Tonina Ibrulj [1]
University of Mostar
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
English Language and Literature

Ivana Zovko-Bošnjak
University of Mostar
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
English Language and Literature

DEFINITENESS AND ENGLISH ARTICLES AS CHALLENGES FOR CROATIAN EFL LEARNERS

Abstract: *This paper explores the challenges faced by Croatian native speakers - students of English- in acquiring the article system (a, an, the). Since the Croatian language does not possess a grammatical category of articles, students must learn an entirely new grammatical structure and the concept of definiteness/indefiniteness. Through a theoretical framework grounded in cognitive linguistics and an empirical error analysis based on a gap-filling task, the paper shows that students often perceive definiteness differently from native speakers. The results indicate that the strict application of rules leads to systematic errors, whereas a meaning- and context-based approach enables greater accuracy and understanding. The analysis of three student groups (students of English, computer science, and law) reveals that academic discipline affects success in article use, with English language students demonstrating the highest accuracy. The paper highlights the need for a balance between grammatical explanation and contextual practice in language teaching.*

Keywords: *articles; English language; definiteness; cognitive linguistics; teaching English as a foreign language.*

1. Introduction

The English article system represents one of the most persistent challenges in both teaching and learning English. In teaching practice and according to the

[1] tonina.ibrulj@sum.ba

literature, it is observed that teachers have difficulty finding a way to introduce students to the use of articles, and despite many years of learning, students still make repetitive mistakes, even at advanced levels. The problem is especially noticeable in the case of Croatian speakers, since their native language lacks a grammatical article system. Unlike learners of French, for example, who can draw on parallels such as *a/an* with *un/une* and *the* with *le/la/les*, Croatian learners do not have any equivalent forms in their language to guide them (Kałuza, 1963).

Since Croatian lacks articles, definiteness is not expressed grammatically but is instead understood through context, word order, or other linguistic elements. In the EFL classroom, articles are usually introduced through the concept of definiteness, with teachers explaining that *the* signals definiteness while *a/an* signals indefiniteness. However, such explanations tend to oversimplify the phenomenon. In most textbooks they are accompanied by long lists of rules and exceptions which students are expected to memorize. As Brala-Vukanović (2013) observes, these rules present two major problems: they do not cover the full range of article use, and they lack a unifying semantic principle that would explain why articles work the way they do. This often leaves learners with the impression that article use is arbitrary and unpredictable.

This difficulty points to the broader issue of how definiteness itself is understood and processed by learners. What makes a noun definite or indefinite? How do Croatian learners perceive these concepts when no grammatical system in their L1 requires them to make such distinctions? And, importantly, how effective are traditional teaching methods that rely heavily on prescriptive rules?

The present study seeks to address these questions by combining theoretical perspectives from cognitive linguistics with empirical data from an error analysis. The central hypothesis is that L2 learners of English often perceive definiteness differently from native speakers, particularly when deciding whether a noun should be treated as definite or indefinite. In many cases, they are misled by rules that are too rigid and fail to capture how meaning and context actually shape article use.

To test this hypothesis, the study sets out three main research questions:
1. How do L2 learners perceive and apply definiteness in English, particularly when distinguishing between definite and indefinite nouns?
2. Do students from different academic disciplines (English, Computing, Law) differ in their accuracy of article use, and if so, how?
3. To what extent does reliance on long, rigid lists of article rules contribute to systematic errors in article use across learner groups?

By exploring these questions, the study aims not only to document common errors but also to show how article use is closely tied to perception, discourse, and context. In doing so, it connects theoretical insights with practical implications for teaching English to Croatian learners.

2. The Semantics of Definiteness

English articles lack direct equivalents in Croatian, which leads to persistent confusion. While French learners may relate English articles to their equivalents (e.g., *un/une, le/la/les*), Croatian learners face a different challenge - Croatian does not grammaticalize definiteness. As Kałuza (1963) notes, Slavic speakers often struggle to internalize article use due to the lack of analogous structures in their native language. The linguistic category of definiteness and indefiniteness is frequently viewed as a universal feature of human languages, meaning that it is considered an inherent part of the linguistic knowledge possessed by all language learners. This feature, as described by Chomsky (2002), is seen as a core aspect of universal grammar that transcends individual languages. Similarly, Silić (2000) argues that the expression of definiteness and indefiniteness plays a crucial role in sentence structure across different languages, further supporting the idea of its universality in human language systems.

Lyons (1999) states and Trenkić (2000) confirms that to understand the concept of definiteness, it is essential to differentiate between two types of definiteness: semantic/pragmatic definiteness and grammatical definiteness. Semantic or pragmatic definiteness refers to the listener's ability to identify a specific referent within a discourse. A referent is considered definite if it is identifiable, unique, and can be retrieved from the surrounding context (Heim, 1982; Gundel et al., 1993). In contrast, indefinite expressions serve to introduce new or non-specific entities that have not yet been established or identified within the ongoing discourse.

As Lyons made distinction between grammatical definiteness and semantic/pragmatic definiteness, he specifies that "definiteness stricto sensu is not a semantic or pragmatic notion as assumed by almost all writers on the subject but rather a grammatical category on a par with tense, mood, number, gender etc." (1999:pp.274–275). Therefore, it can be understood as the grammaticalization of semantic/pragmatic definiteness. However, not all languages grammaticalize this element, and only those languages which show overt definiteness marking (such as articles) have a grammatical definiteness system.

A comparable view is expressed by Lambrecht, who conceptualizes definiteness "as the imperfect grammatical reflection of the non-discrete pragmatic category of identifiability" (Lambrecht, 1994:p.92). In other words, Lambrecht sees definiteness not just as a strictly grammatical feature but as something that also reflects broader pragmatic aspects of communication, particularly the ability of a speaker to indicate which entities are identifiable within a given context. This perspective highlights that the grammatical markers of definiteness are in some sense an imperfect representation of a more complex, context-dependent process of identifying referents.

Croatian, unlike English, does not have a system of articles and therefore, does not obligatorily mark definiteness in a standard way. Therefore, definiteness and identifiability are mostly recognized from the context rather than marked by grammatical rules. "Discoursal marking of elements that are usually seen as carrying some part of the semantic load of definiteness relate to word order and information structure" (Brala Vukanović, 2013:p.174). Nominals often appear without any specific marker, and their definiteness depends on the surrounding discourse. Sometimes, determiners or modifiers can appear and give a sense of definiteness but there is no marker that fully express (in)definiteness.

This means that definiteness in Croatian is understood more through pragmatics than through strict grammatical structures. It's the context that helps listeners recognize whether something is definite or indefinite, and this understanding does not rely on specific rules or markers within the language itself.

Therefore, we can conclude that definiteness is not grammatically represented in Croatian. This fundamental difference helps explain the challenges Croatian learners of English face with article use, as they must not only learn new forms but also internalize a grammatical category that does not exist in their native language.

3. Learning the English Article System and Challenges for Croatian Speakers

The learning of the English article system has long been recognized as problematic for second language (L2) learners, particularly for speakers of languages that do not include article systems such as Croatian and other Slavic languages (Master, 1997; Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004; Trenkić, 2008). Learners whose native languages include articles often rely on structural parallels, whereas speakers of languages without articles must learn a completely new grammatical category. The literature consistently shows that L2 learners make predictable errors: omission of articles, substitution of *a* for *the* or vice versa, and overuse of the definite article with ref-

erents that are not unique or contextually identifiable (Master, 1997; Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004). Errors are particularly pronounced among Croatian learners, who may systematically omit articles, overuse *the* with new or non-specific nouns, or misapply *a/an* in contexts requiring definiteness (Ionin et al., 2004; Trenkić, 2008).

One source of these systematic errors lies in the nature of definiteness as a linguistic category. Lyons (1999) distinguishes between semantic/pragmatic definiteness, referring to the universal concept of identifiability and grammatical definiteness, which is the language-specific encoding of that concept. Identifiability is a pragmatic notion present in all languages, reflecting the hearer's ability to recognize a referent, but only some languages, like English, grammaticalize it through articles. Hawkins (1991) points out that in English, the definite article signals that the speaker assumes the hearer can uniquely identify the referent, whereas the indefinite article introduces a new, non-unique referent into discourse. "*The* and *a* therefore provide a grammatically, and a psycholinguistically real contrast set, in which the is the logically stronger member of the pair" (Hawkins, 1991:p.417). Trenkić confirms that Croatian learners, by contrast, assume definiteness from context, word order, demonstratives, or possessives as "there are determiner-like elements (on a par with English possessive or demonstrative determiners, for example) that can optionally precede a noun" (2008:p.301), making the explicit marking of definiteness through articles a significant conceptual shift.

From a cognitive linguistics perspective, article use is not merely a matter of syntax but also of categorization and perspective-taking (Langacker, 1991; Tyler, 2012). Consequently, "domains are construed as cognitive entities, representational spaces, conceptual complexes of varying levels of intricacy and organisation" (Muhić, 2024:p.314). Learners must assess whether a referent is unique, identifiable, or specific within discourse and then select the appropriate article form. This requires both linguistic knowledge and pragmatic sensitivity, which is especially challenging for speakers of languages that do not encode these distinctions. Learners often use strategies from their first language or simple "rules of thumb," such as "use *the* for important nouns" or "use *a* for first mention," which can lead to mistakes (Master, 1997; Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004).

Traditional grammar teaching, as exemplified by Quirk et al. (1991) and Swan (1996), often relies on prescriptive rules and exceptions. For learners whose first language lacks articles, this is especially challenging, because memorizing rules alone does not ensure they understand how articles function in context. Rules such as "use *the* for unique objects" or "use *a* for first mention" are oversimplified and may encourage learners to apply articles mechanically, disregarding context

(Brala-Vukanović, 2013; Trenkić, 2008). L2 learners often use these rules too rigidly and fail to pay attention to the context in which articles are used.

Meaning-based approaches take a different view, stressing that article use is not just about rules but about how language connects the speaker, the listener, and the referent. Learners are encouraged to consider whether the referent is identifiable to the hearer, whether it is new information, or whether it refers to a category as a whole or a specific instance. Cognitive linguistic pedagogy suggests that exposure to authentic discourse and contextualized tasks, such as comparing minimally different sentences (*I saw a doctor* vs. *I saw the doctor*), can enhance learners' sensitivity to these pragmatic distinctions (Tyler, 2012).

Empirical research supports this approach. Studies indicate that learners who receive meaning-based instruction demonstrate greater accuracy in article use, particularly in contexts where rigid rules are insufficient (Ionin et al., 2004). For Croatian learners, whose first language does not mark definiteness, teaching based on meaning helps them connect general communication strategies to English articles, making it easier to use them correctly in context instead of just memorizing rules (Brala-Vukanović, 2013; Trenkić, 2008).

In conclusion, the acquisition of the English article system is both a conceptual and structural challenge for Croatian learners. Success relies on developing a sensitivity to pragmatic cues and the ability to interpret referents in context, rather than just memorizing prescriptive rules. Seeing definiteness as a universal category that is expressed differently across languages helps explain why learning English articles is slow, prone to errors, and closely linked to understanding discourse.

4. Rule-Based vs. Meaning-Based Instruction

Pedagogical approaches to teaching the English article system traditionally rely on rule-based instruction. Learners are introduced to explicit lists of conditions for using *a/an*, *the*, or zero article, often supplemented with numerous exceptions (Quirk et al., 1991; Swan, 1988). While such instruction has the advantage of clarity and systematization, it tends to reduce article use to mechanical procedures. For learners whose L1 does not mark definiteness through articles, this approach may result in overgeneralization and fossilization of errors. Traditional grammar explanations of articles are often dominated by so-called "exceptions", giving learners the impression that the rules are unpredictable and difficult to master.

In Croatian schools, children start learning English at the age of seven and continue throughout primary and secondary education. Teachers are usually non-native

speakers (Croatian L1) educated at local universities, and exposure to English in the classroom is limited to a few hours per week. Given this limited input, it is unrealistic to expect that students will acquire the article system naturally; articles must be explicitly taught as a new grammatical category. However, analysis of commonly used textbooks shows that the article system does not receive much attention, as teachers tend to focus on tenses, nouns, gender, and case (Brala-Vukanović, 2013). Articles are often skipped or only briefly mentioned, partly because teachers themselves may lack confidence in their use. As a result, students are usually presented with prescriptive rules, such as "use *the* before unique objects," often accompanied by long lists of exceptions. Brala-Vukanović (2013) highlights two major shortcomings of such rules: first, they do not cover all usage types and are inefficient at the predictive level; second, they fail to provide a semantic basis explaining what unites different article usages, contributing to learners' perception of arbitrariness and confusion.

Rule-based instruction presumes that learners can directly apply prescriptive norms to authentic discourse. However, L2 learners often misapply rules because they interpret them rigidly, without recognizing the role of discourse context (Trenkić, 2008). For instance, the rule "use *the* when the noun is unique" is misleading in contexts such as generic reference (*The tiger is an endangered species*), where uniqueness is not tied to a specific identifiable referent. Similarly, rules suggesting "use *a* for first mention" fail when the speaker assumes shared knowledge of the referent. Such oversimplifications reinforce errors rather than promote understanding.

Meaning-based instruction, by contrast, shifts the focus to how articles encode relationships between speaker, hearer, and referent. Lambrecht (1994) and Lyons (1999) discuss that one of the best approaches to understanding articles is through cognitive and pragmatic perspectives, which emphasize how identifiable, familiar, and prominent referents are within a given context. Instead of dealing with articles through fixed grammatical rules, they can be seen as tools that help speakers manage how information is conveyed. Therefore, the authors suggest that learners reflect on questions such as: is the referent recognizable to the listener? Is it new information? Does it point to a general category or a specific instance? These considerations illustrate the intuitive processes that native speakers carry out without conscious thought. Lambrecht (1994) and Lyons (1999) further note that mastering articles depends on interpreting their referential function in context, rather than simply memorizing rules, which explains why Croatian learners often struggle to connect article use with discourse meaning.

Cognitive linguistic pedagogy (Tyler, 2012) suggests that learners benefit from exposure to authentic discourse where article use is seen in context. Activities such

as comparing minimally different sentences (*I saw a doctor* vs. *I saw the doctor*) high-light the meaning differences rather than just form. Empirical evidence indicates that learners who receive meaning-based instruction develop greater accuracy in article use, particularly in contexts where rules alone are insufficient (Ionin et al., 2004). Combining exercises that focus on meaning with clear rule guidance can improve learning, since rules offer structure while exposure to real contexts develops learners' sensitivity to how language is used.

For Croatian learners, the benefits of meaning-based instruction are especially pronounced. Since their L1 lacks grammaticalized definiteness, rule-based instruction may appear arbitrary and disconnected from their linguistic experience. Focusing instead on universal concepts of identifiability and shared knowledge allows learners to map familiar pragmatic strategies onto new grammatical forms. This helps learners move away from memorizing rules and use articles more naturally in context. As Ibrulj and Zovko-Bošnjak (2012) noted, Bernays' imaginative concepts reshaped language and terminology in the field of communication, emphasizing the power of precise linguistic expression. Similarly, meaning-based approaches enable learners to reshape their understanding and use of English articles, highlighting the crucial role of context, pragmatic awareness, and precise linguistic expression in acquiring this complex grammatical category.

In conclusion, while rule-based instruction offers an initial framework for article use, it is meaning-based instruction that enables learners to internalize the pragmatic and cognitive dimensions of definiteness. A balanced pedagogy combining structural clarity with contextualized practice is therefore the most promising approach to teaching English articles to Croatian EFL learners.

5. Discipline-Specific Language Use

The type of English students are exposed to can make a real difference in how they use articles. English majors tend to do better, probably because they regularly read and work with texts that are narrative, argumentative, or academically focused. This kind of input lets them see articles in action, i.e., how they signal definiteness, introduce new information, or link ideas across sentences. They do not just memorize rules; they get a sense of how articles function in real communication, which seems to help them develop a more intuitive understanding of reference.

Computing students, on the other hand, mostly deal with technical English. Their texts are full of specialized terms, abbreviations, and noun phrases that often appear without articles (Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004; Trenkić, 2008). Because arti-

cles are not very noticeable in this kind of language, learners have fewer chances to pick up on their pragmatic role. As a result, they often overgeneralize rules or omit articles entirely, which leads to predictable mistakes.

Law students face a different kind of challenge. They see English mostly in formal, legal contexts, with fixed expressions and formulaic language (Brala-Vukanović, 2013). While this can help them learn specific rules, it does not always encourage flexible thinking about article use. They may know that *the contract* or *the defendant* is correct in legal writing, but struggle to apply articles in everyday or narrative contexts.

These differences show that the kind of language students are exposed to, i.e., its style, register, and typical structures matters a lot. Combined with the limited explicit instruction they usually get in earlier schooling, it helps explain why different student groups make different kinds of errors. English majors get more meaningful, context-rich input, which seems to strengthen both structural and pragmatic understanding. Computing and law students, by contrast, often rely on rules or educated guesses, which makes their article use more mechanical.

From a pedagogical perspective, this means that teachers could benefit from taking into account the disciplinary background of their students. Giving computing or law students extra practice with articles in narrative or everyday contexts could help them apply what they know more flexibly, not just in technical or formal texts. In this way, learners can build a deeper understanding of English articles that goes beyond memorizing rules and exceptions.

6. Methodology

An error analysis of English articles was conducted for the purposes of this study. Error analysis is a well-established method in applied linguistics, used to document the types of errors that appear in learner language, determine whether these errors are systematic, and, where possible, identify their causes (Corder, 1967; Ellis, 1994). In this study, the analysis focused specifically on the use of the English article system (*a*, *an*, *the*), with attention to how learners perceive definiteness and apply articles in context.

The primary instrument for data collection was a gap-filling task based on an authentic text. One large newspaper article from the BBC web portal was selected for this purpose. From this text, all definite and indefinite articles were removed, leaving blank spaces. In addition, blanks were inserted in a few places where articles were not strictly necessary, in order to test learners' sensitivity to discourse and pragmatic cues.

The modified text was then presented to students from different academic disciplines, i.e., English, Computing, and Law, who were asked to fill in the blanks with the appropriate articles (*a*, *an*, or *the*). After the students completed the task, an error analysis was conducted to identify patterns of misuse, omission, or over-generalization. The analysis focused on comparing learners' responses with the target forms in context and examining which types of nouns or discourse situations were most frequently problematic. The research was conducted in the period from 1 January 2025 to 1 June 2025.

This methodological approach was informed by theoretical insights discussed in the previous chapters. In particular, the analysis draws on cognitive linguistic perspectives, which emphasize that article use is governed less by rigid rules and more by interpretation, perspective-taking, and sensitivity to discourse (Langacker, 1991; Tyler, 2012). It also builds on extensive practical experience working with L2 learners of English, allowing for an informed selection of text and recognition of common error patterns.

Overall, this method allowed for a detailed examination of learners' article use, revealing both systematic errors and individual variation. By using authentic texts and a gap-filling task, it was possible to connect empirical observations directly to the theoretical framework established earlier, providing a solid basis for the analysis of results presented in the next chapter.

6.1. Hypothesis and Research Questions

The hypothesis is that L2 learners often understand definiteness differently from native speakers, especially when deciding whether a noun is definite or indefinite. In many cases, they are misled by article rules, which can be too rigid and not always reflect how meaning works in context. This perspective is supported by recent findings in cognitive linguistics, which suggest that article use depends more on perception and interpretation than on fixed rules (Langacker, 1991; Tyler, 2012; Trenkić, 2000; Brala Vukanović, 2013).

To explore this hypothesis, the study addresses three main research questions:
1. How do L2 learners perceive and apply definiteness in English, particularly when distinguishing between definite and indefinite nouns?
2. Do students from different academic disciplines (English, Computing, Law) differ in their accuracy of article use, and if so, how?
3. To what extent does reliance on long, rigid lists of article rules contribute to systematic errors in article use across learner groups?

These research questions link the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics and second language acquisition with the empirical investigation conducted in this study. They guide the design of the methodology, including the gap-filling task with authentic texts, and provide a clear structure for the subsequent error analysis. By framing the study around these questions, it becomes possible to examine how learners' perception of definiteness, their disciplinary background, and their reliance on prescriptive rules interact to shape their article use in English.

7. Analysis, Results and Discussion

Group	Total Article Opportunities per Student	Lowest Scoring Student	Highest Scoring Student	Correct Articles per Study group (mean)	Accuracy Percentage
English	195	82	161	125.67	64.4%
Computing	195	45	138	96.13	49.3%
Law	195	27	123	62.67	32.1%

Table 1. Student Performance in English Article Task:
English, Computing, and Law

The results of the gap-filling task are summarized in Table 1. Each student had 195 opportunities to correctly use the articles *a, an, the,* or the zero article. Of these, 15 blanks were intentionally designed to require no article at all, in order to test learners' ability to recognize when omission was appropriate and to increase the overall difficulty of the task. A total of 30 students participated in each study group (English, Computing, and Law). To calculate group performance, the number of correct articles supplied by each student was first counted. From these individual results, the arithmetic mean was calculated for each group. Accuracy percentage was then derived by dividing the mean number of correct responses by the total number of article opportunities (195), and multiplying by 100. In addition, the lowest and highest individual scores within each group are reported, in order to illustrate the degree of variation between students.

As the table shows, the English group achieved the highest mean score (125.67 correct articles, or 64.4%), followed by the Computing group (96.13 correct, or

49.3%), and finally the Law group (62.67 correct, or 32.1%). The range of scores also highlights substantial variation: English students scored between 82 and 161, Computing students between 45 and 138, and Law students between 27 and 123. These results suggest that disciplinary background influences overall accuracy in article use, with English majors demonstrating comparatively stronger performance but still showing variation across individuals.

To better understand why students struggled, and how their errors reflect conceptual and contextual challenges rather than simple grammatical rule misapplications, a qualitative error analysis was conducted for each group. Errors were categorized into six main types based on their linguistic context:
1. Definite vs. Indefinite Reference
2. Abstract/Uncountable Nouns
3. Proper Names & Institutions
4. Postmodified Noun Phrases
5. National/Cultural Adjectives
6. Generic Reference

Each group demonstrated unique tendencies and recurring patterns in article misuse, as outlined below. The examples provided in each category are representative samples selected to illustrate the most common and important error patterns observed within each student group. Due to the large size of the dataset, it was not possible to include every individual instance of article misuse. Instead, these examples were chosen based on how often they occurred and how well they represent the overall patterns in the qualitative analysis.

Group A: English Students

Category 1: Definite vs. Indefinite Reference
Example: "...had been given ____ opportunity to stage his own version..."
Correct use: "...was given **the** opportunity..."
Explanation: English students made this mistake because they did not always recognize that "opportunity" referred to a specific, important thing in the context. Even advanced learners sometimes miss using *the* when it signals something definite and known.

Category 2: Abstract/Uncountable Nouns
Example: "...everything else about ____ production flowed from that one simple idea."
Correct use: "...everything else about **the** production flowed from that one simple idea."

Explanation: Students treated "production" as a general concept rather than a specific, known event, leading them to omit *the*. This illustrates that their sense of definiteness does not align with that of native speakers, which leads to article errors despite rule-based instruction.

Category 3: Proper Names & Institutions

Example: "...winning both _____ Olivier and the Tony awards."

Correct use: "...winning both Olivier and Tony awards." (**zero article**)

Explanation: Students added *the* before the award names, treating them as specific or previously mentioned, but here the awards are mentioned generically. This shows a tendency to over-apply rules about definiteness, leading to article misuse.

Category 4: Postmodified Noun Phrases

Example: "...it was almost beyond ___ definition, a contemporary piece set to the original music of Tchaikovsky."

Correct use: "...it was almost beyond definition..." (**zero article**)

Explanation: Students might insert "the" before "definition" because of the modifier "beyond," thinking it needs a definite article. However, here "definition" is used abstractly and uncountably, so zero article is correct. This shows learners' difficulty in perceiving when postmodified abstract nouns require no article.

Category 5: National/Cultural Adjectives

Example: "...were created by Bourne and _____ British designer Lez Brotherston."

Correct use: "...were created by Bourne and British designer Lez Brotherston." (**zero article**)

Explanation: Students often add the because they think "British designer" means a specific, known person, so they treat it like a definite noun phrase. It illustrates that definiteness differs from native speakers. In this context, "British designer" is used more like a general job title, not requiring the. The usual grammar rules about the can be misleading here, causing students to add the unnecessarily. This kind of article use is better learned through context and natural exposure rather than just fixed rules.

Category 6: Generic Reference

Example: "...they show that both can be embraced. It's _____ iconic piece..."

Correct use: "...It's **an** iconic piece..."

Explanation: Some students mistakenly use *the iconic piece*, assuming that because the object is important or culturally significant, it requires the definite article.

However, in this context, *an iconic piece* is correct because it refers to one example among many, not a uniquely identified referent. Such error can be explained by the fact that rules like "use *the* for well-known or important things," can be misleading, as it oversimplify how definiteness works. It also reflects how L2 learners may misperceive generic references as definite due to limited contextual exposure.

GROUP B: COMPUTING STUDENTS

Category 1: Definite vs. Indefinite Reference
Example: "It was ____ shock to many in the audience..."
Correct article: "...was **a** shock to many..." (specific event)
Explanation: Students frequently used *the* incorrectly or omitted the article *a* altogether because they did not recognize "shock" as a new, specific event. This suggests difficulties in understanding referential status, i.e., whether a noun refers to something already known and definite, or something new and indefinite within the context.

Category 2: Abstract/Uncountable Nouns
Example: ...changed ballet with ____ one 'big idea.'"
Correct article: "...changed ballet with one 'big idea.'" (**no article**)
Explanation: Students wrongly inserted *a* before *one*, showing they misunderstood the nature of the abstract noun and applied article rules incorrectly with a quantifier. This suggests that article mistakes often come from misinterpreting concepts, especially when dealing with abstract countable nouns modified by numbers.

Category 3: Proper Names & Institutions
Example: "...Adam Cooper, ____ Royal Ballet principal dancer..."
Correct article: "...Adam Cooper, **a** Royal Ballet principal dancer..."
Explanation: Students made a mistake by using *the* instead of *a* treating "Royal Ballet principal dancer" as a unique role. This likely comes from overapplying article rules that associate institutional titles with definiteness. They didn't consider that "principal dancer" is one of several possible roles in the Royal Ballet. This supports the idea that long lists of rules for article use can be confusing, as they encourage strict following of rules instead of paying attention to the meaning and context.

Category 4: Postmodified Noun Phrases
Example: ... ____ pair of white feathery breeches on permanent display at London's V&A museum."

Correct article: "... **a** pair of white feathery breeches on permanent display at London's V&A museum."

Explanation: The noun phrase "pair of white feathery breeches on permanent display at London's V&A museum" is postmodified and refers to one specific but not unique item, so it requires the indefinite article *a*. Students made errors by either omitting the article or incorrectly inserting the definite article *the*, likely because they applied article rules mechanically without understanding that the postmodifier does not make the noun unique. This shows how misleading rigid rules can be when students fail to appreciate the referential specificity introduced by the postmodifier and the context, resulting in article misuse.

Category 5: National/Cultural Adjectives

Example: "...where the setting was ____ Victorian-style orphanage."
Correct article: "...where the setting was **a** Victorian-style orphanage."

Explanation: Students often used the definite article *the* instead of the correct indefinite article *a* before "Victorian-style orphanage" because they mistakenly perceived it as a specific, known entity. This error stems from rigidly applying article rules without considering that the phrase refers to one of many possible orphanages, not a unique or previously mentioned one. Their misunderstanding of definiteness in context led to incorrect article use.

Category 6: Generic Reference

Example: "...known for humour and ____ jokey approach to things..."
Correct article: "...known for humour and **a** jokey approach to things..."

Explanation: Omission of the indefinite article *a*. The phrase "jokey approach" is used generically here, referring to one of many possible approaches. The indefinite article *a* is required to mark this non-specific meaning. Omitting it shows that students did not clearly understand the difference between general and specific meaning in context.

Group C: Law Students

Category 1: Definite vs. Indefinite Reference

Example: "...tells ____ BBC about ____ show that radically changed ballet..."
Correct article: "...tells **the** BBC about **the** show..."

Explanation: Law students omitted *the* or used *a*, likely due to overgeneralized rules (e.g. use *"a" for first mentions*) and a weak understanding of contextual definiteness. They treated known entities (*the BBC, the show*) as new or generic,

showing reliance on form over meaning. This supports the hypothesis that article use based solely on rules, without considering discourse context, leads to errors.

Category 2: Abstract/Uncountable Nouns
Example: "...he had been given ___ opportunity to stage his own version..."
Correct article: "...been given **the** opportunity..."
Explanation: Students left out *the,* probably seeing "opportunity" as a general or abstract idea, not realizing it referred to a specific, one-time chance mentioned in the context. This shows they had trouble recognizing when abstract or uncountable nouns need *the* because the situation makes them specific, again suggesting they relied more on fixed rules than on understanding the meaning in context.

Category 3: Proper Names & Institutions
Example: "...at London's Sadler's Wells Theatre. It was ___ cherished dream..."
Correct article: "...It was **a** cherished dream..."
Explanation: Students incorrectly added *the* before "cherished dream," likely because they extended the definiteness of the proper noun (Sadler's Wells Theatre) to the following noun, or confused the known place with a new idea. "Cherished dream" introduces a new, countable concept, so it requires the indefinite article *a.* This error reflects difficulty in recognizing the referential status of a new entity, rather than just applying the previous article automatically.

Category 4: Postmodified Noun Phrases
Example: "And he keeps saying, 'no I'll only get married for ___ true love.'"
Correct form: "...for **true love**." (zero article)
Explanation: The misuse of *a* shows students may treat "true love" as a countable item, ignoring its fixed, abstract, and generic usage, likely applying rules for concrete nouns rather than recognizing lexicalized expressions.

Category 5: National/Cultural Adjectives
Example: "Like the cohort during that era known as ___ YBAs..."
Correct use: "...known as **the** YBAs (Young British Artists)..."
Explanation: Omitting *the* suggests students overlook that acronyms like YBAs denote specific, recognized groups, applying rules for general plurals instead of marking defined cultural entities.

Category 6: Generic Reference
Example: "...the image of ___ female swans, the dancers, the tutus, was the classical look anyone would imagine."

Correct use: "...the image of female swans, the dancers, the tutus, was the classical look..." (**zero article**)

Explanation: Students perceived "female swans" as definite due to prior context or stereotypes, so they automatically added *the*, following the rule that known or mentioned entities take the. However, in this case "female swans" is a generic reference, referring to a whole category or typical example, not specific individuals. This shows how the rule for using the can be misleading when the distinction between generic and definite reference is unclear.

8. Conclusion

The hypothesis of this study stated that L2 learners often understand definiteness differently from native speakers, especially when deciding whether a noun is definite or indefinite. In many cases, they are misled by article rules, which can be too rigid and not always reflect how meaning works in context. The findings of the analysis support this hypothesis. Learners did not simply make random slips but showed systematic patterns of error that revealed how their perception of definiteness diverged from native-speaker usage.

Concerning the first research question on how L2 learners understand and use definiteness in English, the error analysis revealed that Croatian learners often struggled to match native speakers' norms in their use of definiteness. For example, abstract nouns such as *opportunity* or *production* were often treated as general concepts and left without articles, even though the context required *the* (e.g. *the opportunity* to stage his own version). Similarly, generic reference was frequently misinterpreted, with learners using *the iconic piece* instead of *an iconic piece*. These results support cognitive linguistic claims (Langacker, 1991; Tyler, 2012) that article use is not simply a matter of following prescriptive rules, but of perspective-taking and context-sensitive categorization.

Research question 2 addressed disciplinary differences. The results revealed clear variation across the three groups of 30 students each: English majors achieved the highest accuracy (64.4%), Computing students were less accurate (49.3%), while Law students performed worst (32.1%). This pattern can be explained by disciplinary exposure. English majors, regularly working with argumentative and narrative texts, demonstrated greater sensitivity to discourse functions of articles. Computing students, who are exposed mainly to technical English with many bare noun phrases, had fewer opportunities to notice article use. Law students, in turn, showed the weakest performance, often omitting articles or transferring fixed pat-

terns into inappropriate contexts. These findings confirm that the type of input and register has a direct impact on learners' article accuracy (cf. Brala-Vukanović, 2013).

Research question 3 examined the influence of rigid rules. The analysis showed that reliance on simplified rules such as "use *the* for unique or important nouns" or "use *a* for first mention" led to predictable errors. Learners added *the* in contexts with national adjectives (e.g. *the British designer* instead of *British designer*) or misused articles in postmodified noun phrases (e.g. *the definition* where zero article was required). These examples confirm earlier findings (Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004; Trenkić, 2008) that learners from article-less languages struggle not only because of structural gaps in their L1, but also because rule-based instruction promotes mechanical application rather than discourse awareness.

If we look at all the results together, it is clear that Croatian students' difficulties with English articles are related to both conceptual reasons (because articles do not exist in the Croatian language) and the teaching method (since articles are often covered superficially in classes). Conceptually, they must acquire a grammatical category that does not exist in Croatian, where definiteness is normally recognized from context rather than overtly marked. Pedagogically, the dominance of rule-based instruction reinforces systematic errors, as rules often fail to account for context and pragmatic interpretation.

The results obtained confirm the hypothesis: Croatian students do indeed interpret definiteness differently than native speakers, and relying on rigid rules further complicates the correct use of articles. The research questions were also answered in line with the theoretical framework: (1) learners' perception of definiteness diverges from native norms, especially with abstract nouns, generics, and postmodified phrases; (2) disciplinary background strongly influences accuracy, with English students performing considerably better than Computing and Law students; and (3) prescriptive rule-based teaching contributes to systematic errors. This study therefore reinforces the view that successful article acquisition requires not only structural knowledge but also the development of pragmatic sensitivity and flexible interpretation in discourse.

Finally, while the study provides valuable insights, it is limited in scale and scope. Broader research, involving larger samples and different types of tasks, is needed to further investigate the psycholinguistic processes underlying article use. Such research should also pay attention to disciplinary exposure, as well as to teaching methods, balancing structural explanation with meaning-based practice. Only by combining these perspectives can L2 learners develop a flexible and accurate understanding of English articles.

References

1. Brala-Vukanović, M. (2013) *Perspectives on Meaning and Introduction to Philosophical, Lexical and Cognitive Semantics*. Rijeka, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka.

2. Chomsky, N. (2002) *On Nature and Language*, ed. A. Belletti & L. Rizzi. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

3. Corder, S. P. (1967) The Significance of Learners' Errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 5, 161–170.

4. Ellis, R. (1994) *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

5. Gundel, J. K., Hedberg, N. & Zacharski, R. (1993) Cognitive Status and the Form of Referring Expressions in Discourse. *Language*, 69(2), 274–307.

6. Hawkins, J. A. (1991) On (in)definite articles: Implicatures and (un)grammaticality prediction. *Journal of Linguistics*, 27(2), 405–442.

7. Heim, I. (1982) The Semantics of Definite and Indefinite Noun Phrases. *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 5(4), 447–478.

8. Ibrulj, T. & Zovko-Bošnjak, I. (2023) Lexicon of Public Relations: Exploring Edward Bernays' Influence on Introducing Public Relations Concepts and Vocabulary Terms. *South Eastern European Journal of Communication*, 5(special issue), University of Mostar – Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

9. Ionin, T., Ko, H. & Wexler, K. (2004) Article semantics in L2 acquisition: The role of specificity. *Language Acquisition*, 12(1), 3–69.

10. Kałuza, H. (1963) Teaching the English articles to speakers of Slavic. *Language Learning*, XIII(2), 113–124.

11. Langacker, R. W. (1991) *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar, Volume II: Descriptive Application*. Stanford, Stanford University Press.

12. Lambrecht, K. (1994) *Information Structure and Sentence Form: Topic, Focus, and the Mental Representations of Discourse Referents*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

13. Lyons, C. (1999) *Definiteness*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

14. Master, P. (1997) The English article system: Acquisition, function, and pedagogy. *System*, 25(2), 215–232.

15. Muhić, E. (2024) Within these four walls: the perilousness of elusive guard rails and impermanence of safety. *Filolog*, Banjaluka, Filoloski Fakultet u Banjaluci. BROJ, STR?

16. Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G. & Svartvik, J. (1991) *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London, Longman.

17. Silić, J. (2000) Kategorija neodređenosti/određenosti i načini njezina izražavanja. *Riječki filološki dani*, 401–405.

18. Swan, M. (1996) *Practical English Usage. International Student's Edition*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

19. Trenkić, D. (2000) *The acquisition of English articles by Serbian speakers*. Cambridge, Research Centre for English and Applied Linguistics and Darwin College, University of Cambridge.

20. Trenkić, D. (2008) Variability in second language article production: beyond the representational deficit vs. processing constraints debate. *Second Language Research*, 23(3), 289–327.

21. Tyler, A. (2012) *Cognitive Linguistics and Second Language Learning: Theoretical Perspectives and Pedagogical Applications*. Amsterdam, John Benjamins.

Tonina Ibrulj
Sveučilište u Mostaru
Filozofski fakultet
Engleski jezik i književnost

Ivana Zovko-Bošnjak
Sveučilište u Mostaru
Filozofski fakultet
Engleski jezik i književnost

ODREĐENOST I SUSTAV ČLANOVA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA KAO IZAZOV U UČENJU ZA HRVATSKE IZVORNE GOVORNIKE

Rezime

Ovaj rad istražuje izazove s kojima se hrvatski izvorni govornici – studenti engleskog jezika – suočavaju pri usvajanju sustava članova (a, an, the). Budući da hrvatski jezik ne posjeduje gramatičku kategoriju članova, studenti moraju usvojiti potpuno novu gramatičku strukturu i koncept određenosti/neodređenosti. Kroz teorijski okvir utemeljen na kognitivnoj lingvistici i empirijsku analizu pogrešaka u zadatku popunjavanja praznina, rad pokazuje da studenti često drugačije shvaćaju određenost u odnosu na izvorne govornike. Rezultati ukazuju da stroga primjena pravila dovodi do sustavnih pogrešaka, dok pristup utemeljen na značenju i kontekstu omogućuje bolju točnost i razumijevanje. Analiza triju studentskih grupa (studenti engleskog jezika, računarstva i prava) otkriva da akademska disciplina utječe na uspješnost u uporabi članova, pri čemu su studenti engleskog jezika pokazali najveću preciznost. Rad naglašava potrebu za ravnotežom između gramatičkog objašnjenja i kontekstualne prakse u nastavi.

▸ *Ključne riječi*: članovi, engleski jezik, određenost, kognitivna lingvistika, nastava engleskog kao stranog jezika.