

# Acquisition of the English Article System by Speakers of Polish in ESL and EFL Settings

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the second language (L2) developmental sequence of article acquisition by adult language learners in two different environments: English as a Second Language (ESL), and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). On the basis of an existing classification of English articles (*a*, *the*, *zero*), data on article usage were obtained from adult learners who were native speakers of Polish, a language that has no articles or article-like morphemes. Data analyses led to some limited conclusions about the order of acquisition of the English article system, and may contribute to a more detailed understanding of the nature of interlanguage representations.

## INTRODUCTION

The English article system, which includes the indefinite article *a(n)*, the definite article *the*, and the *zero* (or *null*) article,<sup>2</sup> is one of the most difficult structural elements for ESL learners, causing even the most advanced non-native speakers of English (NNS) to make errors. These errors occur even when other elements of the language seem to have been mastered. According to Master (2002), the difficulty stems from three principle facts about the article system: (a) articles are among the most frequently occurring function words in English (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999), making continuous rule application difficult over an extended stretch of discourse; (b) function words are normally unstressed and consequently are very difficult, if not impossible, for a NNS to discern, thus affecting the availability of input in the spoken mode; and (c) the article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme, a considerable burden for the learner, who generally looks for a one-form-one-function correspondence in navigating the language until the advanced stages of acquisition.

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<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this research I have adopted a traditional approach in which the term *zero article* refers to any instance in which a noun requires no article. Nonetheless, I do recognize that recent research (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Chesterman, 1991; Master, 1997) divides the zero article into two types: zero and null. The zero article occurs with nonspecific or generic noncount and plural nouns, such as *water* and *cats*. The null article occurs with certain singular count and proper nouns, such as *Chicago* and *lunch*.

Added to the complexity of the target system are difficulties inherent in the foreign/second language learning processes. From a language processing perspective it seems reasonable to say that function words, unlike content words, are generally overlooked by learners when processing language primarily for meaning. In the case of articles, the difficulty of meaning is determined by the novelty and abstractness of the concept (Pienemann, 1998). Learners' changing hypotheses about article usage at different stages in interlanguage development, as well as the influence of the first language (L1), complicate the task even more.

There has been a considerable amount of research conducted pertaining to the processes of L2 acquisition of English articles. Research on article acquisition in English language learning falls into two areas: pedagogy and its effectiveness on the one hand, and the process of acquisition on the other. This paper examines the L2 developmental sequence of article acquisition by adult language learners in two different learning environments: ESL and EFL. Participants are native speakers of Polish, a language that has no articles or article-like morphemes [-ART]. The paper briefly describes previous research on the process of acquisition of English articles by L2 learners, identifying relevant theoretical issues generated by the research. It then reports on the procedures and results of the study, and discusses the findings that lead to some insight into the possible reasons for the variability in accuracy in article usage.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Article Use in Different Noun Phrase Environments

Article acquisition research traditionally begins by identifying contexts for the appearance of articles. Huebner's (1983) classification (which itself was based on Bickerton, 1981) has been one of the most widely used models for the analysis of English noun phrase (NP) environments. A slightly modified version of Huebner's model is used in this study since previous research relies on his methodology.

In Huebner's model (summarized in Table 1<sup>3</sup>), the use of English articles is determined by the semantic function of the NP in discourse. According to the model, English NPs are classified by two discourse features of referentiality—namely, whether a noun is a specific referent [+/-SR], and whether it is assumed as known to the hearer [+/-HK]. These two aspects of referentiality thus give rise to four basic NP contexts that determine article use. Nouns classified as Type 1, [-SR, +HK] are generics, and are marked with *a*, *the*, or *zero*. Nouns classified as Type 2, [+SR, +HK], are referential definites and are marked with *the*. Type 3, [+SR, -HK], includes first mention nouns, whose referent is identifiable to the speaker but not the listener, e.g. nouns that the speaker is entering into the discourse for the first time. These are marked with *a* or *zero*. Type 4 nouns, classified as [-SR, -HK], are nonreferentials. This type includes nouns that are nonspecific for both the speaker and the hearer; *a* and *zero* are the relevant articles. In addition to these four types, idiomatic expressions and conventional uses were classified as Type 5 in this study, as in Goto Butler (2002) and Thomas (1989).

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<sup>3</sup> As pointed out by Thomas (1989), Huebner's model is not a comprehensive guide to the distribution of English articles, but rather a sketch of the major environments relevant to acquisition studies. In addition to idiomatic uses, there are other productive contexts for articles (e.g., proper names). There also may be some overlap among the environments listed in Huebner's model.

**TABLE 1**  
**Environments for the Appearance of *a*, *the*, and *0***

Features	Environment	Articles	Examples
Type 1 [-SR, +HK]	Generic nouns	<i>a</i> , <i>the</i> , <i>0</i>	<i>0 Fruit</i> flourishes in the valley. <i>The Grenomian</i> is an excitable person. <i>A paper clip</i> comes in handy.
Type 2 [+SR, +HK]	Referential definites previous mention specified by entailment specified by definition unique in all contexts unique in a given context	<i>the</i>	Pass me <i>the pen</i> . <i>The idea</i> of coming to the US was... I found a book. <i>The book</i> was... <i>The first person</i> to walk on <i>the moon</i> ...
Type 3 [+SR, -HK]	Referential indefinites first-mention nouns	<i>a</i> , <i>0</i>	Chris approached me carrying <i>a dog</i> . I keep sending <i>0 messages</i> to him.
Type 4 [-SR, -HK]	Nonreferential nouns attributive indefinites nonspecific indefinites	<i>a</i> , <i>0</i>	Alice is <i>an accountant</i> . I guess I should buy <i>a new car</i> . <i>0 Foreigners</i> would come up with a better solution.
Type 5	Idioms Other conventional uses	<i>a</i> , <i>the</i> , <i>0</i>	<i>All of a sudden</i> , he woke up. <i>In the 1950s</i> , there weren't many cars. His family is now living <i>0 hand to mouth</i> .

Adapted from Goto Butler (2002), Huebner (1985), and Thomas (1989)

## Article Acquisition by L2 Learners

Research on the L2 acquisition of articles has been rather extensive (although often fragmentary), focusing on isolated features of the English article system (Chaudron & Parker, 1990; Goto Butler, 2002; Jarvis, 2002; Kharma, 1981; Liu & Gleason, 2002; Mizuno, 1999; Yamada & Matsuura, 1982; Yoon, 1993). Some studies that have yielded important findings (Hakuta, 1976; Huebner, 1979, 1983; Tarone, 1985) were not specifically on article acquisition, but on the acquisition of grammatical morphemes in general. Only Master (1987, as cited in Master, 1997), Parrish (1987), Tarone and Parrish (1988), and Thomas (1989) studied the acquisition of articles exclusively (see Table 2 for a summary). In terms of the terminology employed in article acquisition research, the early studies looked mostly at the presence or absence of articles in obligatory contexts. It was Huebner (1983) who opened up a new avenue of research on L2 article acquisition by employing Bickerton's (1981) noun classification system

as discussed earlier. Not only did Huebner look at the presence or absence of articles in obligatory contexts, but he also analyzed various types of NPs and the articles used with each semantic type, as well as the development of ESL learners' grasp of the article system.

From these sources, some tentative generalizations emerge about the development of article use by L2 learners. Master (1987, as cited in Master, 1997) was the first to point out that articles appear to be acquired differently, depending on whether or not they occur in the learner's L1. Overall, *the* emerges early and *a* later in L2 acquisition (Huebner, 1983; Master 1997; Parrish, 1987; Thomas 1989). *The* may be overgeneralized. Both Huebner and Master call this phenomenon "*the*-flooding", although neither of the researchers defines the term, except loosely as a dramatic rise in usage. The researchers find *the* dominating in [+SR, +HK], [-SR, +HK], and [+SR, -HK] (i.e., referential indefinites and definites as well as generics) contexts. Thomas (1989), on the other hand, found the *zero* article overgeneralized across proficiency levels.

For those learners whose L1s lack articles [-ART], researchers (Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987) reported that *zero* dominates in all environments for articles in the early stages of L2 acquisition. Parrish (1987) proposed that the *zero* article was acquired first, followed by the definite article, and finally the indefinite article. In a similar vein, Master (1997) concluded that, "the first article that seems to be acquired by [-ART] speakers is *zero*" (p. 216). However, he admitted that since researchers cannot tell the difference between the *zero* article and non-use or omission of the article, "acquisition is largely by default" (p. 216). Master's data showed that *zero* accuracy is close to 100 % for the low-ability level participants, which then drops, and rises to nearly 100 % again for the high-ability level participants. He also reports that overuse of *zero* decreases with an increase in proficiency level, although the overuse of *zero* persists more than overuse of the other articles.

Liu and Gleason (2002) reexamined Master's data and offered a new interpretation of the overuse of the *zero* article and underuse of *a* and *the*: "this overuse of the *zero* article and the underuse of *the* at the advanced stage would suggest that the two articles are acquired rather late" (p. 5). The hypothesis is supported by Young's (1996) data on the use of articles by Czech and Slovak [-ART] learners of English. Definiteness was not encoded by *the* at the early stages of acquisition. That problem persisted even at the more advanced stages. However, at all levels of proficiency, participants encoded indefiniteness by means of the indefinite article *a*, and the pattern became more consistent as acquisition progressed.

In sum, the previous investigations into the acquisition of English articles by [-ART] speakers have yielded somewhat conflicting results. The early research findings (Huebner, 1983; Master 1997; Parrish, 1987; Thomas 1989) suggest the integration of the definite article into the learner's interlanguage before the integration of the indefinite article. Liu and Gleason (2002) and Young (1996), however, conclude the opposite: early and accurate control of the indefinite article. Another controversy generated by the research relates to the interpretation of *zero* article overproduction. Master's (1997) and Parrish's (1987) "acquisition by default" position with regard to *zero* article overuse fails to account for L1 transfer effects at the initial stages of adult L2 acquisition, which is especially severe for [-ART] speakers. Thomas (1989) described a very similar phenomenon occurring in her data as "the *zero* article overgeneralization, or equivalently, failure to use any article" (p. 349).

**TABLE 2**  
**Summary of Research on L2 Acquisition of Articles**

Study	Research Questions	Informants	Procedures	Findings
Hakuta (1976)	What is the order of acquisition of grammatical morphemes (including articles) in the interlanguage of an ESL child?	5-year old Japanese girl acquiring English in a natural way.	Longitudinal-60 weeks. Every two weeks spontaneous speech was recorded while the girl was playing with peers.	Articles <i>a</i> and <i>the</i> are acquired as a system. Performance on <i>the</i> was initially better than on <i>a</i> . Overuse of <i>a</i> and <i>the</i> involved specific/nonspecific distinctions as well as violations of “ <i>a</i> for singular NP only” rule.
Huebner (1979, 1983)	How does the article system in an adult’s interlanguage develop? What are the differences between different methods for investigating developmental patterns?	23-year old Laotian, a speaker of Hmong acquiring English in a natural setting (at the starting point of the study qualified as a beginner).	Longitudinal-54 weeks. Every three weeks a tape was made of the subject’s narratives. Bickerton’s model was employed. Appearance of morphemes in obligatory contexts as well as nonobligatory contexts was taken into account.	<i>The</i> emerges early, overgeneralization of <i>the</i> results in “ <i>the</i> -flooding.” <i>a</i> appears late in L2 acquisition. Differences in approach to data analysis result in different and sometimes apparently opposing conclusions concerning the nature of interlanguage.
Tarone (1985)	To what extent will ESL learners’ production of grammatical, morphological, and phonological forms (including articles) vary depending on a task?	Twenty 20 ESL learners studying at the University of Minnesota. Ten speakers of Japanese, and ten speakers of Arabic.	Three tasks: - written grammaticality judgment - oral interview with a native speaker of English - oral narration of a sequence of events depicted nonverbally on a video screen.	Utterances of ESL learners show systematic variability in grammar and morphology (including articles) related to each task. To some extent grammatical accuracy was much better in spontaneous oral communication than in a written grammar test.
Parrish (1987)	Can a combination of methods of analysis account for the systematic nature of interlanguage variability? Is there systematicity in the learner’s use of articles?	19-year old Japanese classroom learners. Six years of EFL, four months of ESL (at the starting point of the study qualified as a beginner).	Longitudinal-16 weeks. Every ten days a tape was made of two narratives recycling the same topic (one about Japan, and one describing the city and the campus) An analysis based on suppliance of morphemes in obligatory contexts and Huebner’s classification was conducted.	<i>Zero</i> article was acquired first, followed by <i>the</i> , and finally <i>a</i> . The subject exhibited a gradual rise in the use of <i>the</i> , reaching an 84 % accuracy rate in the end, and lesser accuracy with <i>a</i> , reaching a 50% accuracy rate at the end of the study. <i>Zero</i> article was overgeneralized.

Study	Research Questions	Informants	Procedures	Findings
Tarone & Parrish (1988)	What kinds of NP types, containing different categories of articles, would be elicited by diversified tasks?	Twenty ESL learners studying at the University of Minnesota. Ten speakers of Japanese, and ten speakers of Arabic.	Three tasks: - written grammaticality judgment - oral interview with a native speaker of English - oral narration of a sequence of events depicted nonverbally on a video screen.	Production tasks, such as interviews and essay writing, produced lower error rates than objective tasks, such as cloze test. Lower error rates in production tasks were attributed to learners' avoidance of uncertain uses of articles. Accuracy within one type of article would change across different tasks.
Thomas (1989)	What are the similarities and differences between the L1 and L2 patterns in article acquisition? Do L2 as well as L1 learners associate the definite article with the [+SR] contexts, rather than with [+HK]? If so, do adults overuse <i>the</i> in [+SR, -HK] (first mention) contexts?	Thirty adult ESL learners aged 24-46 (low, intermediate, and high levels of proficiency). Seven speakers of [+ART] languages, 23 speakers of [-ART] languages (Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Finnish).	Paired story-telling task: one member of a pair composes a story based on the drawings and narrates it to the second subject, who cannot see the pictures.	Unlike L1 learners, ESL students did not exhibit early and accurate control of <i>a</i> in the [-SR, -HK] contexts, and <i>the</i> in [+SR, +HK] contexts. The source of errors for L2 learners is overgeneralization of the <i>zero</i> article, or failure to use any article. Overproduction of <i>zero</i> was considerably higher for the [-ART] group than for [+ART] group. L2 learners overgeneralized <i>the</i> in [+SR, -HK] contexts; however, data did not show signs of <i>the</i> -flooding.
Master (1987, as cited in Master, 1997)	How does the English article system develop in the interlanguage of speakers of [+ART] and [-ART] languages?	Twenty ESL learners, speakers of [-ART] (e.g., Japanese) and [+ART] (e.g., Spanish) languages enrolled in an ESL program.	Not specified.	Acquisition order of articles differs depending on subjects' L1s. <i>Zero</i> dominates—it is the first article to be acquired. <i>The</i> emerges early, flooding all environments. For [-ART] learners, acquisition of <i>a</i> is delayed compared with <i>the</i> .

## Definiteness and Indefiniteness in Polish

When tracing the similarities and differences between the first and second language acquisition processes, many researchers have assumed that both L1 and L2 acquisition is governed by an innately specified system, Universal Grammar (UG) (Chomsky, 1968). It consists of relatively autonomous modules, each characterized by a small number of nonviolable universal principles that, to a large extent, account for the similarities across natural languages. Associated with some of these principles is the idea that there are sets of parameters that define possible variations across languages, the setting of each parameter being determined on the basis of experience with the input (Schachter, 1988). There is no consensus among linguists when it comes to defining to what extent UG is available to adult L2 learners. However, the majority of the field acknowledges the influence of the learner's L1 on L2 acquisition, in that the learner will either assume that the L1 settings are appropriate for L2, or that s/he would only have access to the principles and parameter settings instantiated in her/his L1.

English articles are understandably problematic from a cross-linguistic perspective: learners' difficulties appear to be exacerbated when their native languages do not employ articles or article-like morphemes. Participants in this study were native speakers of Polish, a [-ART] Slavic language. On that point Kaluza (1963) observes that to speakers of Polish the idea of the existence of articles may seem entirely strange. Kaluza may be correct in implying that Polish speakers are indeed insensitive to the syntactic aspect of English determiners. However, the concept of marking definiteness or indefiniteness, or, in other words, the use of some grammatical agent to mark the difference, is not foreign to speakers of Polish.

For researchers working within the UG paradigm, definiteness and indefiniteness are a universal property of human language that require speakers to distinguish specific from nonspecific referents, and shared from unshared background knowledge. These meanings are accomplished in Polish without an article system. Instead, word order, verbal aspects, and demonstratives signal definiteness and indefiniteness. For example, the Polish and English sentences in (1) are translation equivalents:

- (1) Do sklepu wszedł mężczyzna.  
*to store entered man*  
A man entered the store.

In English we know that "man" is [+SR, -HK] by virtue of the indefinite article. In Polish, however, the functional sentence perspective requires that new information be positioned toward the end of the sentence, and the clause-final position of *mężczyzna* implies that it is [-HK]. This example is contrasted with sentence (2), in which *man* is marked as [+SR, +HK] by the definite article in English:

- (2) Mężczyzna wszedł do sklepu.  
*man entered to store*  
The man entered the store.

In Polish, the first element in a sentence carries little new information. Instead, it functions to signal given information, and thus *mężczyzna* is [+HK]. Since Polish nouns are fully inflected for

case, word order is not necessary for case assignment. In consequence, word order in Polish takes on some functions for which articles are used in English.

Verbal aspect also allows Polish speakers to distinguish specific from nonspecific referents. This is exemplified in (3) and (4), in which the perfective prefix, *na-* on the verb implies that the noun, *list*, is [+SR], while the imperfective verb implies [-SR].

(3) Napisalem list.  
*Perfective-wrote-1<sup>st</sup> letter*  
I wrote the letter.

(4) Pisałem list.  
*Imperfective-wrote-1<sup>st</sup> letter*  
I wrote a letter.

Alternatively, definiteness in Polish is also achieved through the use of demonstratives and the patterns are similar to those in English, e.g., *ten (this)*, *tamten (that)*, *te (those)*, *tamte (these)*. On the other hand, as in English, indefiniteness may be accomplished with the help of the numeral *one (jeden)*, where it is possible to use *one* as a stressed emphatic variant of *a/an*. Similar functional equivalence is true for other Slavic languages as well (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; James, 1969; Young, 1996).

In sum, languages have a number of means for sorting out reference and achieving topic continuity in connected discourse (Jarvis, 2002). Thus, in a sense, even beginning adult L2 learners of English and native speakers of [-ART] language are sensitive to the semantic aspects of definiteness and indefiniteness in language.

## Environment and Acquisition

A detailed study of the acquisition of a single subsystem of language provides the opportunity to gain an understanding of the learning processes activated by exposure to L2 input under different training conditions. According to Ellis (1985, as cited in VanPatten & Lee, 1990) “*Second* language acquisition is not meant to contrast with *foreign* language acquisition. It is, however, an open question whether the way in which acquisition proceeds in these different situations is the same or different” (p. 17).

Following this line of thinking, I hypothesized that the comparison of specific stages of acquisition across ESL and EFL populations could reveal information about the natural order of acquisition. Discussing environmental similarities and differences, I will follow the convention of using EFL to account for language learning that takes place when English is not the native language of the society, and ESL to refer to language learning that takes place in a country where English is the main language spoken (Bley-Vroman, 1989; Van Patten & Lee, 1990).

For the purpose of constructing a theory of acquisition across different environments, the English article system is a prime candidate as it is a linguistic form that could be especially susceptible to environmental differences. Some linguists (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982) have argued that the English articles are unteachable and can be acquired only through exposure. Doughty and Williams (1998) subscribe to a belief that “there are some forms, such as the English article system, that seem strangely impermeable to instruction and so, for that reason



alone, perhaps should not take up valuable class time” (p. 201). On the other hand, other researchers believe that, although extremely complex, many aspects of the English article system are teachable and learnable (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Master, 1994).

Some SLA researchers (Bardovi-Harlig, 1995; Eubank, 1990; VanPatten, 1990) find the distinction between ESL and EFL irrelevant when it comes to accounting for how learners build a grammatical system. It is argued that the learner’s language acquisition faculties do not change from environment to environment. However, the distinction between ESL and EFL learners is useful in the discussion of product, in relation to both eventual proficiency gained, and the relative impact of certain influences, for example, L1 influence.

In the section that follows, I report on a small-scale empirical study that examined the systematicity of English article use by native-speakers of a [-ART] language. The research questions investigated in this study were therefore the following:

1. In what order do adult L2 learners who are speakers of a [-ART] language acquire the English article system?
2. Do EFL classroom learners necessarily follow different paths in the acquisition of the English article system compared to their ESL counterparts who acquire English in a natural environment where instruction is provided?

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Twenty-five learners participated in the study. The group was composed of ten adult Polish learners of ESL, ten adult Polish learners of EFL, and five native English speakers serving as a control group. Each group of Poles (ages ranging from early twenties to late thirties) included three low-ability, three intermediate-ability, and four high-ability level learners. Levels of proficiency were determined by the means of a grammar placement test<sup>4</sup> used by the Community English Program at Teachers College, Columbia University, where all ESL participants were enrolled for a one-semester intensive English course. The same test was administered to the EFL subjects, all of whom were Warsaw University students (none of them English majors). Low-ability level learners had a score of 20 or below, intermediate-ability level learners scored between 20 and 30, and high-ability level learners scored above 30 out of a possible 40. The average length of stay in America for the ESL participants was one year. All of the ESL subjects used English on a daily basis as all of them were employed in English-speaking environments. In addition, they were taking English classes three times a week. The average length of study in that group was five years. On the other hand, none of the EFL subjects had been outside of Poland for more than a month, and none had used English outside of the classroom, except for occasional trips abroad. The average length of study in the EFL group was nine years, with instruction time amounting to two hours per week.

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<sup>4</sup> Out of 40 questions on the test only one item was designed to test knowledge of the English determiner system.

## **Instrument**

The instrument consisted of forty-two sentences adapted from Goto Butler (2002), Liu and Gleason (2002), and Master (1994). There were a total of seventy-five deleted obligatory uses of *a/an*, *the*, and *zero* articles across five semantic types described previously (fifteen instances for each type). For the test format, I did not leave blanks for the missing obligatory uses of the articles. I simply asked the participants to read the sentences and insert *a/an*, *the*, or *zero* article wherever they deemed it necessary. My rationale was based on Liu and Gleason's (2002) argument that if the blanks were included, some of the students, especially low-ability level learners, might fill every blank with *a* or *the*, making the data very unreliable. Another factor was that the elimination of the blanks could lead to elicitation of unexpected data, as participants could have placed morphemes in places the research did not anticipate. The acceptability of supplied articles was based on the judgment of the control group, and is summarized in Appendix A. The participants were given 20 minutes to complete the task, and they were not allowed to use dictionaries.

## **Data Analysis**

For the purpose of this study an analysis of the use of *a*, *the* and *zero* in obligatory contexts was conducted. In order to understand how well the subjects were able to use the articles, percentage scores of correct responses were calculated for each semantic article type and for each proficiency level. To display the developmental sequences for each semantic article type the percentage scores of correct answers were plotted on the line charts. The described procedure was employed separately for each setting, ESL and EFL.

After obtaining the preliminary results for each setting, the ESL and EFL data were combined according to the proficiency levels of the participants. Again, the percentage scores of correct responses were calculated for each semantic article type. The obtained scores were plotted on the line chart.

Finally, an analysis of the overuse of *a*, *the*, and *zero* was conducted. In order to estimate the learners' overuse of articles, I reanalyzed the same seventy-five NP environments and computed the instances of unnecessary *a*, *the*, and *zero*. To understand the magnitude of the overuse of each article, I calculated the mean proportions of *a/an* versus *the*, and versus *zero*. For ease of comparison, the semantic typology was replaced with the nominal typology (*a*, *the*, *zero*). Means of overuse of each article type were obtained for each proficiency level.

## **RESULTS**

### **The Use of Articles by ESL and EFL Participants**

The performance results for the fill-in-the-article test are shown separately for ESL and EFL populations in Tables 3 and 4. Percentages of accuracy were averaged for each setting and are presented by proficiency level and by article type. By plotting the rate of accuracy from the article matrix, the acquisition curves for ESL and EFL settings were obtained. They are

presented in Figures 1 and 2. The graphs also illustrate the differences between the proficiency levels.

**TABLE 3**  
**Accuracy in Article Use of ESL Participants (Percentage Correct)**  
**(N=10)**

	Type 1: Generics [-SR, +HK] ( <i>a, the, 0</i> )	Type 2: Referential definites [+SR, +HK] ( <i>the</i> )	Type 3: Referential Indefinites [+SR, -HK] ( <i>a, 0</i> )	Type 4: Nonreferentials [-SR, -HK] ( <i>a, 0</i> )	Type 5: Idioms  ( <i>a, the, 0</i> )
Low-Ability	57.7	22.2	46.6	73.3	48.8
Int-Ability	53.3	55.5	53.3	80.0	35.3
High-Ability	58.3	60.0	76.6	80.0	48.3

**TABLE 4**  
**Accuracy in Article Use of EFL Participants (Percentage Correct)**  
**(N=10)**

	Type 1: Generics [-SR, +HK] ( <i>a, the, 0</i> )	Type 2: Referential definites [+SR, +HK] ( <i>the</i> )	Type 3: Referential indefinites [+SR, -HK] ( <i>a, 0</i> )	Type 4: Nonreferentials [-SR, -HK] ( <i>a, 0</i> )	Type 5: Idioms  ( <i>a, the, 0</i> )
Low-Ability	62.2	28.8	46.6	68.8	60.0
Int-Ability	75.5	71.1	73.3	73.3	57.7
High-Ability	60.0	73.3	80.0	88.3	57.7

A number of facts emerge from the data. When Table 3 is compared with Table 4 certain similarities in the acquisition of English articles by ESL and EFL learners become apparent. Nonreferential *a* and *zero* (Type 4) shows the highest observed percentage of accuracy across both settings. Even low-ability level ESL and EFL participants produced 73.3% and 68.8% correct responses respectively for *a* and the *zero* articles in [-SR, -HK] environment. The rate of accuracy reached 80.0% and 88.3% for high-ability level ESL and EFL participants respectively. The learners' command of Type 4 article was solid, independent of the setting.

Type 3, referential indefinites, also requiring the use of both of *a* and the *zero* articles, was more difficult for low-ability level participants, regardless of the setting. Low-ability level learners were able to produce correct instances for less than half of the test items. Nonetheless, the control of correct article usage in [+SR, -HK] environments increased as the participants' English proficiency level increased. High-ability level ESL and EFL learners supplied correct answers for Type 3 in 76.6% and 80.0% of the cases. Again, the setting did not appear to be a major variable for that particular semantic type. In sum, high scores on two subcategories, Type

3 and Type 4, demonstrated a relative ease of detection of the [-HK] semantic feature by the Polish participants.

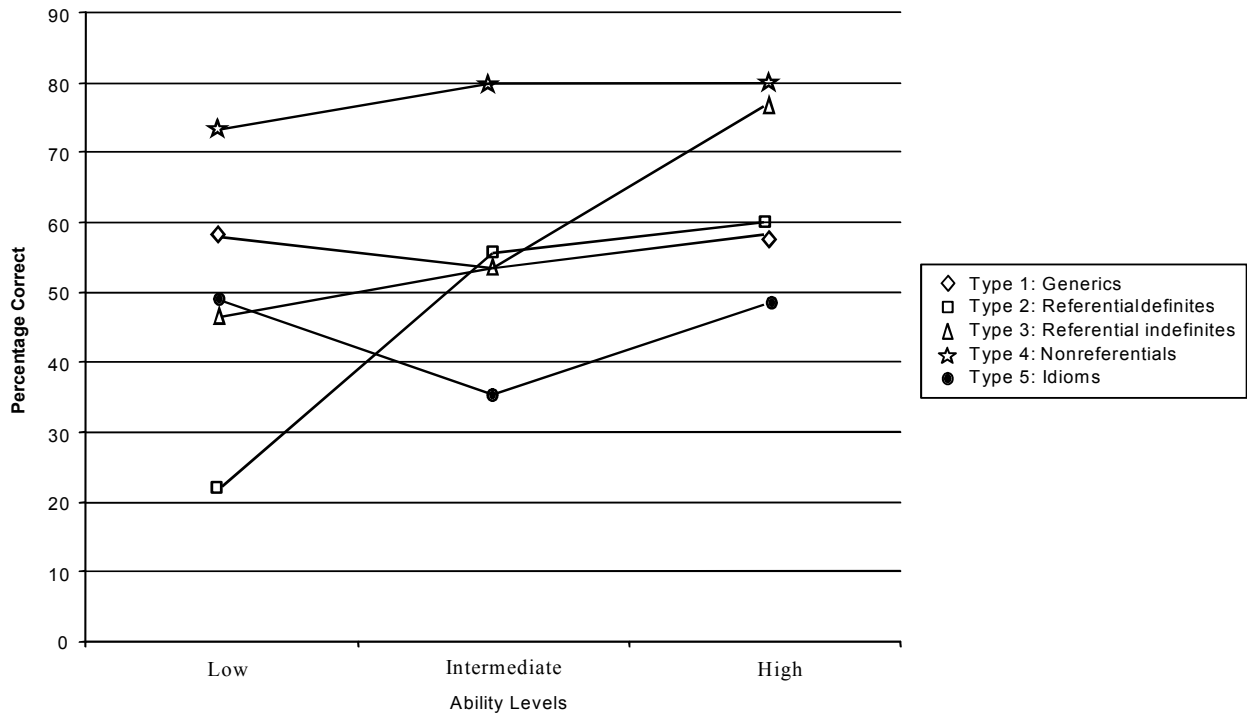
The sharpest increase in levels of accuracy between low- and intermediate-ability level learners occurred in the case of Type 2, referential definites, requiring control over the definite article *the*. Low ability ESL and EFL participants answered only 22.2% and 28.8% of the answers right, respectively. However, the level of control increased significantly for intermediate-ability and high-ability level informants, resulting in 60.0% of correct responses by ESL high-ability level learners and 73.3% by EFL high-ability level learners. Type 2 demonstrated a sharper distinction between the two settings. EFL participants of intermediate- and high-ability scored much higher than their ESL counterparts. The difference amounted to approximately 15%. Nevertheless, the steep increase of accuracy on Type 2 was paralleled by participants in both settings.

Type 1 (generics) and Type 5 (idioms) present a very different picture. In the case of generics, low- and high-ability level ESL and EFL participants scored at the approximately same levels of accuracy. Both ESL and EFL participants of low-ability got approximately 60.0% of answers right. Their high-ability level counterparts scored at the same levels of accuracy. An interesting aspect of the data here is related to the intermediate-ability level participants' scores. On generics, ESL intermediate-ability students scored slightly lower than both low-ability and high-ability participants. For EFL students, the findings are reverse—intermediate-ability level learners scored higher than both low-ability and high-ability participants. This time, however, the difference was substantial, approximately 15%.

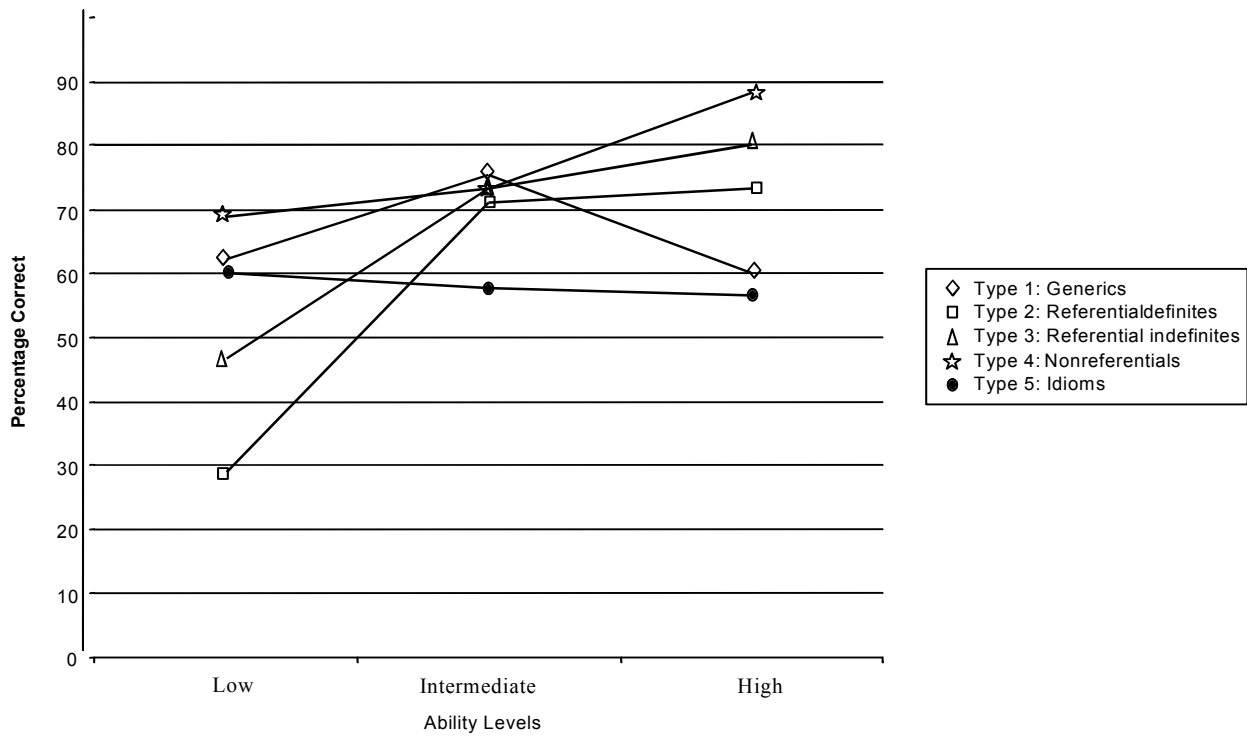
Type 5 (idioms) indicates another paradox; in both settings, ESL and EFL, low-ability level learners scored higher than their intermediate-ability and high-ability counterparts. Type 1 (generics) and Type 5 (idioms) required a skillful use of either *a* or *the* or *zero*, and presented the biggest challenge for the participants. In addition, I hypothesized that the phenomena of fossilization as well as a U-shaped developmental curve may be responsible for the observed results.

In sum, if we look at the graphs (Figures 1 and 2), a similar pattern of accuracy emerges for both ESL and EFL participants. The ordering of semantic article types for low-ability level learners is the following (starting with the lowest levels of accuracy): referential definites (Type 2), referential indefinites (Type 3), idioms (Type 5), generics (Type 1), and nonreferentials (Type 4). For high-ability learners the ordering is the following (starting with the lowest levels of accuracy): idioms (Type 5), generics (Type 1), referential definites (Type 2), referential indefinites (Type 3), and nonreferentials (Type 4).

**FIGURE 1**  
**Accuracy of Article Use in ESL Data (N=10)**

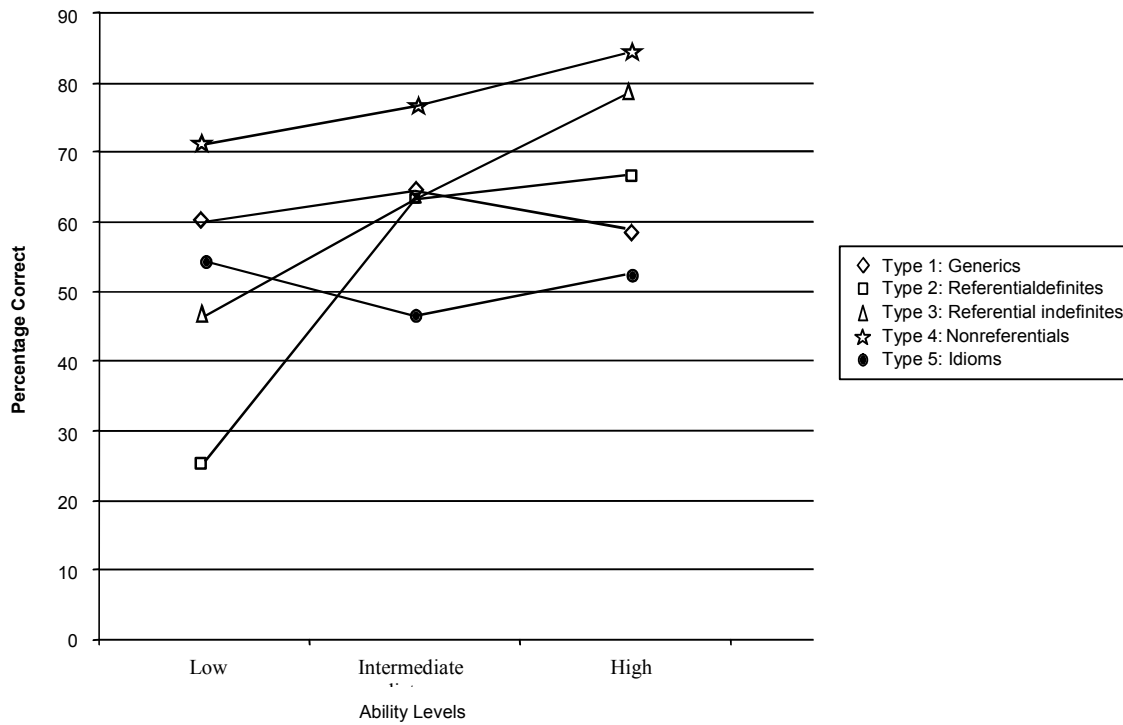


**FIGURE 2**  
**Accuracy of Article Use in EFL Data (N=10)**



In displaying the results, two aspects of the data were considered: hierarchical orderings of semantic article types, and levels of accuracy for each proficiency level in each setting, EFL and ESL. The similarities between the hierarchical ordering across two populations justified the next step, which resulted in combining the results from the two groups of participants. Moreover, the data were combined for ease of comparison with other second-language studies. The rates of accuracy were then plotted onto the line chart and the acquisition curves for the English article system can be seen in Figure 3. The general tendencies described for each setting hold true for the combined results.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Accuracy in Article Use across Proficiency Levels for both ESL and EFL Populations**  
**(N=20)**



### Overuse of *a*, *the*, and *zero*

Reporting the participants' total accuracy scores (the numbers they marked correctly) would not give a thorough picture of learners' linguistic behavior on the article test. Therefore, I have also chosen to calculate and report the percentage of unnecessary uses of *a*, *the*, and *zero*. In other words, a closer look at the overuse of articles by the participants could provide an interesting insight into their developing interlanguage systems. I reanalyzed the same seventy-five NP environments and grouped the instances of unnecessary articles by nominal types: *a*, *the*,

and *zero*<sup>5</sup>. For this analysis, the ESL and EFL data have been combined. Table 5 illustrates where the difference in article overuse lie among the three levels of proficiency.

**TABLE 5**  
**Mean Proportion Disparity of Unnecessary *zero*, *the*, and *a* by Proficiency Level**  
**(N=20)**

Means	Low-Ability	Intermediate-Ability	High-Ability
<i>zero</i>	30.1	17.3	17.2
<i>the</i>	2.3	6.3	2.1
<i>a</i>	3.1	3.5	3.0

The results show that participants at all levels of proficiency commonly overused the *zero* article. Low-ability level learners had the highest rate of *zero* overuse (M=30.1). With increasing levels of proficiency the rates of *zero* overuse dropped approximately in half (M=17.3). However, the instances of *zero* overuse were considerably higher than the instances of the overuse of either *a* or *the* at the intermediate-ability level. Moreover, there was no change in the pattern once the numbers were calculated for high-ability learners (M=17.2). The question remains whether the phenomenon occurring in my data should be termed “*zero* article overuse”, or rather “failure to use any article” (Thomas, 1989).

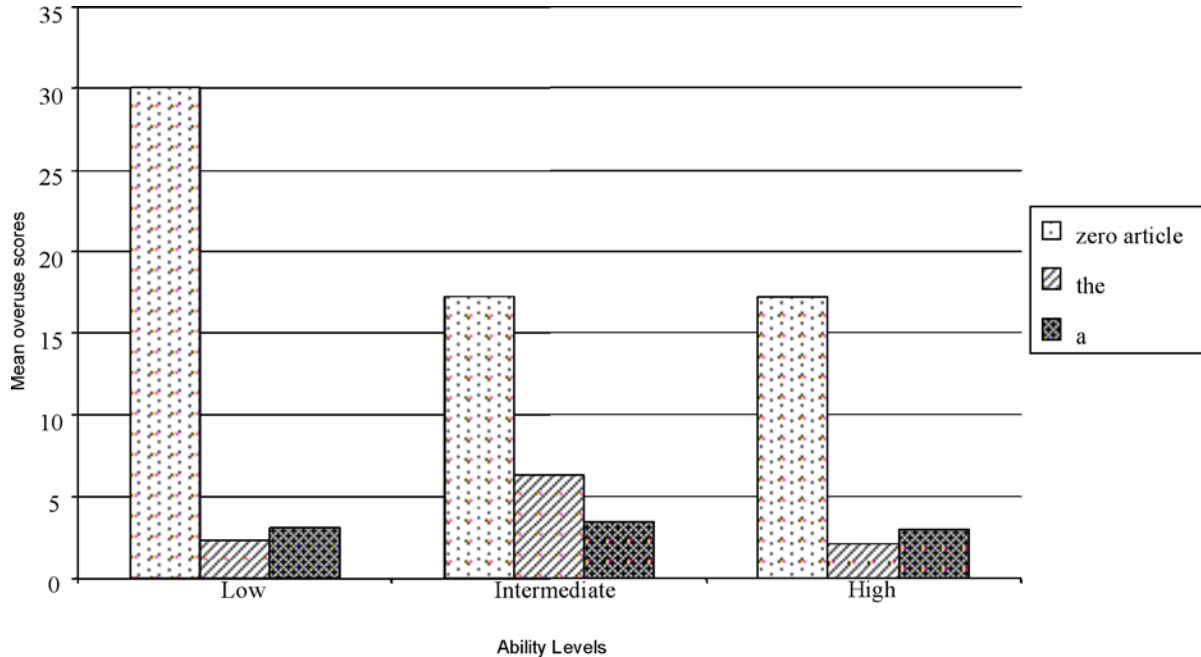
The proportion of unnecessary use of the indefinite article *a* is roughly the same for each level of proficiency (approximately M=3). There was a miniscule rise of .4 in the overuse of *a* by intermediate-ability learners. The small proportion of *a* overuse is consistent with my findings on percentage of accuracy in article usage. The participants demonstrated the highest levels of mastery in the use of semantic Type 4 and Type 3, requiring the command of *a*.

In the case of *the* overuse, however, the picture is different. Low-ability level participants did not overuse *the* on a big scale (M=2.3). However, there was a substantial increase in the unnecessary use of *the* by Intermediate-ability participants (M=6.3). The levels of *the* overuse then dropped for high-ability participants. Their overuse of *the* was the smallest among the three proficiency levels (M=2.1). The phenomenon is reminiscent of the occurrence of “*the*-flooding” chronicled in earlier studies (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1997).

Figure 4 graphically displays the differences between the three proficiency levels’ overuse of three articles, *zero*, *the*, and *a*.

<sup>5</sup> Articles supplied in structurally unacceptable and unanticipated places as in “\*your claim *the* flies in face of all evidence” are beyond the scope of this paper, and errors of this type are not examined here.

**FIGURE 4**  
**Mean Proportion Disparity of Unnecessary *zero*, *the*, and *a* by Ability Level**  
(N=20)



## DISCUSSION

The analyses of the data presents evidence for some limited conclusions on the order of acquisition of the English article system as displayed by Polish learners. First, the five semantic uses of *a*, *the*, and *zero* present different levels of difficulty for L2 learners and do not appear to be acquired at the same time. Second, ESL and EFL learners follow the same path of acquisition, but the influence of environmental conditions remains an open question.

This study has yielded several findings related to L2 article acquisition. There is evidence supporting participants' early and accurate control of *a* in nonreferential contexts (Type 4). In addition, the data suggests that the second article acquired by low-ability level participants was *a* in first mention environments (Type 3). Even though Figure 3 shows a greater rate of accuracy for generic and idiomatic use in low-ability learners' performance, it is accuracy gained largely by default as half of the items in Type 1 and Type 5 called for the *zero* article. It is clear from the analyses of the unnecessary use of articles that the low-ability learners had the highest rates of *zero* overuse (or failed to use any article). That overuse of *zero* was instrumental in boosting the accuracy rates of low-ability participants on Type 1 and Type 5 up to 50%. Only by matching the percentages of accuracy with the matrix of article overuse can one see the real dynamics of the article use by the low-ability level learners. In addition, Figure 3 demonstrates that while the participants' command of nonreferential, referential indefinites, and referential definites continued to make significant improvement after their English proficiency passed the low-ability level, their grasp of correct usage of Type 1 and Type 5 articles appears to have regressed. In fact, there was no improvement in the usage of articles with generic nouns or idioms in high-



ability learners' performance. In sum, the fact that the low-ability learners greatly overused *zero* as well as the fact that their intermediate-ability and high-ability counterparts demonstrated no progress on generic or idiomatic use of articles supports my argument that Type 1 and Type 5 articles appear to have posed a problem for my participants. Therefore, Type 3, indefinite *a*, appears to be the second article mastered by [-ART] learners.

Thus, findings from this study suggest that the natural order of acquisition found in L1 article acquisition studies (Cziko, 1986; Zehler & Brewer, 1982), in which *a* dominates at early stages, is replicated by this group of L2 learners, native speakers of a [-ART] language. At the same time my findings contradict the conclusions of the majority of L2 article acquisition studies in which *the* emerges early, and *a* late. However, the present findings prompt me to question some of the claims made by earlier studies. For instance, Huebner (1979), in his classic longitudinal study of a Hmong speaker, asserts that "at Time 1, there is an apparently greater percentage of *a* in environment 4 than at later stages... This is only apparently the case, however, since it can be shown fairly conclusively that these cases of *a* are epenthetic vowels or pause phenomena" (p. 26). Huebner dealt with oral data. The written data that was elicited for this study (with its own shortcomings) indicate that the instances of *a* are not pause phenomena. Therefore, I conclude that the initial stage in L2 article acquisition by [-ART] learners in my study was characterized by the emergence of the indefinite article *a* in nonreferential and first mention contexts, as well as the massive overuse of the *zero* article.

Learners at the intermediate level of proficiency have also gained a grasp of the referential definites expressed with the definite article *the* (Type 2). This finding is also found in the L1 research. Slightly higher levels of *the* overuse by intermediate-ability participants in my study may also be an indication of the L2 phenomenon known as "*the*-flooding". Although it is still unclear how much overuse constitutes flooding, the tendency of *the* overuse in my data is clear. Therefore, the data suggest that the next stage in L2 article acquisition by [-ART] learners is signified by increased marking of referential definites with the definite article *the*, as well as increasing accuracy in the use of the indefinite article *a* in nonreferential and first mention contexts. Thus, it is reasonable to say that at this stage speakers of Polish become aware of the syntactic properties of definiteness and indefiniteness in English.

The linguistic behavior of the high-ability participants in this study confirms the previous research findings, namely, high levels of accuracy in Type 4 and Type 3 indefinite article usage. High-ability participants' performance was also marked with a growing awareness of Type 2, or referential definites expressed with *the*.

The data suggests that Type 1 (generics) and Type 5 (idioms) required the highest levels of sophistication in article use, as they both called for a skillful placement of *a*, *the*, or *zero*. The results for both types were inconsistent and learners' choices appeared to be random. It seems, nevertheless, that both types are the last to be acquired. The finding directly supports Thomas' (1989) hypothesis on the generic use of articles, and Liu and Gleason's (2002) conclusion about what they termed "the cultural use" of articles as being the most difficult to acquire. There is some justification for this conclusion: generics are generally rare in the input available to learners, and idioms must be learned as a whole, suggesting that most likely they are acquired as items and not as a system (Goto Butler, 2002; Z. Han, personal communication, March 15, 2003).

The most common source of errors made by the study participants in both *a* and *the* contexts was the overgeneralization of *zero*, or equivalently, the failure to use any article. This was true at low, intermediate, and high levels of proficiency in this study, and it is a common

finding of the studies on L2 article acquisition. Some of the researchers (Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987) interpreted such findings as an indication of mastery of the *zero* article on the initial stages of L2 acquisition. Thomas (1989), however, adopted what she termed a “more realistic” approach claiming that her [-ART] participants “produced the *zero* article more frequently (or perhaps... failed to use any article) in *a* and *the* contexts” (p. 349). Therefore, she proposed that overproduction of *zero* may be due to L1 transfer. This proposal has several advantages. First, it supports the hypothesis that negative transfer is playing a substantial role in the process of article acquisition by adult learners. The overuse of *zero*, or, in the case of Polish participants, failure to supply a morpheme when signaling reference, is a reflection of the differences between the target language and any other language previously acquired, including the native language (Odlin, 1989). Second, it gives additional support to the notion that interlanguage is a natural language. As noted by Jarvis (2002), the use of *zero* by [-ART] participants should not be interpreted as either carelessness or ignorance. Rather, it is “quite intentional, or at least rule-governed” (p. 416). It may represent the convention of avoiding redundancy in marking definiteness and indefiniteness (as perceived by [-ART] L1 learners who have some other system at work, e.g., word order).

In this study, the ESL and EFL participants of similar degrees of proficiency exhibited parallel ability levels with regard to the English article system. Setting did not have an impact on overall difficulty of learning; what was easy for ESL learners was easy for their EFL counterparts (e.g., nonreferentials). In addition, what was difficult for ESL learners was difficult for EFL participants (referential *the*, generic and idiomatic use of *a*, *the* and *zero*). This fact alone lends support to the claim that there exists a natural sequence in the acquisition of the English article system. In other words, different learning environments (ESL and EFL) did not lead to a different order of acquisition, that is, the learners’ language acquisition faculties do not change from environment to environment. Therefore, it would appear that, in terms of natural sequences in language acquisition, the distinction between ESL and EFL is irrelevant. This is a conclusion supported by a considerable amount of research in the field of SLA (Ellis, 1989; Eubank, 1990; Pica, 1983).

One interesting finding of this study is that the majority of the EFL learners slightly outperformed their ESL counterparts. Given that some researchers still subscribe to the opinion that the English articles are unteachable and can be acquired only through exposure (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982), this is a rather intriguing outcome. However, there were several variables that the research method did not control for that possibly had some impact on the results obtained in the study. Among these were social and educational differences between the two groups, as well as differences in the length of study of the participants. The EFL participants were all university students, whereas the ESL participants varied in terms of their educational background. Moreover, on average, the EFL participants had studied English almost twice as long as the ESL participants. In sum, the distinction between ESL and EFL may be useful when comparing proficiency gains across the two settings as well as the extent to which L1 influences the interlanguage outcome, if the variables are kept constant.

## CONCLUSION

Before any conclusions can be drawn from the present study, it must be noted that the research findings must be regarded with some caution. With only ten subjects in each setting, divided into three levels of proficiency, the sample size was quite small compared to other research on L2 article acquisition. This small sample size prevented the use of statistical tools. In addition, individual data were grouped according to conditions of L2 exposure, thus ignoring individual variation in the length of study, educational background, and other variables.

The study confirmed a similar route of acquisition of the English article system for both ESL and EFL participants. However, the study was restricted to native speakers of Polish, thus resulting in claims relevant for this particular language group only. There has been a strong claim made by SLA researchers (Master, 1997; Thomas, 1986) that there are significant differences in the sequence of acquisition between speakers of [+ART] and [-ART] languages. Therefore, further research is needed to compare the results of the present study with data from another language group, that is, the only Slavic language containing article-like morphemes, Bulgarian. Longitudinal studies of speakers of different native language backgrounds need to be performed as well in order to determine to what extent Polish participants' use of articles is idiosyncratic, and to what extent it is common to the interlanguage of native speakers of other languages.

The study reported in this paper has provided some evidence in support of the hypothesis that the sequence of L2 article acquisition largely replicates the L1 natural order of article acquisition. On the other hand, it found evidence that might dispute some of the claims of existing L2 article acquisition research. It is, however, too early to make final conclusions as the present findings are rather limited. First, only elicited, cloze type, written data was available to the researcher. Collecting spontaneous oral data in the future would enrich the scope of the research. Second, only quantitative analyses were conducted on the data, and there is a pressing need for a qualitative analysis of the learners' behavior. In future research, elicitation of retrospective data, for example, interviews, or think aloud protocols, could fill the void. Third, adding more subjects as well as including near-native speakers of English whose native language is Polish could confirm or disconfirm some of the findings related to the order of acquisition of the English articles, for example, the reports of *the*-flooding stage. Thus, the present contribution ends with nearly as many questions as answers.

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## APPENDIX A

### Test Instrument

Acceptable answers were based on the judgment of the native speaker control group.

1. Fred bought **a** car on Monday. On Wednesday, he crashed **the** car.

[Type 3]

[Type 2]



25. Jane bought **a** ring and **a** necklace for her mother's birthday. Her mother loved **the** ring  
[Type 3] [Type 3] [Type 2]  
but hated **the** necklace.
26. Steve's wedding is in **0** two weeks and he is getting **0** cold feet.  
[Type 4] [Type 5]
27. There is **an** orange in that bowl.  
[Type 3]
28. This room has **a** length of 12 meters.  
[Type 4]
29. Sally Ride was **the** first American woman in **0** space.  
[Type 2] [Type 5]
30. Writing **0** letters is **a** pain in **the** neck for me.  
[Type 4] [Type 5] [Type 5]
31. I would like **a** cup of coffee, please.  
[Type 4]
32. **The** Shade on this lamp is really ugly.  
[Type 2]
33. **A/the** Paper clip comes in handy.  
[Type 1]
34. Is it true that **an/the** owl cannot see well in **0/a/the** daylight?  
[Type 1] [Type 1]
35. I ordered **a** bottle of wine for us.  
[Type 3]
36. **The** Telephone is **a** very useful invention.  
[Type 1] [Type 4]
37. We don't know who invented **the** wheel.  
[Type 1]
38. He used to be **a** lawyer.  
[Type 4]
39. I'm in **the** mood to eat **a** hamburger.  
[Type 5] [Type 3]
40. He is as poor as **a** mouse.  
[Type 5]
41. Do you have **a** pen?  
[Type 4]
42. I saw **a** man in **a/the** car across **the** street.  
[Type 3] [excluded] [Type 2]