Generic Reference:

A Comparison between English and Catalan Languages

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Abstract

This paper examines the patterns of how to use English and Catalan articles in generic reference with regard to mass and count nouns as well as taking into account whether the count noun is singular or plural. Moreover, the study also provides a detail explanation of articles used in subject, object and prepositional complement position so as to convey genericness. As the fact of mastering English articles appears to be problematic among L2 learners, the aim of this study is to investigate whether English learners are influenced by language transfer effects when using articles in these mentioned contexts accurately. A study involving thirty four English learner subjects from a language school was carried out. They were grouped according to their English level (beginner, intermediate and advanced). They completed a multiple choice questionnaire that was designed according to each level. In addition, three native English speakers also completed all the questionnaires so as to compare their results and take them into account when scoring the English learners' tests. The data show that the three groups found difficulties in using the zero article followed by mass and plural nouns in subject, object and prepositional complement positions as they use *the* as the alternative option. Thus, these findings suggest that L2 learners are influenced by their L1 transfer effects. On the other hand, the advanced learners' accuracy in expressing generic reference is almost native-like.

Key Words: generic reference, subject position, object position, prepositional complement position, L1 transfer, mass nouns, and count nouns.

1. Introduction

In all human languages, generic reference is used for expressing general statements, referring to all members of a collective group without making reference to any entity or subject in particular. That is to say, "Generic statements express general claims about kinds, rather than claims about particular individuals, as well as propositions which denote general properties" (Krifka et al. cited in Barberà 2012:191). By contrast, specific reference designates an individual subject or individual subjects of a collective class which "involves reference to an entity that is related to specimens" (Krifka 2004:111). Thus, in both contexts, there is a contact between the speaker and addressee that allows them to represent the same item or object mentally (Radden and Dirven, 2007).

> *(1) The computer in the department office is new* (specific reference)
>
> *(2) Homework is compulsory for all students* (generic reference)

We use generic reference as in (2) to generalize statements about the world that are meant to be general truth. On the other hand, specific reference as in (1) is used to emphasize or make reference to a particular object or member from a set, that is to say, an instance whose function is to identify individual objects.

Nevertheless, the current study focuses exclusively on the expression of generic reference by using the definite, indefinite and zero articles appropriately according to whether the noun is a mass noun or countable noun and to whether the countable noun is singular or plural. Therefore, one of the aims of this paper is to exhibit the patterns of how to use English and Catalan articles in generic meaning explicitly in subject, object and prepositional contexts. Subsequently, the similarities and differences between Catalan and English will be analysed as well as compared with the goal to predict

whether learners of English whose mother tongue is Catalan are likely to acquire generic reference in English successfully. However, it is predicted that the advanced level will obtain the best marks and will be the closest to native productions when using the English articles in generic contexts.

The reason why Catalan has been selected for this study is because both languages provide an article system: definite, indefinite and zero articles. Thus, the idea is to compare whether Catalan and English articles work in generic contexts in the same way and whether L1 transfer interferes when using English articles.

The organization of this paper is divided into five sections. Theoretical framework to the study is presented in section 2 which includes the role of L1 transfer in generic reference and how articles are used in English and Catalan in sections 2.2 and 2.3. On the one hand, an explanation of the appropriate uses of definite, indefinite and zero articles in English and Catalan generic sentences will be provided. On the other hand, a detailed analysis of these different articles are applied in subject, object and prepositional context in order to convey genericness will be put forward. Next, the methodology of the study is presented in section 3. The following two sections focus on the results (section 4) obtained from the study as well as the discussion (section 5) of them. Finally, conclusions are presented in section 6, which analyse the most important aspects of this research study.

2. Literature Review

The literature review has been divided into three sections. The first section is focused on the role of L1 transfer and how this affects L2 learners when dealing with generic reading. The second section presents English definite, indefinite and zero articles research in generic references. Subsequently, how these different articles are

used in subject, object and prepositional contexts. The third section is devoted to Catalan definite, indefinite and zero articles in generic meanings and their use in the different contexts in the same way as it is developed for English.

2.1. The role of L1 transfer

Certainly, one of the hardest concerns among L2 learners is to master generic reference owing to the notion of L1 transfer. The English article system is one of the latest features that L2 learners acquire because of its complexity, whereas native speakers employ articles easily. Non-native speakers are not aware of the importance of articles until they write them. Thus, it is in this context when they appreciate how difficult it is to select the appropriate article.

L1 transfer is the phenomenon that occurs when individuals tend to apply parameters of their mother tongue into the second language. "Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (Odlin cited in Schachter, 1991:155). For that reason, learning how to manage English articles accurately is such an essential matter that indeed takes rather long time to be grasped.

One of the main differences between English and Catalan is that they differ in the sense that in Catalan it is compulsory to use the definite article when introducing a new topic which sometimes may denote an ambiguous interpretation. It could refer to something specific or generic since the article (i.e. *el/s* or *la/les*) is employed, whereas in English it is not used in generic contexts for new topics.

(3) Children eat a lot of sweets

(4) Els nens mengen molts dolços

(4a)*Nens mengen molts dolços

However, there are some exceptions in which Catalan allows the use of zero article in general statements:

(5) Juguen nens en el parc

(5a) Children play in the park

(6) Nens trapelles juguen en el parc

(6a) Naughty children play in the park

(7) Nens i nenes juguen en el parc

(7a) Boys and girls play in the park

(Montrul and Ionin, 2012:76)

These examples show that it is possible to omit the article when the subject is post verbal (5), when we use an adjective following the noun (6) or when we list some nouns (7).

Furthermore, most of the errors registered in this study were made by the beginner level, since no one chose the appropriate answer, as it is shown in the following sentence (a) taken from the beginner test (see Appendix A):

(a) *The tigers are very dangerous

The beginner subjects selected the definite article *the* since Catalan article system requires to use *els/les* at the beginning of a sentence before plural nouns. Therefore, this sentence (a) exemplifies a case of L1 transfer from Catalan to English language.

Thus, this paper focuses on Catalan native speakers who are studying English as a second language. By analysing English written productions performed by beginner,

intermediate and advanced L2 learners, results serve to determine which level shows higher difficulties in coping with English articles in generic contexts.

2.2. Expressing Generic reference in English

English is a Germanic language that differs from Catalan since it is a Romance language like Spanish, Italian and French (García-Mayo and Snape, 2013). Both languages seem to display definite, indefinite and zero articles, although in generic context they are implemented differently. To convey genericity, the following chart shows every single article used with count and mass nouns as well as what articles are used in singular and plural form in English:

Chart 1: English Articles used in Generic Reference
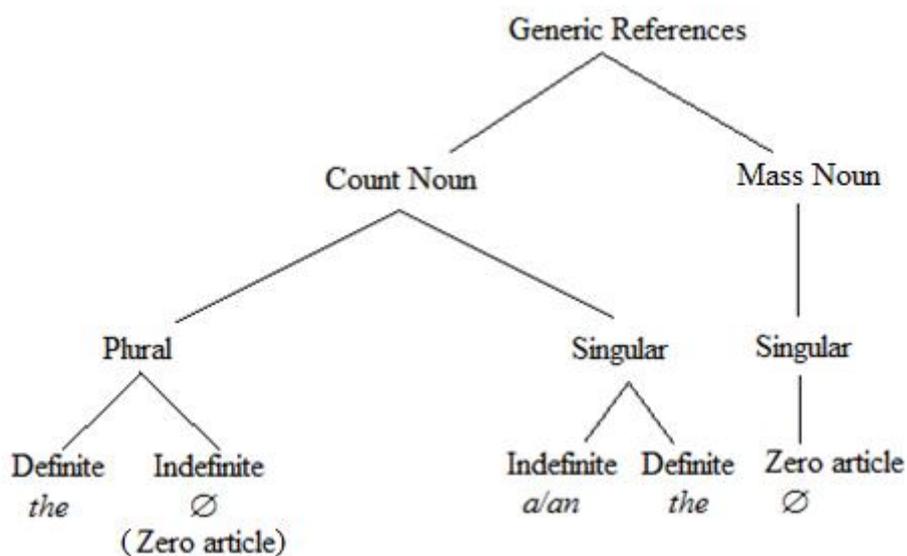
Definite plural count noun:

(8) The Italians love pizza

Indefinite plural count noun:

(9) Computers are important devices in technology

Indefinite singular count noun:

>*(10)An elephant is an animal*

Definite singular count noun:

>*(11)The computer is very useful for research*

Zero article mass noun:

>*(12)Water is scarce in many countries.*

These distinctive kinds of articles are classified according to number that "lead to four possible generic construals, all of which are found in English". (Radden and Dirven, 2007:107)

2.2.1. Definite Article

On the one hand, the definite singular article denotes the singularity or essence of a collective group, that is to say, the totality of a set. In generic expressions, it is used to make reference to aspects that are commonly shared by a particular group of species such as humans, animals and so on (13). Nevertheless, in sentences like (13a) the only possible reading would be specific as it is likely to refer to a particular group of rabbits of a place (zoo, farm).

>*(13) The human being is rational*

>*(13a) *The rabbits eat vegetables*

Sentence (13) provides a statement that is shared by all humans around the world, although this instance clusters every single human being, they can be grouped according to their community such as *The Italians*. Likewise, the same goes for material things which are not species, but objects as in sentence (14).

(14) The mobile phone is a revolutionary device.

On the other hand, the definite plural article is also used to represent generic meaning with some restrictions. The purpose is to use it only with names of nationalities as we appreciated in the previous sentence (8). In addition, another restriction in which definite plural would be deemed properly used is when we employ nominalised adjectives or an adjective head that, at the same time, describes a singular feature of a class as a whole as it is represented in sentence (15).

(15) The unemployed are looking for jobs.

Moreover, the definite plural article can somehow be generic if 'reference to a set of subspecies' (Chesterman, 1991:37) conveys generic meaning. Thus, in this context, it would be accepted to be generic in the sense that "the NP here illustrates something they call 'limited generic reference'" (Chesterman, 1991:37) as sentence (16) presents:

(16) He likes the wines of this shop [1]

2.2.2. Indefinite Article

The indefinite singular article is used to display the 'essence' of a collective group by exemplifying a subject of a class and it is mostly used for definitions of terms. It provides a member as an instance to show the singularity which is common of a set as the following quotation states: "Attributes that are uniquely shared by all elements of a class are felt to be essential, not accidental, attributes. […] they define what we believe to be the 'essence' of a thing" (Radden and Driven, 2007:108).

(17) My brother is a doctor

(18) A beaver builds damns

---

[1] Quirk et al. cited in Chesterman,1991:37

Conversely, verb *to be* (17) assigns a member or subject as the representative of a class, that is to say, it is considered to be a concept and not an object. Furthermore, in sentence (18), there is no copulative verb, albeit it is also an activity that predicates of the concept. Thus, when we use the indefinite article in generic contexts we are dealing with concepts and not objects as the following quotation exhibits:

> (In copula constructions) *a* is the article that determines singular indefinite NP's which have their function in sentences not as specific individuals (i.e. as referents to individuals or specific groups of them), but as the class to which some referend is being assigned (Burton-Roberts, 1976:428)

Therefore, the indefinite *a* could also be used before mass nouns. That is to say, they denote a quality or an abstraction that it is attributed to another subject/object, although if we omit the adjective, it would not be considered grammatical:

(19) He seems to have a good education

*(a) *He seems to have an education*

Just as the definite plural article, the indefinite singular *a* has also generic reading when we refer to "subspecies, type" (Chesterman, 1991:37), which is shown in sentence (20):

(20) Lars wants to study <u>a deer</u> that abounds in southern Africa but is rare in the north [2]

Additionally, there are cases in which some elements are unique and the indefinite article cannot be used to make reference to it. It only conveys genericness when they are subjects/objects that are not unique (22). Thus, the use of the indefinite in sentence (21) is not possible since *sun* denotes something unique in the world and that is the reason why definite article *the* is required.

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[2] Burton-Roberts cited in Chesterman, 1991:37

(21) *A sun is big (The sun is big)*

(22) A lion is a mammal

2.2.3. Zero Article

Zero article is represented through this symbol ∅. It means that there is no article employed in front of a noun, that is to say, we use neither *the* nor *a/an*. Moreover, it is used to talk about generalisations or mass nouns.

(23)I don't like ∅ cheese (countable)

(24)∅ Life is wonderful (mass noun)

Master points out that zero article "is the most indefinite of the articles. Its general function is to remove the boundaries that make nouns discrete" (Master 1997:222). Similarly, he emphasises that it is used with singular count nouns in alternation with indefinite *a* and renders a singular count noun into a mass noun distinction (25). Furthermore, to convey generic meaning, the zero article is frequently used in both plural count (26) and mass forms (27).

(25) Mice like ∅ cheese (vs. This is a cheese of uncommon flavour)

(26) ∅ Frogs are reptiles (plural count form)

(27) ∅ Water is essential (mass form)

2.2.4. Ambiguity

As far as genericness is concerned, there are many different opinions with regard to it since a particular sentence could be considered to be a generic sentence by some authors whereas some others would not consider it generic. The following examples show the possible meanings that have been attached according to some authors:

(28) The idea is more perfect than the object (generic for Vendler

(1968:20), 'dubious' for Smith)

(29) A beaver built dams in prehistoric times (generic for Smith, unacceptable on a generic reading for Perlmutter (1970))

(30) Time elapses more quickly in old age than in childhood (non-generic for Smith, generic for Chesterman)

(Chesterman 1991:33)

Following Krifka (2003), we assume that depending on the elements used within a sentence they may denote both generic and specific reading. That is to say, sometimes definite singular article is likely to represent the kind/category or the subject that belongs to that kind/category. Furthermore, bare plurals (33, 34), just as the definite singular one, are assumed to be ambiguous since they make general reference to the type, but also the member of the type. Thus, they may apparently express generic and non-generic reading depending on the context and how authors interpret generic references.

(31) The potato contains vitamin C (generic)

(32) The potato rolled out of the bag (non-generic)

(33) Lions are dangerous (generic)

(34) Lions were dangerous (non-generic: verb *to be* in the past form could make reference to lions of a particular place)

On the other hand, definite and bare forms are grammatical in the sense that they denote generic meaning, whereas the indefinite singular article does not allow to illustrate ambiguity. García-Mayo and Snape (2012) provide in sentence (35) such an unambiguity, and using the indefinite article would not be considered accurate due to the predicate since a member of a collective group cannot be extinct. This point will be further developed in the next section.

*(35) *A dinosaur is extinct*

2.2.5. Subject usage in generic context

In this section, we will discuss two significant categorizations that García-Mayo and Snape's study (2012) developed according to generic meaning in subject position. English generic sentences are classified in two levels: NP-level and sentence-level. The former makes reference to kind-denoting, whereas the latter stands for habitual sentences which express generalizations. Thus, the definite singular article (36) is properly used at NP-level generics, while the indefinite one in singular form (37) and zero article with mass nouns are perfectly accurate to represent genericness (39). Notice that the zero count noun article can be used both at NP and sentence level generics (38).

(36) The giant penguin is extinct (NP-level generics)

(37) A banana contains potassium (Sentence-level generics)

(38) Lions eat meat (NP and Sentence-level generics)

(39) Water is necessary for life (Sentence-level generics)

Therefore, employing the indefinite article at NP-level generics would be accurate in the hypothetical case that the predicate denotes the essence of the subject. That is to say, "the subject NP must denote a *kind*" (García-Mayo and Snape, 2012). Nevertheless, we cannot omit a particular member of a specie in a generic sense as happens in (40).

*(40) *A giant penguin is extinct*

Thus, applying the indefinite article at NP- level generics is not allowed because the predicate must be a collective group to be extinct, but not only a member or a group of a collective class.

Furthermore, the definite article in singular form at sentence-level generics is not allowed since it would denote something specific rather than generic (41). Likewise, the same goes for definite plural nouns (42), except for those cases that we mentioned in 2.2.1. What is more, sentence (43) is ungrammatical because it is needed the definite/indefinite article for the singular noun *Lion* to represent generic reference. Finally, mass nouns, as in example (39), convey generic reading, although if the definite singular article is used as in (44), it will denote specific reference, and indefinite article cannot be used because it is a mass noun (45).

(41) *The doctor heals diseases*

(42) *The oranges contain vitamin C*

(43) * Lion is dangerous*

(44) *The water is necessary*

(45) *A water is necessary*

2.2.6. Object usage in generic context

Generic meaning is generally studied at subject position. However, our goal is to present that genericness also exists in other contexts. Thus, the main point of this section is to provide with some examples the interpretation of articles with their NPs when they fulfil the object function and to appreciate whether all articles express generic reading in this context.

First of all, indefinite *a/an* makes reference to a random member of a collective group. Hence, apart from specific reading, it can also display generic reading in the sense that this particular member represents the whole set as it can be seen in sentence (46).

(46) Have you ever seen an otter? [3]

Additionally, sometimes the indefinite article seems to be ambiguous because it may denote both readings. On the one hand, the generic interpretation of sentence (47) would refer to any unicorn that fulfils all the properties that unicorns have in common. On the other hand, the specific reading would be that John has a particular representation of a unicorn in his mind, but with "non-default properties". (Van der Auwera, 1980:122).

(47) John seeks a unicorn [4]

Secondly, the zero article indicates an entire group or category that, unlike Catalan, when it is used with NPs, it may occur in subject or objection position regardless of the function that displays within a sentence (Cardus, 1982). Moreover, as it was commented on in section 2.2.5., the zero article is always generic and accepted at NP and sentence-level generics.

(48) I like music (mass noun)

(49) She loves computers (count noun)

Furthermore, NPs with definite article as well as the zero one fulfil both functions (subject and object). Nevertheless, when we use *the* in object position with an abstract noun it denotes specific reference as the following example shows:

(50) I hate the music (of that pub)

The following sentence conveys non-specific reading, otherwise would be deemed ungrammatical (51), whereas in Catalan (51a) it is allowed to employ the definite article for generic purpose.

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[3] Chesterman, 1991:75
[4] Van der Auwera, 1980:122

*(51) *I hate the music*

      a. Odio la música

Finally, if we retake sentence (16), as reported by Chesterman (1991), the definite plural article denotes a certain limited generic reference of the NP when referring to 'types, subspecies of a genus' that displays somehow non-specific reading. However, authors such as Smith and Perlmutter are unlikely to accept these kinds of productions being generic. Thus, Chesterman points out:

> The higher term is accepted as generic and the lower terms (usually) rejected although both are referring at a higher level of abstraction than the particular. In the absence of an explicit and agreed definition of 'generic', the 'subspecies' readings remain borderline cases –and hence critical for any definition. (Chesterman 1991:38)

2.2.7. Prepositional usage in generic context

Preposition is the head of the prepositional phrase and it must be followed by an NP. Furthermore, genericness can also be expressed in prepositional contexts depending on the article that it is going to be used. However, there are some restrictions that need to be taken into account. The prepositions we propose to exemplify genericness are *at, in* and *on* which can be followed by *the, a/an* or ∅ article regardless of generic or specific meaning. This is because they differ in terms of usage. However, the zero article is commonly used in British English for nouns that are called 'quasi-locative', that is to say, they represent institutions of human life and society. In other words, the (in)definite article is not normally used when we refer to places such as school, university, hospital, prison, home among others, although in American English *the* is allowed. Moreover, when we use the preposition *to*, it refers to direction as well as place (56).

(52) People go to hospital when they get injured (British English)

(53) People go to the hospital when they get injured (American English)

Thus, by using no article, we somehow could also express generic meaning. Within those prepositional phrases that contain an NP, when we use a preposition that indicates a place, it does not carry out article (54, 55 and 56).

(54) They live on ∅ Main Street

(55) Criminals are locked in ∅ prison

(56) Criminals are sent to ∅jail

Other meanings in which the zero article may convey genericness is when we are referring to a period of education in which prepositions *at* and *in* are the most common ones employed.

(57) Children are at ∅ school (they are schooled.)

(58) Children are in ∅ class

On the other hand, when the (in)definite article is used, it is different from the individual institution since it makes reference to the physical institution, and thus, it is countable and implies specific meaning.

(59) They are at the Church

(60) There is a lot of information in the computer

(61) My keys are on the table

(62) I never go to the cinema

2.3. Expressing Generic reference in Catalan

As mentioned before, Catalan unlike English is a Romance language whose article system seems to be more complex as articles are marked for number and gender.

Thus, the following chart shows the Catalan article system that conveys generic reference:

Chart 2 : Catalan Articles used in Generic Reference
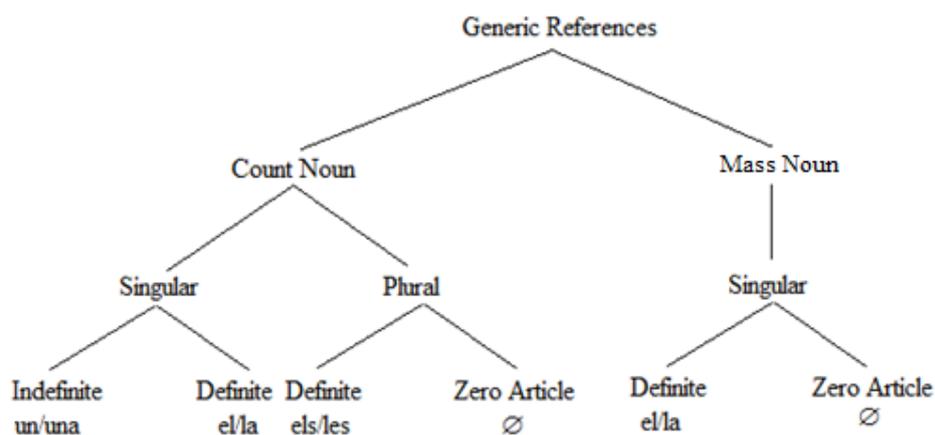
(Cardus, 1982:46)

Indefinite singular count noun:

> (63) *Un dofí és un mamífer*
>
> 'A dolphin is a mammal'

Definite singular count noun:

> (64) *La patata és un tubercle*
>
> 'The potato is a tubercle'

Definite plural count noun:

> (65) *Els tigres són perillosos*
>
> 'Tigers are dangerous'

Zero plural count noun:

> (66) *M'agrada menjar caramels*
>
> 'I like eating sweets'

Definite mass noun:

> *(67) La salut és important cuidar-la*
>
> 'It is important to look after your health'

Zero mass noun

> *(68) M'agrada prendre vi*
>
> 'I like drinking wine'

Notice that examples (66) and (68) the zero article is only employed in object position, that is to say, this article is not allowed to be used in subject position to convey generic meaning (except for vocatives). On the other hand, the zero article is properly used in English because it is accurate in both contexts (see sentences 9 and 12).

2.3.1. Definite Article

We use the definite article *el/la* as the equivalent English form *the*. However, this article can be also expressed by using the apostrophe *l'* particularly when there is a singular feminine or masculine noun and it begins in a vowel as in *l'illa* (feminine) or *l'ou* (masculine). Moreover, we can find this when a vowel is preceded by *h* as in *l'herba* (there are some restrictions about its use, although it is not our essential point to explain them).

Unlike English, Catalan definite article expresses generic meaning when employed with every single noun. No matter whether they are singular or plural count nouns or mass nouns. On the other hand, English singular definite article (and countable) is believed to express genericness, although plural count nouns have some restrictions as we discussed in section 2.2.1. (Yates, Wheeler and Dols, 1999:49)

> *(69) La pastanaga és una verdura* (singular count noun)

'The carrot is a vegetable'

(70) *Les pastanagues són verdures* (plural count noun)

'Carrots are vegetables'

(71) *El tabac perjudica la salut* (singular noun-count noun)

'Tobacco damages health'

2.3.2. Indefinite Article

Just as English, *un/una* is used with singular count nouns to denote the singularity from a set. That is to say, it takes an individual from a class to display the nature that is common of a collective group.

(72) *Un gat té quatre potes*

'A cat has four legs'

Moreover, verb *ser (to be)* may also play the same role as in English by assigning a member of an entire group. Thus, in generic expressions, we are also dealing with concepts but not objects.

(73) *El gos és un mamífer*

'The dog is a mammal'

(74) *Un gos és un mamífer*

'A dog is a mammal'

On the other hand, there are some exceptions in which the indefinite article does not present generic reference according to Cardus (1982). The author claims that in passive sentences (75) and (75a) *un/una* is not allowed because it is thought to denote specific reading, while the definite article is accepted to express genericness in (76) and (76a).

(75) *Un ocell construeix nius*

'A bird builds nests'

> a. *Els nius són construïts per un ocell*

'Nests are built by birds'

(76) L'ocell construeix nius

'The bird builds nests'

> a. *Els nius són construïts per l'ocell*

'Nests are built by birds'

Therefore, the indefinite singular article cannot denote common features of a whole group as happens in (77), which is ungrammatical as well, whereas again *el* is employed in (78) to represent generic meaning.

*(77) *Un dodo està extingit*

'A dodo is extint'

(78) El dodo està extingit

'The dodo is extinct'

2.3.3. Zero article

In Catalan, this article is also used to express generic reference, although it is used differently from the definite and indefinite ones. The zero plural article with count nouns (79) and with mass nouns (80) are restricted only to object position, that is to say, nouns that do not fulfil subject function, whereas in English, the zero article has no restrictions when using it. Certainly, this accurate choice of the article in Catalan is determined by "the function of the noun phrase within a sentence" (Cardus 1982:96). By contrast, English articles are not influenced by this feature (see sentences 23 and 24)

(79) M'agrada comprar ∅ caramels

'I like buying sweets'

(80) M'encanta prendre ∅ te

'I love to have tea'

2.3.4. Subject usage in generic context

Taking as a referent point García-Mayo and Snape's (2012) study to develop this section, Catalan and English share an article system that allows them to separate specific and generic references. However, each language uses it differently when marking generic meaning. Unlike English, Catalan definite article is used to refer both NP-level and sentence level (kinds/types)

> *(81) El pingüí gegant està extingit* (NP-level generics)
>
> 'The great penguin is extinct'
>
> *(82) El plàtan conté potassi* (Sentence-level generics)
>
> 'The banana contains potassium'
>
> *(83) Un plàtan conté potassi* (Sentence-level generics)
>
> 'A banana contains potassium'
>
> *(84) Els lleons mengen carn* (NP and Sentence-level generics)
>
> 'Lions eat meat'
>
> *(85) L'aigua és necessària per viure* (Sentence-level generics)
>
> 'Water is necessary to survive'

The definite singular article with count nouns takes the same usage as in English at NP-level, although sentences (81) and (82) show that *el* is properly used both at NP and sentence levels. Nevertheless, singular *the* is used only at NP-level in English.

Furthermore, we can appreciate that the indefinite article in (83) is used at sentence-level which conveys perfectly generic meaning like English. However, they share a common feature: the indefinite article cannot be used at NP-level because the subject NP must denote a kind of an entire group. Thus, sentence (86) is ungrammatical since the predicate does not allow us to interpret it as generic and it should make reference to the whole class, but not an individual of it.

*(86) *Un pingüí gegant està extingit*

'A great penguin is extinct'

Finally, definite plural count nouns (84) and definite mass nouns (85) are properly used at sentence-level. Moreover, if we omit the definite plural article in Catalan (87a) with count nouns, it would be considered ungrammatical, whereas in English (88) it is accepted.

(87) Les taronges contenen vitamina C

    a. *Taronges contenen vitamina C*

(88) Oranges contain vitamin C

    a. *The oranges contain vitamin C*

2.3.5. Object usage in generic context

Generic meaning may also appear in object position, albeit limited information has been found to describe this section. However, we will try to demonstrate through some examples that generic reference emerges in object contexts as well. In addition, verbs that display preference, taste, emotion, prohibition, censure and so on are the most common ones that "tend to refer to their objects as totalities or total inclusive sets, whence the appearance of the generic definite article" (Yates, Wheeler and Dols, 1999: 51).

As mentioned in section 2.3.3., Catalan zero article is also used in object position which can be either direct object or indirect object. That is to say, it occurs with NPs that do not denote subject function. Moreover, taking into account the explanation provided in section 2.1., there are particular cases in which the zero article can also be used in subject position; for example, when the subject is post verbal (5), an adjective follows the noun (6) and when listing some nouns (7). According to Cardus (1982), the

zero article not only conveys genericness in object position but also the definite plural article with count nouns. Additionally, the definite singular article with count and mass nouns also stands for generic meaning, but notice in sentence (93) that in English requires *the* in its equivalent translation. However, we cannot deem it as generic because it is denoting specific reading.

(89) *Mai tinc paciència* (zero singular article - mass noun)

'I have no patience'

(90) *No m'agrada regalar flors* (zero singular article – count noun)

'I don't like giving flowers'

(91) *Estimo els dofins* (definite plural article - count noun)

'I love dolphins'

(92) *Odio la música* (definite singular article – mass noun)

'I hate music'

(93) *Adoro el lleó* (definite singular article – count noun)

'I adore the lion (of that zoo)'

Nevertheless, taking into account that the indefinite singular article is accepted only at sentence-level generics, it is not allowed to represent generic meaning in object position. By contrast, it only conveys specific reading as the following example shows:

(94) **La Maria odia veure un tigre*

'Maria hates seeing a lion'

2.3.6. Prepositional usage in generic context

Catalan as well as English displays generic reading in prepositional contexts, albeit not all articles are accurate to express it. In English, we provided prepositions *at, on, in* and *to*. In this section, we are going to present prepositions *sense* (95, 95a, 96,

96a)*, a* (97, 97a, 98, 98a) and *en* (99, 99a, 100, 100a), since I consider them the most clear ones to show genericness.

(95) *Va venir sense barret*

    a. *He came without a hat*

(96) *Els animals no poden viure sense aigua*

    a. *Animals cannot live without water*

(97) *La gent acudeix a l'hospital quan es fa mal*

    a. *People go to hospital when they get injured*

(98) *La gent prega a l'església*

    a. *People pray at Church*

(99) *Els morts s'enterren en els cementiris*

    a. *Dead people are buried at cemeteries*

(100)   *Els morts s'enterren en el cementiri*

    a. *Dead people are buried at cemetery*

In sentence (95), we use the zero singular article with a count noun to display generic reading, whereas in English (95a), notice that it requires the use of *a* for its equivalent translation. Additionally, employing the zero article with a mass noun (96) is another clear example of how to convey generic reference as well as in English (96a), where it also employs the zero article. By contrast, Catalan like English has some restrictions when using the definite singular/plural article with count/mass nouns in the sense that it may denote specific reading. Taking the above sentences as referent, using *el* would change totally their generic meaning into specific as well as in English.

(101)   **Va venir sense el barret*

    'He came without the hat'

(102)   **Va venir sense els barrets*

'He came without the hats' (emphasizing)

(103)   *Els animals no poden viure sense l'aigua

'Animals cannot live without water'

However, sentences (97) and (98) apply *l'* because, unlike (British) English in (97a) and (98a), in Catalan we use it when we refer to the place, the institution of human life. Otherwise, it would not be deemed grammatical as when the preposition *a* is followed by an NP, we must use the definite article in generic use. Moreover, preposition *a* may also be followed by *un/una*, but it would convey specific connotation. Furthermore, preposition *en* as it is presented in the above examples (99) and (100), it requires to be followed by the definite article *el/s* with count nouns, but not the indefinite one. English again employs the zero plural article in count nouns.

(104)   *Va venir sense un barret

'He came without a hat'

(105)   *La gent acudeix a un hospital quan es fa mal

'People go to hospital when they get injured'

(106)   *Els morts s'enterren en un cementiri

'Dead people are buried in cemetery'

3. Methodology

As previously indicated in the introduction, the aim of this study was to compare the similarities and differences between English and Catalan languages when dealing with generic references and using articles in subject, object and prepositional complement position. Additionally, language transfer was also taken into account since it plays an important role that allowed us to detect whether L1 transfer interferes when using English articles.

Thus, the methodology of this study was carried out at an English language school with the participation of the whole student body. Three different levels of English were analysed with the objective of detecting the level that appeared to have acquired better generic references in English. Thus, three different multiple choice questionnaires were designed according to beginner, intermediate and advanced level with 11 sentences per test that contain all the possible combinations of articles in subject, object and prepositional contexts followed by a count and mass noun (see Appendix A,B and C). The purpose was to evaluate how Catalan subjects used the different articles in each environment and in different position.

The following table shows all the possible combinations in which it is possible to appreciate whether these English sentences coincide or not with Catalan translation:

SUBJECT POSITION

	COUNT NOUNS		COINCIDENCE WITH CATALAN	MASS NOUNS	COINCIDENCE WITH CATALAN
	SINGULAR	PLURAL		SINGULAR	
Definite	The dodo is extinct	-	El dodo està extingit OK	-	-
Indefinite	A lion is dangerous	-	Un lleó és perillós OK	-	-
Zero	-	Tigers are dangerous	Els tigres són perillosos X	Gold is expensive	L'or és car X

OBJECT POSITION

	COUNT NOUNS		COINCIDENCE WITH CATALAN	MASS NOUNS	COINCIDENCE WITH CATALAN
	SINGULAR	PLURAL		SINGULAR	
Definite	-	-		-	
Indefinite	Have you ever touched a dolphin?	-	Has tocat mai un dofí? OK	-	-
Zero	-	She hates motorcycles	Odia les motocicletes X	I hate gold	Odio l'or X

PREPOSITIONAL COMPLEMENT POSITION

	COUNT NOUNS		COINCIDENCE WITH CATALAN	MASS NOUNS	COINCIDENCE WITH CATALAN
	SINGULAR	PLURAL		SINGULAR	
Definite	-	-	-	-	-
Indefinite	She came with a hat	-	Va venir amb barret X	-	-
Zero	People get a cold in winter	He came without trousers	La gent agafa un refredat a l'hivern X Va venir sense pantalons OK	I like working with iron	M'agradar treballar amb ferro OK

OK = coincidence

X = no coincidence

3.1. Participants

The data of this study was based basically on evaluating students by providing them an English questionnaire, according to their level, in which participants had to select what article suited best in every sentence. The subjects were 34 and the activity was carried out in an English language school in Ripollet. 13 of these subjects were at beginner level whose ages are between 10 and 12 years old; 10 subjects at intermediate

level whose ages are between 12 and 15 years old; and 11 subjects at advanced level whose ages are between 16 and 31 years old. All participants' L1 is Catalan and carried out an experiment which consisted of a series of sentences regarding generic reference. They had to choose the article they thought was the most appropriate according to the meaning of the sentence. The experiment was conducted with the prior authorization of the Director of the English school. Furthermore, once Director's approval was accepted, the three different groups were informed that they would participate in a research study. Then, students carried out the experiment without being told the real purpose of the activity so as not to influence their answers. Moreover, a pilot test was conducted with a group of three native speakers (2 English and 1 American) and they completed each test in order to compare their results with the ones provided by Catalan participants. Thus, this allowed us to appreciate whether there was more than one possible answer in every question, which we accepted in case subjects provide one answer or another.

3.2. Data Collection

The different questionnaires were designed according to Catalan learners' level as we mentioned in the previous section. Subsequently, students completed the multiple choice questionnaire in English with 11 sentences per test. The ones who obtained a score 6 or more were considered to master articles, whereas the other ones who obtained a score below 6 were considered not to master articles in English. Thus, the purpose of this activity was to appreciate whether they had acquired how to master articles in generic meanings in subject, object and prepositional contexts with singular/plural count and mass nouns. The data collected was used to identify which level appeared to have more problems when selecting the different articles in generic references. In the next section, results are represented in graphs which provide the percentage of mistakes and correct answers that every level obtained according to function. Then, three graphs with

the use of articles in every sentence are also provided so as to appreciate when subjects used more frequently each article in the different contexts (subject, object, and prepositional complement position).

4. Results

In this section we provide the results obtained from the study. As described above, the following graphs exhibit results that have been obtained from the activity carried out in the English School. Thus, each graph presents each level (beginner, intermediate and advanced) with percentages in order to appreciate correct and incorrect answers provided by subjects. The first graph (Figure 1) deals with articles that subjects used in subject position, the second one (Figure 2) shows articles they used in object position, and the third one (Figure 3) corresponds to articles they used in prepositional complement position.

Furthermore, Figure 4, 5 and 6 show in detail the data counted on percentages of the different articles (*the, a* and $\varnothing$) that subjects of each level used most in order to detect whether they use them properly or not. The beginner level seems to show more difficulties when using each article, whereas the advanced one masters much better them with slight problems. The intermediate level results are closer to the advanced percentages, but articles are not fully acquired. Thus, in the next section, the discussion of these results are analysed in detail.
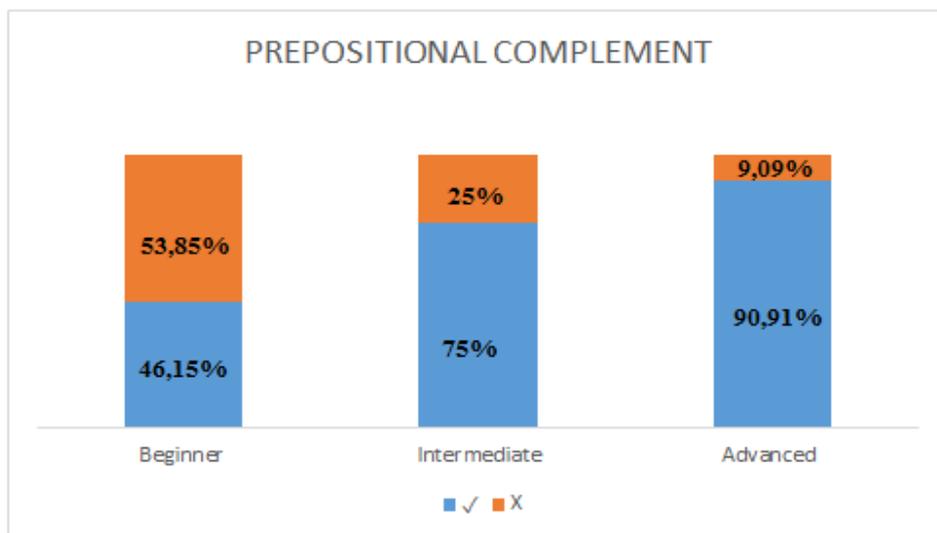
Figure 1: Subject Position (%)

Figure 1 represents sentences (1, 5, 7 and 11) of each questionnaire in subject position. The corresponding 88,64% of right answers shows subjects from the advanced level who appear to master better articles when dealing with subject position, whereas the beginner level seems to have more difficulties. However, subjects from the intermediate level are not far from the advanced one as they represent a 67,50% of correct answers.
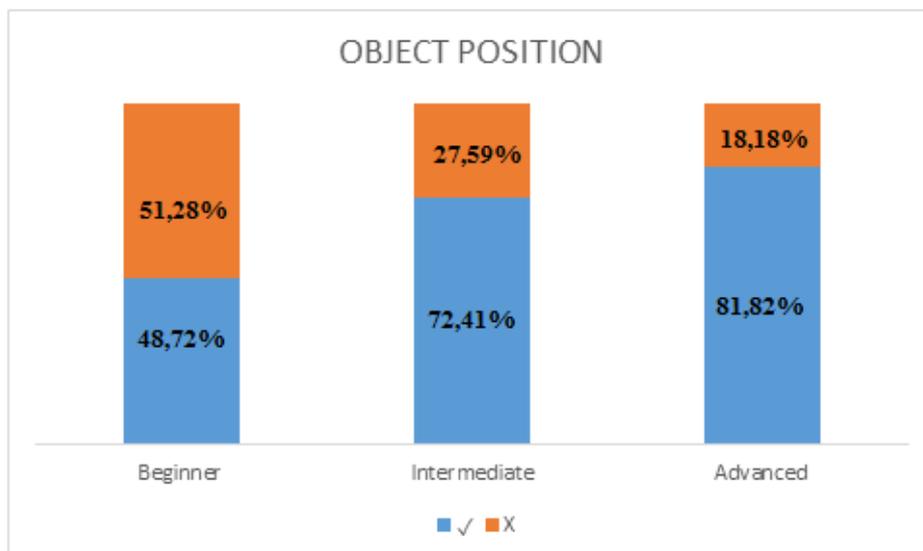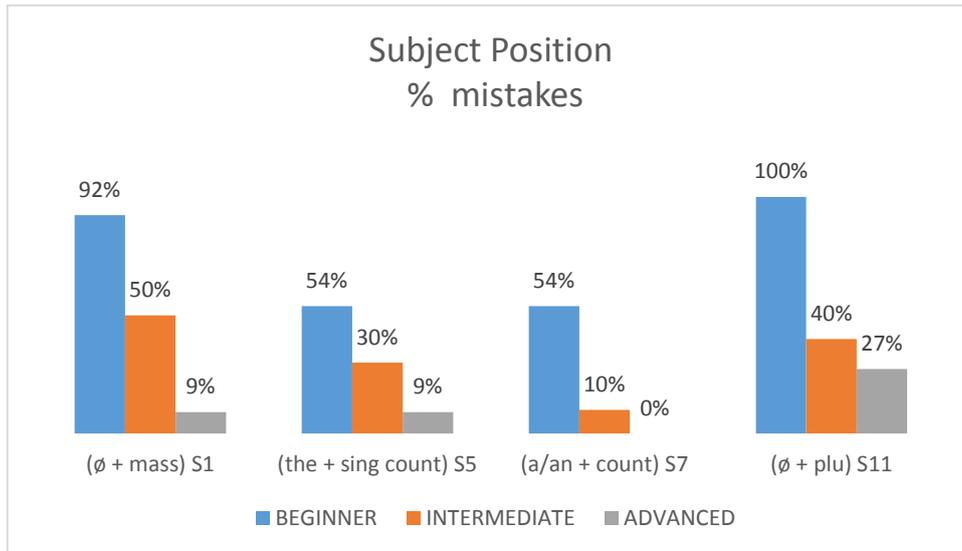

Figure 2: Object Position (%)

As can be seen in Figure 2, which stands for sentences (3, 6 and 9) of each questionnaire, subjects from the beginner level obtained a 48,72% of correct answers in

object position, although it is still the worst percentage. Yet, subjects from the intermediate and advanced levels represent almost the same percentage with a 72,41% and 81,82% respectively. Thus, this probably means that articles in object position are still equally acquired by both levels.


Figure 3: Prepositional Complement Position (%)

As observed in Figure 3, which corresponds to sentences (2, 4, 8 and 10) of each questionnaire in prepositional complement position, the advanced subjects obtained the best score, a 90,91% of right answers, followed by a 75% of the intermediate ones and, finally, subjects from the beginner level obtained a 46,15%. As can be seen, comparing Figure 1, 2 and 3, the intermediate and advanced levels obtained better scores when using articles in prepositional complement position, whereas the beginner level seems to master articles almost equally in prepositional complement and object position than in subject contexts.

Figure 4: Subject Position (%) Mistakes

As observed in Figure 4, subjects from the beginner level obtained the worst scores in all subject sentences. However, the zero article seems to be the most problematic one and it might be due to language transfer.
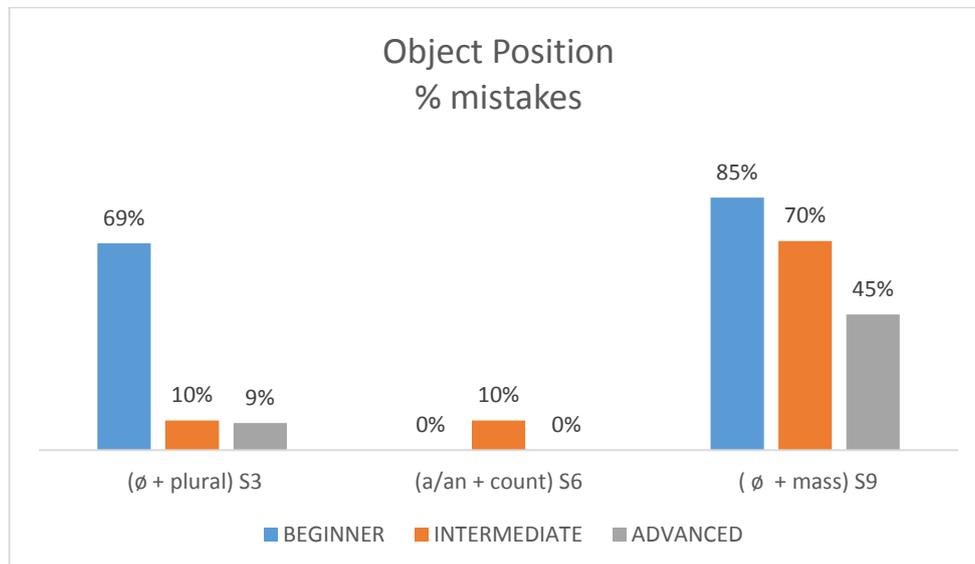
Figure 5: Object Position (%) Mistakes

Moreover, in Figure 5, subjects show again some difficulties when using the zero article when it is followed by a mass noun in object position. What is more, the beginner subjects are far from the other levels as they do not master the zero article when dealing

with plural count nouns. Furthermore, the intermediate level performed the worst use when they had to choose the indefinite article since some subjects used *the* instead.
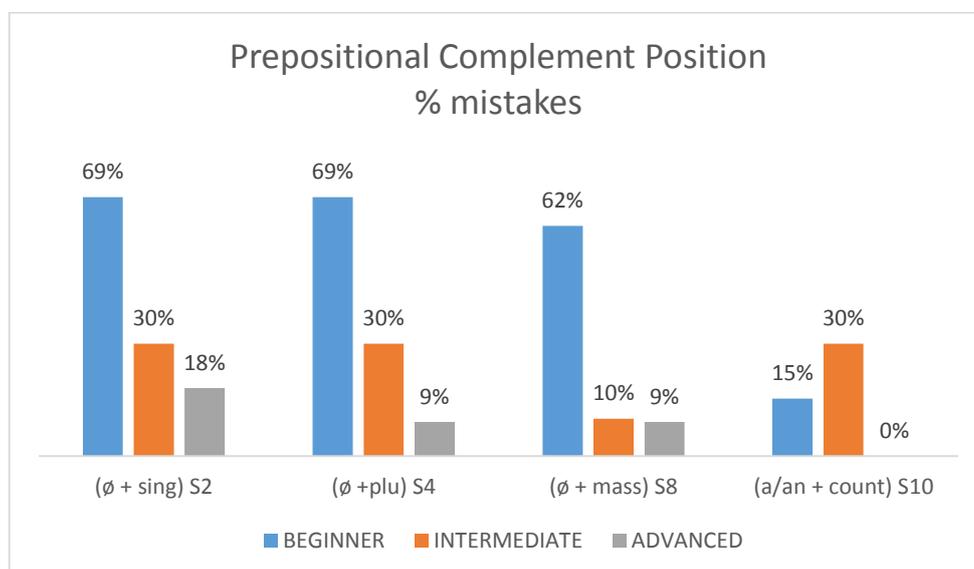
Figure 6: Prepositional Complement Position (%) Mistakes

Finally, in Figure 6, the beginner subjects exhibit the worst scores with sentences that required the use of zero article again. However, the other two levels have obtained better results in prepositional complement position. Still, the intermediate level seems to find out problematic sentence (10) since they used *the* as the alternative option. In the next section, a further explanation of the results obtained will be analysed in detail.

5. Discussion

This study was carried out towards the aim of establishing the degree of difficulty to express generic reference according to the English level. Comparing the results, our prediction that the advanced level would obtain the best scores when using articles in each context to make sentences be generic was what we supported from the first time. Nevertheless, some distinctions among levels need to be discussed with regard to the different articles in subject, object and prepositional complement position.

Therefore, it is also worth pointing out that sentences have been scored taking into account the literature review (see section 2) as well as the results that native speakers provided. In addition, in sentences (5, 6 and 7) (see Appendix C), the three native speakers provided other options that made sense for them and genericness is also maintained. However, in the beginner and intermediate tests they did not select other possible answers.

Concerning Figure 1, it presents the percentages of articles used in sentences (1, 5, 7 and 11) in subject position properly. As it was expected, subjects from the beginner level obtained unsuccessful results (only 25% correct answers) as they are initially starting dealing with the English language. However, we need to take into account that language transfer plays an important role by which subjects are influenced. As for the intermediate level is concerned, there is a huge difference with regard to the beginner one as it appears to have acquired better articles in subject position. It represents a 67,50% of correct answers, although the intermediate subjects still present some problems to manage them accurately. Eventually, the advanced level obtained a 88,64% of correct answers, albeit it is not far enough from the intermediate one. Nevertheless, it is the closest level whose subjects provided answers that were similar to the ones selected by the control group.

Figure 2 presents the data obtained in object position from sentences (3, 6 and 9). Again, the beginner level still corresponds the lower percentage 48,72% of correct answers, although it is better compared to the subject one (25%). Sentence (6) seems to be an easy sentence because it works in the same way as in Catalan. Thus, the beginner subjects could just be transferring their mother tongue use. Concerning the intermediate level, subjects' scores are quite higher with a 72,41%, and the data from subject position and object position do not differ a lot. Therefore, it seems that articles used in both

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positions are acquired almost in the same way, but in practical terms they still have slight difficulties when selecting the appropriate article. As for the advanced level is concerned, again, it obtained the best score with 81,82% which means that it uses almost perfectly articles in generic object contexts, albeit some mistakes are made by a few subjects who do not master them at all[5].

Figure 3 deals with the data obtained from sentences (2, 4, 8 and 10) in prepositional complement position. The use of article in this context appears to be the easiest one for the three levels. However, the results do not differ much from the ones obtained in the object position. Thus, the reason of this fact presumably seems to be that language transfer is crucial at the beginner level as they obtained a 46,15% of correct answers. The correspondence 75% is for the intermediate subjects who may also be influenced by language transfer, although some of them are aware of when to use articles in prepositional contexts. Eventually, the advanced level obtained a 90,91% which is the highest score among the different contexts, and apparently subjects applied carefully their theoretical knowledge about articles in those prepositional sentences.

Figures 4, 5 and 6 show the data of every single sentence in detail so as to appreciate in which contexts subjects performed more mistakes. Hence, Figure 4 presents those mistakes that each level made when using articles in subject position to convey genericness. Subjects from the beginner level found problematic sentence (1) and (11) (see Appendix A) as the data show a 92% and 100% of mistakes respectively since they incorrectly used *the* instead of ∅ with mass and plural count nouns due to their L1's influence presumably. However, singular count nouns appeared to be less difficult as they used *the* or *a/an* quite properly in sentences (5) and (7) because these articles work in a similar way as the Catalan ones. Along similar lines, the intermediate

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[5] The results of each subject have not been commented on.

level was also unsuccessful in sentences (1) and (11), although their percentages are lower 50% and 40% respectively than the beginner ones. Again, language transfer also seems to be present in the intermediate level. Finally, the advanced level showed 27% of mistakes in sentence (11), albeit most subjects used the zero article properly.

Figure 5 represents the data collected from articles used wrongly in object position. The beginner subjects did not use the zero article in sentences (3) and (9), although the percentage is 69% and 85% respectively, which is lower than the ones they obtained in subject position. Perhaps, they were a bit conscious that in English *the* is not used when dealing with general statements in this kind of sentences (see Appendix A). Nevertheless, the intermediate subjects showed a rather low performance (70% errors) when dealing with sentence (9) when the zero article is followed by a mass noun. This presumably appears to be the case because they applied their mother tongue's rules. The same holds for the advanced subjects who a 45% selected *the*. Or it could be that they were simply unable to differentiate between mass and count nouns. Moreover, the corresponding 10% of mistakes from sentence (6) is made by the intermediate level because they selected incorrectly *the* instead of *a* in most cases. Thus, the indefinite article seems to be problematic for this level or maybe the kind of noun chosen in the test was not the most appropriate (see Appendix B).

Finally, Figure 6 deals with the results that correspond to the percentage of articles used wrongly in prepositional complement position. Still, the beginner subjects have difficulties when using the zero article as happens in sentences (2, 4 and 8), although this time when the zero article is followed by a mass noun the percentage is lower with a 62% of mistakes. As for the intermediate subjects, when a singular or plural count noun is preceded by the zero article is still problematic for them, whereas when the zero article is selected with plural count nouns in object position it is used

wrongly only by the 10% of them. However, sentence (8) only a 10% were wrong, which means that it is almost acquired. Concerning the advanced subjects, they used the zero article in sentences (4) and (8) native-like, although only a 18% found problematic when the zero article is followed by a singular count noun. Nevertheless, the highest level maintained a 0% of mistakes when a sentence required the indefinite article in the three different contexts. The beginner and intermediate levels' percentages in sentence (10) are low, but the intermediate one obtained a 30% of mistakes, whereas the beginner subjects a 15%. A reason could be that the intermediate subjects may have perceived the count noun *tie* (see Appendix B) as a mass noun because they probably did not understand what this word meant and they selected $\varnothing$ instead of *a*, except in one case when *the* was selected.

Let us consider now sentences (5, 6 and 7) (see Appendix C) since as mentioned at the beginning of this section they need to be discussed. Sentence (5) fulfils the rules described in sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2. For that reason, *the* and *a* are allowed in it since both answers convey generic meaning and express the essence of a collective group, that is to say, a general statement that it is shared by all lions:

The/A lion is a threatening animal

Therefore, in sentence (6), we used *a* according to Chesterman (1991) (see example 20), as that sentence was taken from his book, but one of the English speakers selected *the* instead of *a* in the advanced test. However, we accepted it as correct since for this subject it made sense to use *the* and it does not lose its generic meaning in object position. Thus, as can be appreciated, *the* still conveys a type or subtype of a deer.

> *Lars wants to study <u>a/the</u> deer that abounds in southern Africa but is rare in the north.*

Moreover, the same goes for sentence (7). In this case, the other English speaker and the American one provided the definite article instead of the indefinite one. Additionally, in our literature review (see section 2.2.2), it is established that when the indefinite article is not used with verb *to be* it conveys concepts and not objects. Thus, sentence (7) makes reference to an activity that the concept carries out. Hence, we accepted the use of *the,* in this case, as these two native speakers used it. Thus, we scored both answers as correct in those cases that Catalan learners used *the* instead of *a* in the advanced test

> <u>*A/The*</u> *beaver builds damns*

Some level scores were quite unexpected, particularly the case of the intermediate subjects with regard to the use of indefinite article in sentences (6) and (10) because it is supposedly assumed that the more level a subject acquires the less mistakes he/she commits. Thus, the data show that this premise is not always true for all cases.

6. Summary and Conclusions

This study attempted to investigate exclusively the expression of generic reference by using the definite, indefinite and zero articles in subject, object and prepositional complement position. Moreover, in this piece of research, these different articles are examined according to whether the noun was a mass or count noun and whether the noun was singular or plural. The aim of the study was to compare whether Catalan and English languages use articles in the same way as well as to appreciate to what extent L1 interferes in L2 when using English articles to convey generic meaning. Thus, all these factors were taken into account to analyse genericness faithfully. The

participants were 34 from a language school whose mother tongue was Catalan and were divided according to their English level (beginner, intermediate and advanced). They had to complete a multiple choice questionnaire which was created according to each level. Concerning the results they provided in their respective tests, some differences emerged among the three groups.

The data shows that the beginner and intermediate subjects find it difficult the use of articles in subject position. Therefore, this fact is due to L1 transfer effects since sentences that required the zero article with mass or plural nouns were difficult as they selected *the* as the alternative option. Nevertheless, the indefinite article was not fully acquired by the intermediate level as they incorrectly chose *the*. Furthermore, the advanced subjects show slight problems when dealing with articles in object position and it seems that mass nouns were the trickiest ones since they used *the* instead of $\varnothing$. Perhaps, the nouns chosen in object position in the advanced test were not selected accurately and thus they made the results vary. Still, L1 transfer remains active well into the advanced level.

Notwithstanding, the teaching methodology that most teachers adopt when dealing with articles is focused on articles used in subject position without providing a distinction (in most cases) between generic and specific reference. However, the results of this study show that subjects seem to have difficulties when using articles in subject position. This fact may be as a consequence of L1 transfer as it interferes when using articles. On the other hand, the fact of selecting other kinds of nouns in the questionnaires would have shown different results. Thus, further research is needed with regard to genericness as well as the investigation of articles used in object and prepositional complement position.

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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Subject: **BEGINNER LEVEL**

Age:

Girl/Boy

Choose and circle the correct article in the following sentences:

1. _____homework is obligatory for all students.

   the   a   an   ∅

2. People usually get a cold in _____ winter.

   the   a   an   ∅

3. She likes _____ computers.

   the   a   an   ∅

4. I came without ____trousers.

   the   a   an   ∅

5. _____great penguin is extinct.

   the   a   an   ∅

6. Kevin wants _____ elephant.

   the   a   an   ∅

7. _____ person from Italy probably likes pizza.

   the   a   an   ∅

8. Animals can't live without _____ food.

   the   a   an   ∅

9. I hate _____ music.

   the   a   an   ∅

10. He came home with _____ hat.
    the   a   an   ∅

11. ____ tigers are very dangerous.

    the   a   an   ∅

Appendix B

Subject: **INTERMEDIATE LEVEL**

Age:

Girl/Boy

Choose and circle the correct article in the following sentences:

1. _____tea is really good for your health.

   the   a   an   ∅

2. Children enjoy their holidays in ____ summer.

   the   a   an   ∅

3. She loves driving _____ cars.

   the   a   an   ∅

4. Gentlemen cannot come without _____ trousers.

   the   a   an   ∅

5. _____dodo is extinct.

   the   a   an   ∅

6. Have you ever touched ____ dolphin?

   the   a   an   ∅

7. _____ orange contains vitamin C.

   the   a   an   ∅

8. Mike likes drinking coffee with ____ sugar.

   the   a   an   ∅

9. She has never tasted ___ coffee.

   the   a   an   ∅

10. It is compulsory to attend the meeting with _____ tie.

   the   a   an   ∅

11. ___ elephants are really clever.

   the   a   an   ∅

VOCABULARY BANK

Dodo= a kind of bird

Compulsory = obligatory

Meeting = where people come together to discuss about something

Clever = intelligent

Appendix C

Age:

Girl/Boy

Choose and circle the correct article in the following sentences:

1. _____time elapses more quickly in old age than in childhood.

   the   a   an   ∅

2. It is thought that in _____ spring people are open to love.

   the   a   an   ∅

3. I would like to eat _____ apples every day.

   the   a   an   ∅

4. I prefer to go out in ___ jeans since they are really comfortable.

   the   a   an   ∅

5. ___ lion is a threatening animal.

   the   a   an   ∅

6. Lars wants to study _____ deer that abounds in Southern Africa but is rare in the north.

   the   a   an   ∅

7. _____ beaver builds dams.

   the   a   an   ∅

8. Welders work with _____ iron.

   the   a   an   ∅

9. My friends value_____ friendship highly

   the   a   an   ∅

10. Ladies and gentlemen are meant to attend the meeting with ____ hat.

the   a   an   ∅

11. ____ tickets are expensive when dealing with concerts.

the   a   an   ∅

VOCABULARY BANK

Welder = a person who specializes fusing materials.