in case something goes wrong*. (a countable plural noun, with approx. 60% correct responses provided), where the most frequently provided alternative was the demonstrative. The participants seem to recognize that language use should reflect/guide focus of attention as part of the construal, which can in turn imply the deictic use of a particular word, but seemingly based on their L1 interference, they opted for the familiar alternative.

The sub-sample of freshmen achieved the highest scores of correct L2 definite article production for the following obligatory contexts for the use of the definite article: non-linguistic knowledge, anticipatory use, modification, and associative use, in decreasing order. The lowest scores were recorded for anaphoric use, situational use, and predication property, in decreasing order. Eight sentences from the latter group will be analyzed in more detail for insight into the L2 definite article production of this sub-group.

Correct L2 definite article production was lowest in all three sentences illustrating definite article use based on predication property, with the highest percentage of correct responses not exceeding 55% for all three example sentences. The alternatives provided differed in all three cases: the indefinite article for the example which included the countable singular noun (*The racquet dropped from his hands as if it had grown numb.*), the zero article for the example which included a countable plural noun, and a possessive for the example which included an uncountable noun. This might indicate that in this case, count ability affected article choice; otherwise, the same alternative answers might have been expected across all three sentences.

The second context was the one based on situational use, where for the examples which included countable plural and uncountable nouns (for example, *the furniture has not been arranged properly.*) the percentage of correct responses did not exceed 40%, and in both instances a demonstrative was used instead of the definite article. The situation is reminiscent of the L2 production of the sub-group of seniors, where the necessity of focusing attention was recognized, but the production may have been marred by L1 interference.

The third context was based on anaphoric use, where for the examples containing a countable plural (*Two women and several children walked into the restaurant. I knew the women from somewhere.*) And uncountable noun (*Some people entered our yard. Even though it was dark, I could see the people were carrying bricks.*) Two demonstratives were again used more frequently than the definite article, which was provided in no more than 45% of the time. It would seem that L2 definite article production differed very little for the last two contexts, perhaps due to the deictic component inherent in both of them.

It was surprising that one of the contexts for the obligatory use of the definite article that all the participants scored a high percentage of correct responses was the context based on the presence of modification, since it is precisely this context that Trenkić (2009) determined was problematic for Serbian L1/ English L2 speakers. Her research indicated that article omission in L2 (definite) article production for these English language speakers resulted from their view that the definite article is unnecessary if the noun has been provided with the [+specific] feature, in this case through the inclusion of modification. Thus, low scores were expected, and not the 69.2% accuracy rate on average, which is high compared to the results the sub-group of freshmen scored in the remaining contexts, nor the 94% correct responses on average scored by the sub-group of seniors. An issue that should perhaps be taken into consideration is that in her research, Trenkić dealt with pre-modification in the form of single-word adjectives, while the examples in this study were mostly based on post-modification, i.e. the use of relative clauses, at a ratio of 2:1. This may be an indication that further study is needed to determine whether pre- or post-modification plays an important role in determining the use of *the* for this particular population. Such research would also require a greater number of examples than the ones provided here.

The participants were not expected to score a high percentage of correct responses for the anticipatory or cataphoric use of the definite article, or associative use, as most EFL teachers working in this environment would inform us based on their everyday in-class experience of working with L2 English speakers. This discrepancy may be accounted for the way in which the questionnaire was designed. The participants were offered individual sentences which were meant to be completed using a single word. In practice, when working with EFLs, L2 article production is mostly viewed through their written work that is contextualized and consists of longer segments, which in turn affects the referential relations being established. If more contextualized, longer segments had been provided for the fill-in-the-blank exercise, different findings may have been obtained.

And finally, the lowest scores of L2 definite article production were noted for contexts for the obligatory use of the definite article based on predication property, as was the case in the group of seniors. Both of the two sub-groups scored high on the same four contexts for the obligatory use of the definite article (presence of modification, anticipatory use, associative use, and non-linguistic knowledge) and low scores on the same three (situational use, anaphoric use, and predication property), however, in different order.

If the possibility of putting into practice figure/ground alignment as a means of visual representation of the underlying sense related to definite article use in the English language were to be illustrated, it could be done on one of the examples that both of the sub-groups of participants struggled with: *The racquet dropped from his hand as if it had grown numb*. All of the participants scored low percentages of correct responses for this context for the obligatory use of the definite article, irrespective of the type of noun used to illustrate it. The way that the sentence is worded requires us to go beyond its syntactic context. An analysis of the proposition itself is necessary, to determine where the speaker wanted us to focus our attention so that the hearer could recreate his construal. If the proposition itself assigns increased prominence to a particular referent in relation to the other referents, one that could visually be represented as the figure, it would be *the racquet*. The means by which prominence is achieved are of secondary importance (in this case it might be general knowledge of the world around us, or the process of association that is linked to it), and it is the final outcome, the selection of the desired referent at the expense of all the others in a particular discourse setting, that matters.

When it comes to the possible alternatives provided instead of the definite article, the two sub-groups provided similar responses: the zero article and the demonstrative. The latter is hardly surprising, due to the deictic feature it shares with the definite article, and the translational equivalents for the definite article in the Serbian language. In the case of the former, Trenkić (2002, 2004) claimed that in Serbian, information that the speaker believes the hearer to be conscious of, i.e. what he estimates to be the hearer's state of consciousness, is considered 'given' information, and is placed in the sentence initial position. However, there was no increased use of the zero article noted for instances when the noun phrase in question was found in sentence initial position for either of the sub-groups. Another possible explanation was provided by Veličković (2018) who stated that Serbian L1/English L2 speakers may tend to overuse the zero article with countable plural and uncountable nouns, which account for the majority of contexts in which this alternative was provided. Coupled with how prominence is achieved in Serbian and in English (including using the zero article with proper nouns), this may further cloud the issue.

When it comes to count ability, overall, the seniors were most successful when it came to using the definite article in the example sentences which included a countable singular noun, and least successful in using the definite article in the example sentences which included a countable plural noun, as were the freshmen. It may be the case that the former are more frequently encountered by this particular population during instruction, and that the frequency of occurrence accumulated over time led them to learn that 'a countable singular noun requires that a determiner precede it'. When it comes to countable plural nouns, there seems to be a widespread conclusion that these nouns are mostly used in a generic sense, and that because their reference is so 'broad' they are mostly found within bare noun phrases (Farkas and Swart, 2007).

This could provide a basis for us to push forth the idea that L2 definite article instruction could include the figure/ground alignment. If, as the results may lead us to conclude, in Serbian L1/English L2 definite article production count ability plays an important role, sometimes with a detrimental effect as seen previously, an account that does not focus on the grammatical features of the noun in question may be preferable. If using the definite article could be linked to representing the referent in question as a figure set against a ground, during the instruction process EFLs could be taught that definite article use in English reflects a particular construal that revolves around prominence. This could in turn help them in

situations when it is unclear as to which article is required, when both the zero article and the definite article, or the indefinite and the definite article are grammatically acceptable, but not equally appropriate.

Could this proposed theoretical account hold up in practice? Considering the fact that the two sub-groups of participants differed significantly in terms of their L2 definite article production on the fill-in-the-blank task, but were equally successful in their L2 definite article production as part of the Serbian to English translation task motivated by the visual representations of appropriate figure/ground alignment, there is reason to believe that the selected type of visual representation could be a suitable means of explaining an important aspect of the use of the definite article. This is borne out by the fact that the participants not only used the definite article when translating sentences that accompanied the appropriate figure/ground illustrations, but that they used the indefinite article when such a representation was not found in the illustrations. Thus, this could be considered a valid subject for further study.

6. CONCLUSION

This study attempted to analyze L2 definite article production in seven obligatory contexts for the use of the definite article. Even though the study included two groups of university students who differed significantly in their rate of correct L2 definite article production, it was marred by very similar issues (the choice of alternatives to the definite article, issues with count ability, overall persisting errors in L2 definite article production in the same contexts), indicating the need to re-evaluate the existing definite article instruction process. The goal was to provide a contribution to EFL classes in the Serbian L1 setting by identifying possible drawbacks, and suggesting an alternative means of illustrating the use of the definite article, both in a theoretical and practical sense. Since little work has been done gain insight into (definite) article production in this environment, the paper hopefully shed some light on these persistent problems. The alternative approach based on figure/ground alignment could prove to be a facilitating point in the instruction process tailored to the needs of this group of EFLs.

In summary, of the seven contexts for the obligatory use of the definite article, both sub-groups had the highest scores in the contexts based on modification, anticipatory use, associative use, and non-linguistics knowledge. The lowest scores were noted for situational use, anaphoric use, and predication property. The participants provided more correct responses for fill-in-the-blank sentences which included a countable singular noun and were not as successful when it came to sentences which included a countable plural noun, which may indicate issues with count ability. The second most frequently provided response was the zero article, which may be a consequence of L1 interference.

The results indicate that it would be beneficial if the L2 definite article instruction processes were to include more reference to context in general, since some of the lowest scores were noted for the context based on predication property which is directly linked to a broader understanding of the context, immediate or otherwise. Furthermore, the inclusion of longer sequences that would illustrate L2 definite article use, with a reduction in the number of single-sentence examples used for the same purpose could prove to be beneficial for the L2 definite article instruction process.

The varying levels of correct L2 definite article production did not affect the results that the participants achieved on the translation task meant to evaluate whether figure/ground alignment was a good visual representation of the underlying sense for L2 definite article use, since both groups of participants were equally successful on this task. However, these findings need to be retested before any definitive answers can be provided. This in turn leads us to consider the following issues for further study: including nouns other than a countable singular noun in the second questionnaire; including several age groups in further study; comparing the influence of pre- and post-modification on the use of the definite article; analyzing whether a correlation exists between the possessive adjective and definite article; and providing a practical in-class set of L2 article instructions that would include figure/ground alignment.

Acknowledgement: Prepared as a part of the project *Modern Trends in Researching English Linguistics and Anglophone Literature and Culture*, conducted at the University of Niš – Faculty of Philosophy (No. 183/1-16-1-01).

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UPOTREBA ODREĐENOG ČLANA U NASTAVI ENGLESKOG JEZIKA KAO STRANOG: PRIMER STUDENATA ANGLISTIKE

Ciljevi ovog istraživanja su sledeći: da se ispita efikasnost nastave engleskog jezika na primeru upotrebe određenog člana među studentima anglistike čiji je maternji jezik srpski, i da se proceni mogućnost upotrebe podele na šaru i pozadinu u ovom aspektu nastavnog procesa. Kako bi se ovi ciljevi ostvarili, upotrebljena su dva upitnika. U prvom upitniku se od ispitanika zahtevalo da date praznine popune jednim od tri člana engleskog jezika, kako bi se procenio njihov opšti nivo poznavanja upotrebe određenog člana. Drugi upitnik sastojao se od ilustracija koje su se bazirale na podeli na šaru i pozadinu, u kombinaciji sa rečenicama za prevod sa srpskog na engleski jezik, koju je na osnovu date ilustracije trebalo prevesti upotrebivši tačan član. Cilj je bio da se određeni član upotrebi u onim rečenicama koje su opisivale ilustracije na kojima je željeni referent prikazivan u vidu šare. Analizom dobijenih podataka utvrđeno je da ispitanici nisu ujednačeni po pitanju nivoa poznavanje upotrebe određenog člana, ali da su uprkos tome postigli identičan (zadovoljavajući) uspeh prilikom rešavanja zadatka u drugom upitniku. Ovi rezultati mogu se iskoristiti u cilju poboljšanja nastave engleskog jezika među izvornim govornicima srpskog jezika.

Ključne reči: *određeni član, izvorni govornici srpskog jezika, konteksti za obaveznu upotrebu određenog člana, podela na šaru i pozadinu*