

ARTICLE

## L1 Influence vs UG Access in L2 English: Examining Genericity and Specificity

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### ABSTRACT

Semantic features influence the second language (L2) use of articles, yet their interaction with the influences of both first language (L1) and Universal Grammar (UG) remains controversial. This study investigates whether and how genericity and specificity interact in L1 Arabic speakers' acquisition of indefiniteness in learning English as an L2. English indefinite generics are always definite in Arabic and specificity is not morphosyntactically realised in either language. The study recruited thirty-three participants, who were classified according to their proficiency levels (beginner or upper-intermediate) and used a multiple-choice article task to collect the data. The task items were all indefinite and had an equal number of generic, specific and non-specific singular and plural items. The findings revealed that: a) the beginner group incorrectly supplied *the* in all generic and specific contexts; b) the upper-intermediate group incorrectly supplied *the* in all generic contexts; and c) non-specific contexts were the least challenging for both groups. These results show that Arabic speakers at high proficiency levels struggle with genericity. They also reveal that the combination of semantic features results in different levels of difficulty. The findings indicate that learners' L1 influences their L2 acquisition of the generic semantic feature, while UG access facilitates the use of the specificity feature.

**Keywords:** Arabic; English; Generics; Indefinite; Specificity

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## 1. Introduction

One of the goals of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research since its inception has been to examine why L2 learners do not always produce utterances identical to the target language<sup>[1]</sup>. The most significant causes of this involve linguistic factors, including differences between a speaker's L1 and L2, and L1 transfer<sup>[2]</sup>, and b) cognitive factors related to what Chomsky<sup>[3]</sup> called UG<sup>[4]</sup>, a set of biologically inherent rules and principles that he thought were properties of human language per se, and c) factors related to the availability or absence of sufficient input<sup>[5]</sup>. The transfer of rules/principles from a learner's L1, as well as similarities between an L1 and an L2 have been thought to affect a learner's acquisition of an L2<sup>[6]</sup>. In the SLA literature, there is some doubt about whether an L2 learner still has access to UG after puberty. Moreover, further factors that affect the extent to which learners become target-like in the L2 are the quality and quantity of the teaching.

Genericity is a universal phenomenon that is expressed in different ways cross-linguistically<sup>[7]</sup>. It refers to the expression of general truths or kinds rather than specific entities. For example, the sentence 'Dogs are loyal' expresses a generic meaning in that it refers to dogs as a category, not individual animals. Fewer researchers have examined L2 generic article use among L2 learners than non-generic article use. Semantic features such as genericity, indefiniteness and specificity influence article use in languages that use articles. Indefiniteness typically marks unknown or new entities, while specificity refers to whether a speaker has a particular referent in mind. L2 learners of English have found the generic use of articles more challenging than the non-generic use<sup>[8]</sup>. In Arabic, generic nouns are always rendered as definite, whereas in English, they can be (in) definite. Specificity does not influence the use of articles in either language. This means that although a speaker's intent may involve a specific referent, it does not affect the form of the article used in either Arabic or English. Therefore, the way L1 Arabic speakers acquire L2 genericity, indefiniteness and specificity is fertile ground for the investigation of the relationship between the challenges faced by L2 learners and the factors that influence L2 acquisition. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate how the interaction between semantic features affects L1 Saudi Arabic speakers' L2 English article use. The rationale for this is that semantic features have

been found to be key factors that contribute to the linguistic challenges faced by L2 learners. Studies that address specificity effects have compared non-generic specific contexts with non-generic non-specific contexts. Generic contexts are always non-specific. For example, 'A tiger is a dangerous animal' is generic and non-specific, whereas 'I saw a tiger in the forest' is non-generic and specific. The present study therefore advances the investigation further by comparing two types of non-specific context (i.e., non-generic non-specific vs. generic non-specific), in addition to non-generic specific contexts.

The present study is situated in research on semantic features, specifically genericity and specificity, and how they interact with indefiniteness. Although previous research has investigated these features, few studies have examined their combined effects on article use. That is, it is not clear whether L2 challenges in using English articles are feature-specific or arise from the interaction of features. The significance of the study lies in the fact that such comparisons shed light on the interaction between two critical semantic features in L2 language acquisition: a) genericity, which is used differently in both languages; and b) specificity, which is used similarly in Arabic and English. These comparisons provide a unique opportunity to explore the extent to which L2 acquisition is influenced by linguistic similarities and/or differences. The study also investigates the extent to which semantic features, L1 transfer and the availability of UG guide L2 article use. The key research questions were as follows:

1. Do genericity and specificity influence article use?
2. Does L1 transfer play a role in article use?
3. Does UG play a role in article use?

To provide a linguistic background, the section below outlines the way articles are used in English and Arabic before discussing previous research in the literature review.

## 2. Linguistic Target

English has three articles: *the*, which is definite and *a* and *∅*, which are indefinite<sup>[9]</sup>. In contrast, Arabic has two articles: the definite *al-* and the indefinite *∅*<sup>[10]</sup>. The English *the* is used with singular, plural and mass nouns, whereas *a* is used with singular and *∅* with plural and mass nouns.

Concerning sentence types, there are two types of sen-

tences in English and Arabic: a) particular sentences convey information about specific entities, and b) generic sentences express generalities about the whole class<sup>[11]</sup>. Particular sentences are related to Ionin’s<sup>[12]</sup> semantic account. She proposed that there are two semantic features that control article use: specificity, which is related to circumstances where a speaker has a referent in mind, and definiteness which is related to circumstances in which both speaker and listener can

identify the referent. Languages such as Arabic and English use definite articles when a context is definite. Specificity settings are not relevant in these languages. Generic sentences are inherently non-specific. The present study focuses only on indefinite contexts with different semantic features (specific, non-specific and generic) with singular and plural nouns. **Table 1** shows how semantic features interact with singular and plural nouns in both languages.

**Table 1.** Genericity and specificity in indefinite article use: English and Arabic.

English Articles	Arabic Articles	Noun Type	Definiteness	Genericity	Specificity
<i>a</i>	<i>al-</i>	singular	–	+	–
$\emptyset$	<i>al-</i>	plural	–	+	–
<i>a</i>	$\emptyset$	singular	–	–	+
$\emptyset$	$\emptyset$	plural	–	–	+
<i>a</i>	$\emptyset$	singular	–	–	–
$\emptyset$	$\emptyset$	plural	–	–	–

It can be noted from the table that in Arabic the definite article *al-* is used in all generic contexts. This is not the case with English, which varies its article use according to noun type. Non-generic contexts are similar between Arabic and English except in singular nouns where English uses *a*. Specificity does not affect article use in either language. To make it easier to interpret the combination in the table, each row corresponds to a unique combination of the three features and noun number, as illustrated below with aligned examples. These contexts are illustrated for both languages in the examples below:

*English*

Generic

1. *A bird* has feathers. [indefinite, non-specific, singular]
2.  $\emptyset$  *Birds* have feathers. [indefinite, non-specific, plural]

English uses *a* with singular nouns to refer to the whole kind, and it uses  $\emptyset$  with plural nouns to express a general truth.

Nongeneric

1. I found *a flower*. It was beautiful. [indefinite, specific, singular]
2. I found *flowers*. They were beautiful. [indefinite, specific, plural]
3. I want to plant *a flower*, and I want it red. [indefinite, non-specific, singular]
4. I want to plant *flowers*, and I want them red. [indefinite, non-specific, plural]

The four non-generic examples above show that English uses *a* with indefinite singular nouns, while indefinite plural nouns take  $\emptyset$ . Neither type of noun is affected by the specificity setting.

*Saudi Arabic*

Generic

[generic, non-specific, singular]

1. Alṣaṣfur    luh    rish.  
The-bird    has    feathers.  
'*A bird* has feathers.'

[generic, non-specific, plural]

2. Alṣaṣfir    laha    rish.  
The-birds have    feathers.  
'*Birds* have feathers.'

Unlike English, Saudi Arabic consistently uses the definite article *al-* with both generic singular and plural nouns.

Nongeneric

[nongeneric, indefinite, specific, singular]

1. Lagit    wardah.    Kanat    hilwah.  
Found-I    flower.    It-was    beautiful.  
'I found *a flower*. It was beautiful.'

[nongeneric, indefinite, specific, plural]

2. Lagit    ward.    Kan    hilw.  
Found-I    flowers.    They-were    beautiful.  
'I found *flowers*. The were beautiful.'

[nongeneric, indefinite, non-specific, singular]

3. Abgha azraʕ wardah, wa abghaha hamara.  
Want-I plant flower, and want-I red.  
'I want to plant *a flower*, and I want it red.'

[nongeneric, indefinite, non-specific, plural]

4. Abgha azraʕ ward, wa abghah ahmar.  
Want-I plant flowers, and want-I-them red.  
'I want to plant *flowers*, and I want them red.'

In non-generic contexts, Saudi Arabic omits the article completely, regardless of whether the noun is singular or plural, specific or non-specific.

The differences between Arabic and English are evident here. While English uses various articles with generics, Arabic always uses *al-*. The next section discusses studies that investigate the L2 use of English generics.

### 3. Literature Review

From the earliest studies<sup>[13]</sup> to the most recent<sup>[14]</sup>, researchers have focused mainly on the non-generic use of articles among L2 English language learners. This section considers research with a greater focus on the acquisition of generics and semantic features by speakers of different L1 backgrounds.

Snape et al.'s<sup>[15]</sup> study investigated the article use of 188 upper-intermediate and advanced-level participants who were speakers of Spanish, Turkish, Japanese and Chinese. They were given a written task containing definite and indefinite generics. The researchers—predicted that Spanish speakers would overuse *the* and that Turkish, Chinese and Japanese speakers would omit articles, since these are article-less languages. The Spanish speakers outperformed the other groups as a result of their positive transfer of articles in definite generic contexts. Speakers in the other language groups struggled to supply articles in all contexts. The Spanish speakers used *the* with indefinite generic plural contexts which supports the role of L1 transfer. The study demonstrates that L1 background is influential, particularly in contexts involving abstract semantic features such as genericity and definiteness.

Snape<sup>[16]</sup> later examined the way a range of L1 Japanese speakers—categorised on a scale from intermediate to advanced—used the generic and non-generic *the*.

Japanese does not have articles. Using two written tasks to gather data, he aimed to explore the influence of L1 transfer and UG among Japanese L2 English learners. The participants distinguished between the two types of articles. Since their L1—Japanese—lacks articles, this suggests that they had access to UG rather than relying solely on L1 transfer.

Drawing on a sample of forty-one participants, Azaz<sup>[17]</sup> explored L1 English speakers' acquisition of Arabic plural definite generics. The forty-one participants were learning Arabic as an L2 and were classified as beginners, lower-advanced or highly-advanced based on the number of years they had been exposed to Arabic. They were given two written production tasks to complete, which revealed clear evidence of L1 transfer. Especially at the beginner level, the study's participants failed to use *al-* with generic plural nouns, and left them bare since generic plural nouns in English are bare. L1 transfer effects diminished at higher proficiency levels.

In a two-part experiment, Aboras<sup>[18]</sup> examined the role of specificity, definiteness and genericity among Saudi Arabic learners of L2 English. The first part addressed non-genericity with thirty-two students taking postgraduate courses in the UK. The second part addressed genericity with 160 undergraduate students who were students in an English department in Saudi Arabia. Multiple written tasks were used to gather the data. The participants performed accurately in non-generic but not in generic contexts, which showed L1 transfer effects. However, a key limitation of the study is that Aboras<sup>[18]</sup> made no direct comparisons between genericity and non-genericity, which limits the possibility of drawing conclusions about the interaction between these semantic features.

In the L2 acquisition of English generics, Köylü<sup>[19]</sup> recruited 19 Turkish, 20 Chinese and 20 Arabic speakers who were ESL learners in the United States of America. They were categorised as having either low or high proficiency based on an institutional placement test. Two written tasks were used: a fill-in-the-gap task and a grammaticality judgement task. The tasks covered definite and indefinite generic uses. Concerning indefinite uses, Arabic speakers struggled with indefinite singular and plural nouns, which are always definite in Arabic, but the Chinese and Turkish speakers did not. This reflects the influence of L1 transfer.

Jallalah<sup>[20]</sup> carried out an intervention study to investi-

gate the role of explicit instruction on the acquisition of genericity in light of linguistic accounts proposed by Slabakova<sup>[21]</sup> and Lardiere<sup>[22]</sup>. She recruited 64 Saudi-Arabic-speaking participants who were at a low proficiency level in addition to 20 English-speaking controls. Different written tasks were used, and the study's design was longitudinal (pre-test and multiple post-tests). The findings revealed that indefinite singular generics were the most challenging and that negative evidence was not effective. Indefinite plurals and definite singular generics were less challenging. This shows that their improvement was not the result of positive L1 transfer but rather evidence of access to UG. However, she only focused on generics and did not investigate specificity, an issue addressed in the present study.

The studies discussed above have shown that speakers of different L1 backgrounds (i.e., Arabic, Chinese, Spanish or Turkish) display different degrees of L1 transfer and access to UG. The present study explores this further by examining the potential interaction between genericity and specificity in article use. The methodology used to investigate this is described below.

## 4. Methodology

This study design is cross-sectional and quantitative. This design allowed for the comparison of article use across proficiency levels in different semantic contexts.

### 4.1. Participants

The participants were thirty-three Saudi undergraduates studying at a Saudi university. All were female and ranged in age from 18 to 20. To control for the potential influence of metalinguistic knowledge on their linguistic competence, the researcher ensured that none of them was specialising in English. An Oxford Quick Placement Test was used to assess their English proficiency. This test has six proficiency levels ranging from level one (beginner) to level six (very advanced). The test has been used in numerous studies due to its placement efficacy<sup>[23]</sup>. Twenty-two participants were at the beginner level, while eleven were at level four (the upper-intermediate level). The rationale for this was to assess how performance might change if the proficiency levels were distinct enough to find potential differences. The reason the groups were not the same size is related to the difficulty of

finding highly advanced participants at the university-level who had neither specialised in English nor been brought up in English-speaking countries. Recruiting such participants could affect the homogeneity of the sample because their exposure to English would likely be different from that of other participants. For instance, those who studied English formally at advanced levels or had lived in English-speaking countries might rely on their metalinguistic knowledge or naturalistic input.

### 4.2. Instruments

The study adapted Snape's<sup>[24]</sup> multiple-choice article task. Participants were given thirty-six dialogues to complete, twenty-four of which were in non-generic, indefinite, (non) specific singular and plural contexts and twelve of which were indefinite, generic singular and plural contexts. A dialogue consists of three conversational lines with a blank in the third line, and the participants must choose one of three options (articles) to fill in the blank. Such tasks allow researchers to control the semantic features and number of target nouns, which is not possible to control in free-writing tasks.

The Oxford Quick Placement Test is a standardised tool with high reliability for measuring L2 proficiency. The multiple-choice article task was piloted with a small group of learners (not included in the main study) to ensure clarity of instructions and items.

### 4.3. Procedure

First, the participants took the proficiency test. Then—on a separate day—they completed the experimental test, as taking both tests at the same time may have led to fatigue and affected the quality of their answers. As in Snape's<sup>[20]</sup> study, participants were given only half an hour to complete the proficiency test. However, to allow them to complete the second task with no time pressure, participants were allowed to complete the multiple-choice article task at their own pace, although they were instructed not to overthink their answers.

### 4.4. Data Analysis

The responses from the article task were coded and grouped based on semantic features and noun type. Accuracy

scores were calculated for each context type, and descriptive statistics were used to summarise the performance of every group. Due to the non-normality of the data, non-parametric statistical tools were utilised. Non-parametric tests were chosen to ensure robust results despite the small sample size. Mann-Whitney U tests (accepted significance level is  $p < 0.05$ ) were used to compare both groups in each context. To address semantic factors, Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks tests (accepted significance level is  $p \leq 0.016$ ) were used to compare article use between the three semantic contexts: specific, non-specific and generic. The rationale for adjusting the significance value when conducting Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks tests is to avoid false positive results, as recommended by Armstrong<sup>[25]</sup>. To ensure objectivity and reliability, responses were blind-coded and analysed in SPSS.

#### 4.5. Ethical Consideration

All participants were assured of anonymity and consented to take part in the study by signing a form. The neces-

sary ethical approval was obtained from the institute where the experiment was carried out.

### 5. Results

The results section starts by reporting the accuracy percentages of both groups in each context to visually represent the beginner and upper-intermediate groups' article use trends. This is followed by inferential statistical analyses to examine the research questions related to the role of semantics and article use.

Figures 1 and 2 show a relationship between semantic features, proficiency and accuracy levels. In terms of proficiency, participants in the upper-intermediate category showed themselves to be significantly more accurate than those in the beginner category. Of the different contexts, generic contexts were the most challenging for both groups followed by specific contexts. These visual observations were statistically analysed in Table 2.

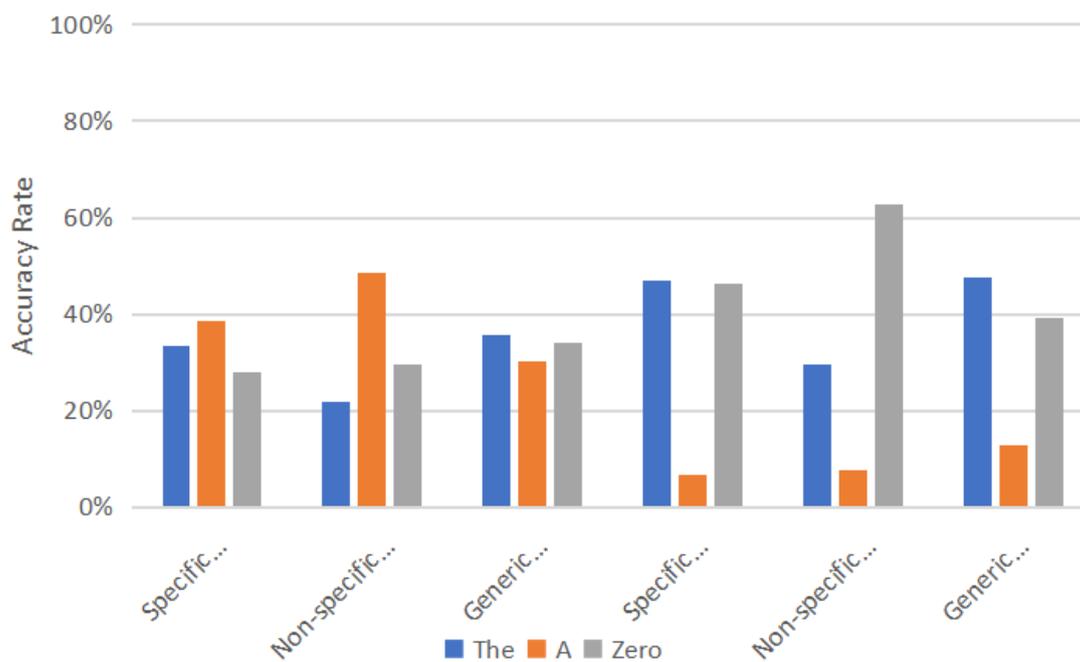


Figure 1. Article use across contexts—beginner group.

Table 2. Article use accuracy: comparisons between proficiency levels (Mann-Whitney U test).

Noun	Specific			Non-Specific			Generic		
	The	A	Ø	The	A	Ø	The	A	Ø
Singular	33.000 $p < 0.001$	23.000 $p < 0.001$	81.000 $p = 0.133$	61.000 $p = 0.021$	26.500 $p < 0.001$	50.000 $p = 0.006$	105.000 $p = 0.560$	24.000 $p < 0.001$	21.500 $p < 0.001$
Plural	34.000 $p < 0.001$	112.500 $p = 0.749$	32.500 $p < 0.001$	56.500 $p = 0.012$	115.000 $p = 0.836$	69.000 $p = 0.048$	99.000 $p = 0.418$	78.000 $p = 0.105$	54.000 $p = 0.009$

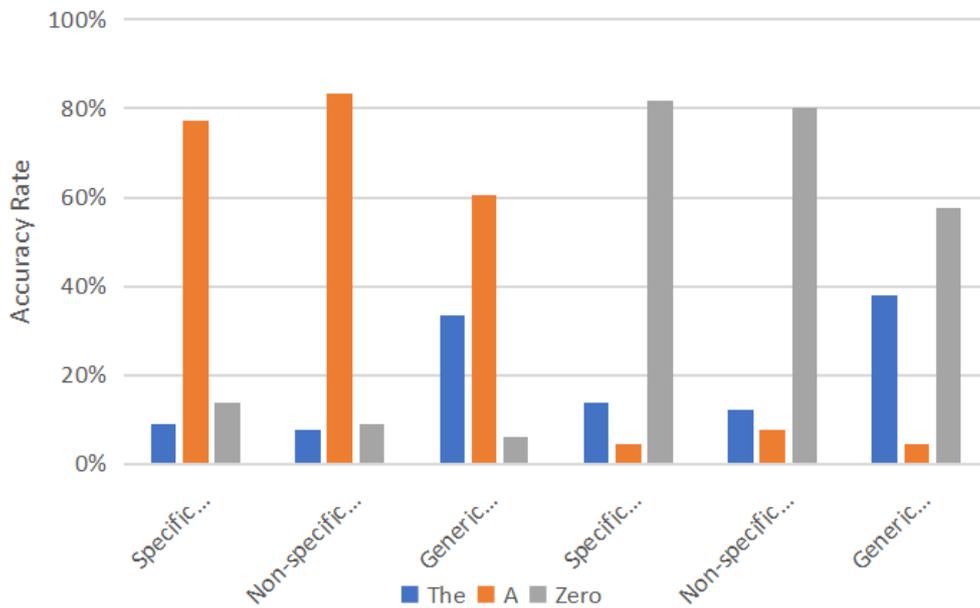


Figure 2. Article use across contexts—upper-intermediate group.

Comparisons between the groups revealed that those in the upper-intermediate category, in all contexts, outperformed those in the beginner group, as reflected in the statistically significant differences for all target articles (a with singulars and  $\emptyset$  with plurals). This was especially so for specific and non-specific contexts. However, no differences were found in the generic contexts.

For singular contexts, the beginner group was more accurate in non-specific than in generic and specific. No

differences were found between specific and generic. Conversely, the upper-intermediate group’s performance was similar in specific and non-specific but was less accurate in generic than in specific and non-specific (Table 3).

Similar to singular contexts, the beginner group demonstrated greater accuracy in non-specific than in generic and specific. This group performed similarly in specific and generic. In generic, the upper-intermediate group demonstrated greater use of *the* than they did in either specific or non-specific (Table 4).

Table 3. Article accuracy across contexts—singular (Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test).

Group	Specific vs Non-specific			Specific vs. Generic			Non-specific vs. Generic		
	The	A	$\emptyset$	The	A	$\emptyset$	The	A	$\emptyset$
Beginner	$z = -2.501$ $p = 0.012$	$z = -2.647$ $p = 0.008$	$z = -0.151$ $p = 0.880$	$z = -0.474$ $p = 0.636$	$z = -1.417$ $p = 0.156$	$z = -1.463$ $p = 0.143$	$z = -2.189$ $p = 0.029$	$z = -2.404$ $p = 0.016$	$z = -0.938$ $p = 0.348$
Upper-Intermediate	$z = -0.736$ $p = 0.461$	$z = -0.539$ $p = 0.590$	$z = -0.791$ $p = 0.429$	$z = -2.820$ $p = 0.005$	$z = -2.124$ $p = 0.034$	$z = -1.188$ $p = 0.235$	$z = -2.684$ $p = 0.007$	$z = -2.273$ $p = 0.023$	$z = -0.324$ $p = 0.746$

Table 4. Article accuracy across contexts—plural (Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test).

Group	Specific vs Non-specific			Specific vs. Generic			Non-specific vs. Generic		
	The	A	$\emptyset$	The	A	$\emptyset$	The	A	$\emptyset$
Beginner	$z = -2.54$ $p = 0.011$	$z = -0.184$ $p = 0.854$	$z = -2.260$ $p = 0.024$	$z = -0.026$ $p = 0.979$	$z = -1.564$ $p = 0.118$	$z = -1.070$ $p = 0.284$	$z = -3.090$ $p = 0.002$	$z = -1.869$ $p = 0.062$	$z = -3.432$ $p = 0.001$
Upper-Intermediate	$z = -0.276$ $p = 0.783$	$z = -1.000$ $p = 0.317$	$z = -0.171$ $p = 0.864$	$z = -2.558$ $p = 0.011$	$z = -0.378$ $p = 0.705$	$z = -2.475$ $p = 0.013$	$z = -2.534$ $p = 0.011$	$z = -1.512$ $p = 0.131$	$z = -1.969$ $p = 0.049$

Since Arabic speakers overused *the*, Table 5 compares the target uses in each singular context (i.e., *a*) with  $\emptyset$  in each

plural counterpart in addition to comparing *the* in singular to plural contexts.

**Table 5.** Article accuracy across contexts—singular vs. plural (Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test).

Group	Specific		Non-Specific		Generic	
	A vs. Ø	The vs. The	A vs. Ø	The vs. The	A vs. Ø	The vs. The
Beginner	$z = -1.450$ $p = 0.147$	$z = -2.552$ $p = 0.012$	$z = -2.537$ $p = 0.013$	$z = -1.423$ $p = 0.155$	$z = -1.316$ $p = 0.188$	$z = -1.920$ $p = 0.055$
Upper-Intermediate	$z = -0.256$ $p = 0.798$	$z = -0.690$ $p = 0.490$	$z = -0.552$ $p = 0.581$	$z = -0.957$ $p = 0.339$	$z = -0.211$ $p = 0.833$	$z = -0.641$ $p = 0.521$

The beginner group used *the* more in specific plural than in specific singular but were more target-like in specific plural than in specific singular. No other significant differences were found.

These results highlight that article use varies by semantics and proficiency. The beginner group struggled with specific and generic contexts, whereas the upper-intermediate group found generic contexts most challenging. These findings are discussed in the following section.

## 6. Discussion

This section discusses the findings in relation to both previous research and to the research questions, which are repeated below:

1. Do genericity and specificity influence article use?
2. Does L1 transfer play a role in article use?
3. Does UG play a role in article use?

Concerning the roles of genericity and specificity, the comparisons between semantic features revealed that the beginner group had greater difficulty with genericity and specificity than with non-specificity. This is confirmed by their results with singular and plural nouns, to the extent that they exhibited no significant differences in article use in either the specific or the generic context. Those in the upper-intermediate group struggled only with the generic context, as shown by the comparisons between the three semantic features. These findings confirm the influence of semantic features on article use, and this supports Aboras<sup>[18]</sup>, Azaz<sup>[17]</sup>, Jallalah<sup>[20]</sup>, Köylü<sup>[19]</sup>, Snape<sup>[16]</sup>, and Snape et al.<sup>[15]</sup>.

The question arises whether the semantic effects are related to L1 transfer or UG access. Arabic has  $\emptyset$  and specificity is not relevant in article use. The beginner group struggled more with the specific singular *a* than with the specific plural  $\emptyset$ . This can be explained either by the fact that *a* is syntactically less complex than  $\emptyset$  or by L1 transfer

(Arabic lacks *a*). Aboras<sup>[18]</sup> did not find any specificity effects among her Saudi speakers' use of articles. The present study's participants are similar to those of Aboras except that her participants specialised in English. This study deliberately avoided recruiting such participants, who may have had a lot of teaching that could affect their natural linguistic development. Concerning generics, their complex nature was revealed by the fact that this was the only area in which the upper-intermediate group struggled. They associated the with generics in all their within-group comparisons. Moreover, between-group comparisons in all contexts, including generics, revealed that members of the upper-intermediate group performed better than those in the beginner group, but that the upper-intermediate group's use of the *in* singular and plural generic was similar to the beginner group. This shows that in the case of generics, learners' use of *the* persists, even where they are highly proficient. The overuse of the *is* is supported for Arabic speakers' article use in the work of Aboras<sup>[18]</sup> and Köylü<sup>[19]</sup>, and for Spanish speakers in the study by Snape et al.<sup>[15]</sup> regardless of proficiency and educational backgrounds.

L1 transfer can explain the beginner group's overuse of the generic but not in specific. L2 learners of English who are at the initial state either: a) transferred from their L1, where that language contained a similar target grammar; and b) accessed UG when their L1 lacked the target language grammar<sup>[26]</sup>. If their L1 had both features, why did they rely on L1 transfer in generic contexts but not in specific? It can be proposed that L1 transfer does not function with all semantic features and that semantic features vary in complexity, and this plays a role in variation in article use. This is supported by the upper-intermediate group's performance as they used articles correctly regardless of the specificity setting, but they struggled with overuse of the *in* generic cases. Specificity can cause confusion to beginner learners as it refers to something that the speaker knows which can be mistaken for definiteness. On the other hand, genericity can

be a challenge for L2 learners because they have to differentiate between nouns that refer to the whole class and nouns that refer to individuals. Added to this complexity is the fact that generics are marked differently across languages as can be seen in Arabic and English. It is plausible to assume that UG access is responsible for the acquisition of specificity and that L1 transfer is responsible for the acquisition of genericity. This can be noted in the beginner group, which was not able to transfer specificity and had to access UG to correctly set the parameter. Arabic speakers depended on their knowledge of how generics are grammaticalised in Arabic. The fact that Snape's<sup>[16]</sup> Japanese speakers distinguished between the two semantic features in definite contexts despite the fact that their L1 lacks articles indicates that the L2 acquisition of article semantics is not governed solely by L1 transfer or UG access.

These findings show that semantic features (genericity and (non)-specificity) influence article use. It can be proposed that L1 influence is evident in generic use, whereas UG access is evident in specificity. One open question is whether L2 Arabic speakers can recover from linking *the* to generics or whether this error has become fossilized. Since the present study did not recruit more proficient speakers, this question cannot be answered. However, given that the upper-intermediate group recovered from struggling with specificity, it may be plausible to assume that this could be the case with generics. The role of explicit instruction should be considered since the results of the present study are not identical to those of Aboras<sup>[18]</sup> and Jallalah<sup>[20]</sup> despite the fact that the participants had similar characteristics. In light of the above, further research is needed to find out whether the article use patterns revealed by this study hold across L2 English learners from different educational backgrounds and who speak other languages as their L1.

Although the present study provides insight into the role of generics and specificity in L1 Arabic speakers' article use, future research will need to consider several limitations. In the first place, the study focused only on one L1 background. Including English learners from languages that do not have articles (e.g., Korean) and those whose L1 has articles (e.g., Spanish) would allow for a more comprehensive view of the role of L1 background and may reveal other article use trends. The study used a written task, and future research should consider using oral tasks. Oral production

data would allow for examining more spontaneous linguistic output that may show different article use patterns under real-time communicative pressure, which is less dependent on metalinguistic knowledge. The study did not recruit participants at near-native levels, and future research should consider this, despite the fact that it is challenging to find participants at such high levels who have not received an excess of English instruction. In fact, investigating near-native speakers' data may provide insight into whether generic misuses would resolve at this level, and this is central to the long-standing debate about the ultimate attainment of article semantics. Finally, this study only examined indefiniteness and future research should also include definiteness. By incorporating both definiteness and indefiniteness, future research could provide a more comprehensive perspective on article use challenges.

## 7. Conclusion

This study addressed the question of the interaction of genericity and specificity with indefiniteness in L2 article acquisition as well as whether trends in article use can be interpreted in relation to L1 transfer and/or UG access. The findings revealed that L1 influences the way L2 learners approach the generic semantic feature at both beginner and upper-intermediate proficiency levels. Conversely, UG access can facilitate the acquisition of the specificity feature. Overuse of *the* persists at the upper-intermediate level, which indicates that this overuse could become fossilized. This has important theoretical and pedagogical implications: theoretically, it is in line with the position that there are certain semantic features that cannot be acquired fully due to L1 transfer; while pedagogically, it suggests that explicit instruction is needed to potentially help L2 learners acquire them. These results add to what we already know about semantic effects on L2 article use and highlight the need to further investigate other semantic features in different L1 backgrounds. Such insights support the view that functional morphology is constrained by both L1 transfer and UG, which indicates that there is an interaction between input and underlying semantics in interlanguage development. Overall, the present study contributes to the ongoing debate in generative SLA by showing that accessibility to UG is shaped by L1 influence, which influences the trajectory of L2 article acquisition.

This raises questions about the limits of ultimate attainment and the role of explicit instruction in overcoming persistent difficulties.

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## Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Scientific Research Ethics Committee at Taif University (Approval No. 45-136, HAPO-02-T-105).

## Informed Consent Statement

Consent was obtained from all participants.

## Data Availability Statement

All the data collected were analysed.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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