



## The Acquisition Sequence in Interlanguage Development of English Articles: A Longitudinal Analysis Based on Semantic Categories of Nouns

Qudsia Ishaq\*, Nadeem Haider Bukhari\*\*

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**ABSTRACT:** *English and Urdu differ in the way they express definiteness. English encodes (in) definiteness through a, the and Ø. Urdu, on the other hand, relies mainly on quasi indefinite article ek to show indefiniteness but definiteness of a noun is expressed in a context in which the noun occurs, through word order and also with the help of thematic roles the noun plays in the argument structure (Sing, 1994). For the reason, the Urdu learners face persistent difficulty in learning English article system. The study provides a detailed analysis of the problems faced by these learners by examining the route of English articles acquisition by Urdu L2ers of English. For this purpose, the data was collected from 41 undergraduates at Department of English in UAJK. The same group of participant was tested via Master's (1994) article diagnostic test with the interval of two years. Apace with, the learners' improvement in general English proficiency during these years is measured employing different versions of the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). Using Huebner's (1983) noun phrase classification, the data was analyzed quantitatively. Then, the sequence/order of article acquisition is determined with regard to the SOC (Supplied in Obligatory Contexts), TLU (Target Like Use), and UOC (Used in Obligatory Contexts) measures. Findings suggest that learners tend to omit articles and/or produce them in the incorrect semantic context. The results manifest (a > the > Ø) route of article acquisition for Urdu L2ers of English.*

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**Keywords:** Urdu Speakers, article acquisition, semantic categories of nouns, acquisition sequence/route

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### Introduction

English is not a foreign language in the state of Azad Kashmir (Pakistan). It is the second compulsory language of the state, which is taught as a compulsory subject from nursery to graduation level almost in all public and private institutions.

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\* Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Muzaffarabad (Corresponding author e-mail: kishaq85@gmail.com)

\*\* Meritorious Professor, Department of English, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir Muzaffarabad

**Disclaimer:** The manuscript is extracted from the PhD dissertation of the first author. A soft copy of the dissertation has been submitted in the repository of the Higher Education Commission, Pakistan (HEC) as a library record. The title of the study is "ANALYZING L1 INFLUENCE ON THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH ARTICLES BY URDU SPEAKERS: AN OPTIMALITY THEORETICAL SYNTAX ACCOUNT".

Despite having spent 12 years in these institutions, the level of English language proficiency of students in Azad Kashmir is far from satisfactory. The students being weak in English commit numerous errors including article errors.

The second language acquisition (L2A) of English articles has been the topic of considerable interest in recent past. The English article system is comprised of three small units *a/an, the* and *Ø*; they are commonly used in English sentences and convey great deal of information. But these apparently intelligible elements present a pretty complex system. Their use is very intricate and context-dependent that L2 learners do not learn easily. L2 learners face much difficulty when they have to encode information through articles in English. The situation becomes worse when learners of article-less languages acquire these notorious elements. For, along with the complexity of English article system, a syntactically different first language proffers another complicating factor for L2 learners and decelerates the acquisition process. Much research have been conducted by scholars on the processes of acquisition of English articles by L2 learners whose L1 does not have equivalent elements (Yamada & Matsuura 1982; Huebner 1983; Master 1994; Ionin et al. 2004; Hawkins et al. 2009). Many researchers believe that native language has an impact on L2 article acquisition. However, the extent to which L1 influences L2 acquisition is still controversial.

There are two major theoretical approaches to research on article acquisition: (1) Ioninet *al.'s* (2004) Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH) that has its basis in Principles and Parameters framework of Chomsky (1986); (2) Huebner's (1983) features of referentiality model that relies on Bickerton's (1981) semantic wheel for noun phrase reference. Some researchers (Dirdal 2005; Ting 2005; Tryzna 2009) made serious criticism on the effectiveness of FH. They believed that FH could not always capture all the error patterns found in the L2 data. For example, it is unable to explain the individual patterns emerged in Ioninet *al.'s* (2004) study like overuse of *the* in [-definite, +specific] and overuse of *a* in [+definite, +specific] context.

To illustrate English article use, Huebner (1983) presented a distinct quadrants based on Bickerton's (1981) semantic features of specific reference [ $\pm$ SR] and reference assumed known to the hearer [ $\pm$ HK]. He, as cited in Thomas (1989, p.338), identified the use of articles: in generic context [+SR, -HK] to show the individual representative of the class such as (*The/A Swede is a kind person, and Swedes are kind persons*); In referential indefinites [+SR, -HK] context where the speaker

introduces a specific noun in his mind but assumes that the referent is unknown to hearer (e.g., *Sue held a dog* and *He visited several Ø museums on his trip*); In non-referential indefinites [-SR, -HK] such as (*Ken is a banker*); and in referential definites [+SR, +HK] to refer to a specific referent both for the speaker and the hearer as in (*Sue held a dog. The dog barked*).

Huebner himself conducted a longitudinal study with an adult Hmong speaker 'Ge' who had basic English proficiency. He investigated the use of the definite article *da* by collecting oral data from the subject over a year and observed six stages in his learning trajectory. The results revealed the traces of 'the-flooding'<sup>1</sup> in the second stage; while in the six stage the definite article was associated with [+HK] features. Thus, his study provided evidence of systematic variability in article use with the increase of proficiency.

This new avenue of research was employed by many other developmental studies (Master, 1987; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Liu & Gleason, 2002) of article acquisition. But unlike Huebner, Parrish (1987), Master (1987), and Thomas (1989) investigated all the three articles *a*, *the* and *Ø*. They argue that the zero article is acquired earlier than other two articles, which suggest the effects of L1 transfer.

Yamada and Matsuura (1982) performed a cross-sectional study with Japanese speakers. They used the division between high school and college Japanese students as proficiency measure. The study showed different sequences of acquisition for the two groups:

Intermediate	<i>the</i> > <i>a</i> > <i>Ø</i>
Advanced	<i>the</i> > <i>Ø</i> > <i>a</i>

In his pseudo longitudinal study, Master (1987) investigated the subjects through informal interviews from five different native language backgrounds: three groups of [-Art] L1 speakers (Chinese, Japanese and Russian) and two groups of [+Art] L1 speakers (Spanish and German). The subjects represented four stages of interlanguage development: Baslang, Low-Mesolang, Mid-Mesolang, and High-Mesolang. To measure the proficiency level Master employed Cazden, Cancino,

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<sup>1</sup>Both Huebner (1983) and Master (1987) used the term 'the-flooding', although neither of the researchers defines it, except loosely as a dramatic rise in usage.

Rosansky, and Schumann's (1975) negation criterion. The accuracy rates of the three articles were estimated using SOC (number correctly Supplied in Obligatory Contexts) and UOC (number Used in Obligatory Contexts) measurement system. The overuse of  $\emptyset$  was assumed to be the indicative of L1 transfer. Moreover, zero article was assumed to acquire earlier and indefinite article later than the acquisition of *the*. The study presented the following acquisition order for the learners:

Basilang	$\emptyset > a > the$
Low-Mesolang	$the > \emptyset > a$
Mid-Mesolang	$\emptyset > the > a$
High-Mesolang	$\emptyset > the > a$

In order to explain the acquisition order of English articles in further detail, Parrish (1987) examined 19-year-old beginning level Japanese learners of English in a longitudinal study. He carried out a story telling task every ten days for four months. He found that the learner acquired the zero article first, followed by *the* and then *a*.

In a similar study, Thomas (1989) did a cross-sectional analysis of 30 adult L2 learners from nine native language backgrounds: 23 from [-Art] languages and 7 from [+Art] languages. The subjects were paired to complete a picture description task. The accuracy order for all [-Art] languages was,  $the > \emptyset > a$ . Further, Thomas criticized Huebner's (1983) and Master's (1987) claim of the initial association of *the* with [+HK] contexts needed. He argued that their findings relied on high frequency of *the* in [+SR, +HK] contexts, but there was not provided any evidence of generic NPs in [-SR, +HK] contexts.

Although these three studies used the same measure system (Supplied in Obligatory Contexts or SOC) but the findings reveal the inconsistencies of the acquisition orders. Thomas (1989) argued for the same acquisition order for all three levels while Master's (1987) and Yamada & Matsura's (1982) study exhibited different acquisition orders depending on the proficiency level. Unlike Huebner (1983) and Master (1987), Parish (1987) and Thomas (1989) believed that *the* is initially associated with [+SR] rather than [+HK] contexts. But despite of discrepancies, Master (1987), Parish (1987) and Thomas (1989) had been reached on a consensus that *a* is acquired later than *the*.

Lu (2001), in her cross sectional study, applied SOC, UOC and TLU (target like use) to check what these measurement systems tell about acquisition of articles.

She collected data from 55 Mandarin speakers who were divided into three groups (the Advanced, the Upper- Intermediate, the Lower-Intermediate) on the basis of their TOEFL scores. The data is collected through a multiple-choice cloze test<sup>2</sup>. SOC results demonstrated that zero article was used least accurately by the all three groups:

Advanced	$a = the > \emptyset$
Upper-Intermediate	$a > the > \emptyset$
Lower-Intermediate	$the > a > \emptyset$

On the other hand, TLU revealed the same hierarchy of accuracy for all three proficiency levels:

Advanced	$the > a > \emptyset$
Upper-Intermediate	$the > a > \emptyset$
Lower-Intermediate	$the > a > \emptyset$

Lu (2001) concluded that TLU is more reliable hence, the acquisition order revealed through TLU is assumed to be right for Chinese learners.

Liu and Gleason (2002) reexamined Master's (1987) data and claimed that the subjects overused the zero article and underused *a* and *the* because the [-Art] group acquired these two article rather late. Besides, they suggested that the indefinite article is acquired earlier than the definite article. The findings are also inconsistent with the result of Thomas's (1989) study, which depicts early acquisition of the definite article.

In a same vein, Díez-Bedmar and Papp (2008) conducted a study with Chinese and Spanish learners of English. They were considered advanced learners their accuracy rates corresponded to Lu's (2001) advanced group. The researchers analyzed the written essays retrieved from the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) corpus. TLU measurement system was employed to estimate the accuracy level. The results showed that zero article was used more accurately than definite and indefinite article.

Advanced	$\emptyset > a > the$
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Lucille (2011) investigated Mandarin speakers to observe L1 influence on the

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<sup>2</sup> Cloze test devised by Master (1997) comprises 58 items in two parts: discrete sentences and a descriptive paragraph.

acquisition of English articles. The data was collected through two tests: a cloze test and a Chinese-to-English translation task. The study employed Huebner's (1983) taxonomy of noun phrase classification. The findings of the study revealed that learners made more errors in generic context [-SR, +HK]. The study didn't measure the acquisition order of the articles through TLU and UOC. But, it explicated that the Mandarin-speaking learners of English have fewer problems with the use of the indefinite article *a* compared to the use of the definite article *the* and the zero article  $\emptyset$ . The researcher concluded it as a result of the positive influence of Mandarin on the acquisition of English, as Mandarin has a semi equivalent indefinite article *ye*.

The review of literature on article acquisition studies demonstrates that an extensive research has been conducted on this issue, yet the subject invites to explore the area in further detail. For instance, the controversy generated about the integration of the indefinite article into the interlanguages before the integration of the definite article has paved the way for current research. Hence, the researcher has chosen Urdu [-Art] speaking learners of English to observe the developmental pattern of the three English articles. The study aims at to identify route of article acquisition for Urdu L2ers of English

### **Research Question**

*What is the sequence/route of article acquisition for Urdu L2ers of English?*

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Participants**

The participants for this study were forty-one (46) undergraduate students enrolled in BS program in the first semester of the academic session (2014-2018) in department of English at University of Azad Jammu & Kashmir. The subjects were also similar in terms of L1(Urdu). Age (ranging from 19-20 years old) and L2 exposure (approximately 12 years). All the participants were L2 learners (L2ers) of English who formally started learning English between ages 4-6 (mean age, 5 years old) years old.

To judge the general proficiency level of the participants in English, this homogenous sample of 41 subjects was classified using the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) (Syndicate U.C.L.E., 2001), paper and pen version 2 (Appendix A). It was noticed through results that 09 of the participants were the advanced learner of English, 19 were upper intermediate and 08 were low intermediate learner of

English. Whereas, five (5) out of 46 performed worst in the test as they scored below 30. Hence these 5 subjects were eliminated due to low proficiency level and only forty-one (41) participants were included in the study. The study did not calculate the social variable i.e. sex.

### ***Materials***

The data were collected through an article diagnostic test, adapted from Master (1994: 250) as it seems to cover the entire range of article usage. Predominantly, the test is designed to test the English article usage for non-native speakers of English. It was a close test, comprised of 28 discrete sentences and a descriptive paragraph (see Appendix, B). In total, there were 58 gaps in the test. Huebner (1983)'s semantic wheel is adopted as basic framework for analysis that doesn't include proper nouns and idiomatic expressions; hence, instead of 58 only 41 items were included in the text.

### ***Procedure***

Testing took place in a classroom setting for all 41 participants. The same test with same material was administered with the same subjects in three different intervals of time. First it was conducted on June 2014, when the subjects were in the first semester of BS English Program. Then it was operated on the subjects in 3<sup>rd</sup> semester in March 2015, and finally in 5<sup>th</sup> semester in April 2016. The test was never timed to avoid pressure. During this course of time, the subjects didn't get explicit formal instructions on English article use. But their exposure to English language had increased.

### ***Data Analysis***

The data gathered from article diagnostic test is assessed using SOC (Supplied in Obligatory Contexts) TLU (Target-like Use) and UOC (Used in Obligatory Contexts) measures were employed to observe the accuracy rate and usage patterns of the English articles by the Urdu L2ers of English.

### ***Results and Discussion***

Employing Master's (1994) article diagnostic test, three sets of the data were collected. The analysis of each set of data is presented step by step. To investigate article use by Urdu L2ers of English, an acquisition threshold from earlier studies is applied, as the present study does not involve native speakers. Montrul and

Slabakova's (2003) used a 90% accuracy criterion as their native control groups performed at a minimum of 90%. Some other studies (Al-Kafri, 2013) have applied a lower threshold of 83.33%. The importance of having an acquisition threshold lies in the fact that L2 learners' accuracy level can be judged accordingly. Hence for the present study, it is assumed that L2 learners can perform as high as 83%-90%.

### SOC Results of the Articles in Four Semantic Contexts

SOC measure system estimates how accurately an article is used relative to its obligatory context SOC measure is formulated as:

$$\text{SOC} = \frac{\text{Number of correct compliances in obligatory contexts}}{\text{Number of obligatory contexts}} \times 100$$

The number of incorrect article uses in obligatory contexts relative to the sum of all obligatory contexts can be measured using the above formula. The following section presents the SOC results of articles in four contexts across years of learning.

### SOC Results of *a*, *the* and $\emptyset$ in Four Semantic Contexts in 2014

Following the SOC formula, the accuracy rate of *a*, *the* and  $\emptyset$  is calculated in generic, referential definite, referential indefinite and non-referential context. For example, there are 03 instances of *a*, 07 of *the*, and 10 of  $\emptyset$  in generic setting of the test. To calculate the accuracy rate of *a* in generic setting, it needs to be considered that there are 41 learners, and there are 03 items that require *a/an* in the test, so in total there are 123 (41\*09) instances of *a*. The learners supplied the article correctly 99 times, in the obligatory context. Thus, the percentage of the occurrence of *a* is 99/123\*100% = 80.48%.

The results obtained for each article are displayed below:

Table1

*SOC Results of 'a, the and  $\emptyset$ ' in Four Semantic Context in 2014*

Articles	SOC	[-SR, +HK]	[+SR, +HK]	[+SR, -HK]	[-SR, -HK]
a	SOC	80.48%	–	76.42%	69%

the	SOC	62%	74%	–	–
Ø	SOC	25.36%	–	39%	–

It seems that on the indefinite generic items of the test, the learners could draw near to the natives as the accuracy rate is 80.48%. The learners' performance for *the* in this context is not as good as for *a*. Here, the accuracy rate of definite article is 62%. On the other hand, the learners appear to have more doubts in using Ø in generic context. They performed worst with the accuracy rate of 25.34%. In referential definite context that allows only the use of *the*, the definite article is used with the accuracy rate of 74%. Considering the referential indefinite context, use of *a* (76.42) was higher than the use of Ø (39%). However, the accuracy rate of the indefinite article is 69% in non-referential context. The findings reveal that the learners' performance on indefinite article is better than the other two articles.

The above table yields interesting findings as indefinite article seems to be easiest to acquire by Urdu L2ers of English. The accuracy rate of the indefinite article (75%) is higher than the accuracy rate of the definite article (70%). Conversely, the misuse of the definite article (34%) is higher than the misuse of the indefinite article (24.24%). Further, the use of zero article is quite restricted in terms of both its accuracy (26%) and misuse scores (13.41%).

### SOC Results of *a*, *the* and Ø in Four Semantic Contexts in 2015

Following the same formula, SOC measures of the article use in four semantic contexts [-SR, +HK] [+SR, +HK], [+SR, -HK] and [-SR, -HK] are calculated in 2015 and finally presented in the following table:

Table 2

*SOC Results of 'a, the and Ø' in Four Semantic Context in 2015*

Articles	SOC	[-SR, +HK]	[+SR, +HK]	[+SR, -HK]	[-SR, -HK]
a	SOC	79.67%	–	82%	75.6%
the	SOC	65.85%	82%	–	–
Ø	SOC	60%	–	58%	–

The table shows that in generic context, the learners performed better with the indefinite article than with the definite article, which in turn is outperformed than the zero article. It is evident that the learners achieved a relatively high accuracy rate 79.67% for the indefinite article. However, keeping in view the fact that the frequency of *a* was relatively high 80% even in 2014, the progress is statistically non-significant. On the other hand, the frequency of the definite article rise steadily across proficiency levels from 62% to 65.85%. As far as zero article is concerned, its use is considerably increased with years of learning (25% to 60%). But, the results suggest that the learners still find this article problematic as compared to other two articles. Besides, the learners' performance is turned out to be best in the acquisition of referential definite *the* with the accuracy rate of 82%. Virtually, the indefinite referential *a* is used with the similar frequency of 82%. The zero article is also found to be troublesome even in referential indefinite context as the article is underused with the accuracy score of 58%. The use of the zero article is substantially lower than the use of *a* in this context.

The results suggest that the difference between the use of the three articles is considerable the learners have coped better with the indefinite article than the other two articles. Nevertheless, the level of difficulty of the learners in using zero article is slightly higher than the former two articles. The results show that zero article has received the lowest frequency amount which is 60%. This indicates that the acquisition of the zero article seems to be problematic and it might not be easily acquired by Urdu L2ers of English of English.

### **SOC Results of *a*, *the* and $\emptyset$ in Four Semantic Contexts in 2016**

Following the same SOC formula, the percentage of accurate use is obtained by dividing the number of correct compliance by the sum of obligatory uses in each context i.e. [-SR, +HK] [+SR, +HK], [+SR, -HK] and [-SR, -HK]. The percentages are listed in the table below:

Table 3

*SOC Results of 'a, the and  $\emptyset$ ' in Four Semantic Context in 2016*

Articles	SOC	[-SR, +HK]	[+SR, +HK]	[+SR, -HK]	[-SR, -HK]
a	SOC	86%	–	88%	83%

the	SOC	77%	90%	–	–
Ø	SOC	65%	–	80%	–

The data demonstrates that in generic context, the use of indefinite article is improved considerably and achieved a relatively high accuracy rate of 86% with years of learning. While, the definite article is turned out to be of moderate difficulty in 2016 as its accuracy score is 77%. It seems that the learners still have problems in using zero article, as the accuracy rate (65%) of this article is still far from satisfactory. In case of referential definite, the near-native-like performance of *the* is witnessed. The accuracy score of *the* in this context is 90%. In referential indefinite context, the frequencies of both articles (a=88% and Ø = 80%) come close to the native norm at the advanced stage. Moreover, the use of *a* seems relatively easy for the subjects than the use of Ø. The learners, however, have correctly supplied *ain* 83% of the non-referential context.

However, it is necessary to recognize the correct use of the articles employing the other measurement tool so that the reliability of the results cannot be questioned. Thus, to recapitulate the above findings that Urdu L2ers of English have most difficulty in using definite article and least in using indefinite article in acquiring the English article system, Target-Like Use (TLU) of the three articles is measured. The following section throws light on TLU and UOC results.

### TLU and UOC Results

In order to measure the accuracy and order of Urdu L2ers use of the English, articles Target-Like Use (TLU) has been employed in the study. It is formulated (Pica, 1983) as:

$$TLU = \frac{(Y) \text{ Correct Suppliances in Obligatory Contexts}}{\text{Obligatory contexts (X) + Over Suppliances in Non-Obligatory Contexts (Z)}} \times 100$$

TLU takes into account the overgeneralization of an article in the accuracy measure. Hence, it leads to a better understanding of article acquisition. On the other hand, UOC measures the underuse and overuse of the articles. It is devised (Master, 1987) as:

$$UOC = \frac{\text{Correct Suppliance in Obligatory Contexts (Y) + Over Suppliance in Non-Obligatory Contexts (Z)}}{\text{Obligatory Contexts (X)}} \times 100$$

### Obligatory Contexts (X)

If overgeneralization does not occur, the parameter  $Z$  will be zero. But, if the value of  $Z$  is equal or larger ( $Z \geq 1$ ) than one, the mean of UOC will be higher than the mean of TLU. In other words, if the parameter  $Z$  increases, the mean of TLU decreases while the mean of UOC increases. Hence, the means of TLU and UOC can be used to measure the overuse and underuse of the articles.

To sum up, TLU and UOC measures reveal useful information regarding the acquisition of English articles. It is easy to comment on the overuse of an article, by comparing the means of TLU and UOC. The following section presents the details.

#### **Means of TLU and UOC**

Using TLU and UOC measures, first the percentage of the occurrence of each article is obtained in each test (2014/2015/2016). There are 09 instances of **a**, 21 of **the**, and 11 of **Ø** in the test. The percentage of the occurrence of each article is compared. For example, in the data collected in 2014, there are 41 learners, and there are 21 items that require **a** in the test and in total, there are 369 ( $41 \times 09$ ) instances of **a**. The learners supplied the article correctly for 296 times; whereas, its suppliance in non-obligatory context is 200. So, the TLU of indefinite article **a** in 2014 is  $296 / (369 + 200) \times 100\% = 52\%$ . Similarly, there are 861 ( $41 + 21$ ) instances of **the** in the test, and the correct suppliance of **the** in 2014 is 603; While overgeneralization is 315 so the TLU of 'the' is  $603 / (861 + 315) \times 100\% = 51\%$ ; Additionally, there are 451 ( $41 \times 11$ ) instances of **Ø**, the correct suppliance is 120 and overuse is 165, so the TLU of zero article is  $120 / (451 + 165) \times 100\% = 19.48\%$ . After calculating percentage score of the three articles in each year, TLU and UOC means are compared.

There is inverse correlation between the mean of TLU and mean of UOC. It can be best explained in terms of the value of parameter  $Z$ . If the value of parameter  $Z$  is equal or larger than one ( $Z \geq 1$ ), the mean of TLU will be smaller than the mean of UOC. The mean of TLU becomes smaller when the value of parameter  $Z$  increases, while the mean of UOC also increases. Precisely, the larger the difference between the means of TLU and UOC, the more an article is overused. Moreover, if TLU is less than 69%, it indicates that the article is underused; as far away an article is from 100%, the less accurate the learners' performance is as compared to native speakers. For more simplification, if TLU and UOC percentage is the same for a certain article, it means that no overgeneralization has occurred. In the data, there is

not found any instance of such case. Rather, the data shows the instances of the underuse of the articles.

The following table displays the TLU and UOC results for the present study:

Table 4

TLU and UOC Results of 'a, the and Ø' in 2014/2015/2016

Articles	TLU/UOC	2014	Mean of TLU/UOC	2015	Mean of TLU/UOC	2016	Mean of TLU/UOC
a	TLU	52%	73%	70%	23%	79%	16%
	UOC	125%		93%		95.66%	
the	TLU	51%	56%	62%	37%	72%	32%
	UOC	107%		99%		104%	
Ø	TLU	19%	44%	41%	70%	50%	43%
	UOC	63%		111%		93.34%	

The study reveals some interesting findings; it shows that there is a positive relationship between English proficiency level and use of indefinite article. The TLU accuracy rate for **a** ranges from 52% to 70% to 79% during three years 2014/15/16, respectively. Moreover, the UOC score for indefinite article has decreased with the rates of 125% to 93% to 96% in 2014/15/16, respectively. The data presents a flooding-then-trickling pattern as overgeneralization of **a** is witnessed in 2014 which becomes low in coming years (2015, 2016) when the learners get good control on this article. Hence **a** is the first article to be acquired by the Urdu L2ers of English.

On the other hand, the range of accuracy rates for **the** is 51% (2014) to 62%(2015) and it extends further to 72% (2016). This accuracy rate is somewhat lower than the accuracy rate of **a**. It shows that the learners had most difficulty with **a** as oppose to **the**. Besides, compared to the overuse of **a**, the definite article **the** is overused less frequently in 2014 (107%). But, the UOC percentage of **the** (99%) and (104%) is higher than **a** in 2015 and 2016. In other words, there seems a shift from

*a*-flooding to *the*-flooding in 2016 as the learners have overused the definite article more as compared to the other two articles. Thus, the definite *the* is the second article to be acquired by the Urdu L2ers of English.

Among the three articles, zero article has the lowest accuracy rate. It seems that the learners failed to supply the zero article most of the time. The majority of the learners tended to underuse  $\emptyset$ , 19.48% to 41 % to 50%, respectively in year 2014/15/16. Surprisingly, the UOC rate of  $\emptyset$  is increased from 63% to 111% and then reduced to 93%. It indicates the learners' slight better control on zero article at advanced level. But after analyzing the results, it is evident that  $\emptyset$  is the last article acquired by Urdu L2ers of English of English. In order to strengthen the argument, the TLU scores for the *a/the/* $\emptyset$  during the three years are shown below:

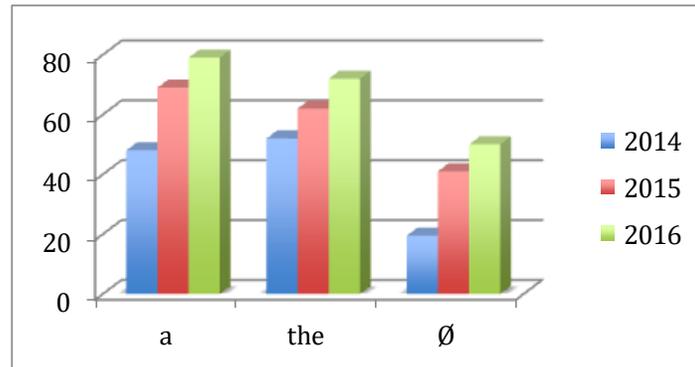


Fig 1

TLU scores for 'a, the &∅' during 2014, 2015 and 2016

The figure displays that there is a direct correlation between the general English proficiency of the learners and the accuracy rates of the articles as the accuracy rate of the three articles increases with increasing proficiency. Further, the difference between the accuracy rates of the three articles is significant enough to determine which article is the easiest and which is the most difficult for the learners to acquire. The data suggests that the use of *a* is more targetlike than *the*, which is more targetlike than  $\emptyset$ . But, if these results are compared with the acquisition threshold set for the study (83% to 92%), it indicates that Urdu L2ers of English are still far behind the target like use of English articles.

The mean difference of TLU and UOC is also calculated to support the claim. It is displayed below in the form of chart:

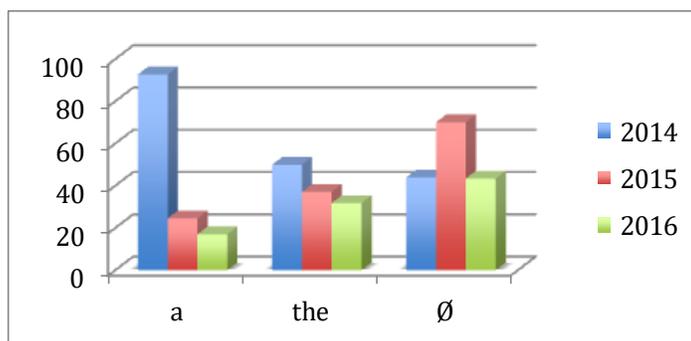


Fig 2

The mean of TLU and UOC for 'a, the & Ø' during 2014, 2015 and 2016

The mean of TLU and UOC is measured by calculating the difference between the rates of TLU and UOC. The figure shows that Urdu L2ers of English decrease the overuse of the articles as they become more proficient learners of English.

After analyzing TLU scores, it is quite evident that *a* is acquired earlier by the Urdu L2ers of English. The study contradicts early research findings (Huebner, 1983; Master 1997; Parrish, 1987; Thomas 1989) that suggest the acquisition of the definite article before the acquisition of the indefinite article. But it supports Liu and Gleason (2002) and Young (1996), who report early and accurate control of the indefinite article.

The overuse of indefinite article in the above figure also confirms the claim as *a* is overused the most in 2014; as the mean difference between TLU and UOC scores is 90%. Because of early acquisition, it may be overgeneralized. Huebner and Master call this phenomenon 'flooding'. After *a*-flooding, *a*-trickling is observed in the next two years. Thus, the findings confirm *a* 'flooding-then-trickling' phenomenon as the overuse of *a* becomes rare at advance stages. The mean difference between TLU and UOC measures for *a* in 2015 and 2016 is 23% and 16%, respectively.

The situation is not different for definite article, which is reported as the second article to be acquired by the learners, on the basis of TLU scores. The learners also seem to pass through *the* 'flooding-then-trickling' stage as the overuse of the decreased with the increase in English proficiency. Moreover, *the* as its

overuse is high in 2014 (51%) and then it decreases in 2015 (36%) and in 2016 (32%). Conversely, overuse of  $\emptyset$  increased with the learners' English proficiency level in first two years and then decreased at advanced level. The mean difference between TLU and UOC for zero article is 44%, 70% and 43% in year 2014, 2015 and 2016, respectively. It shows that the learners learn to trickle the use of  $\emptyset$  very late. The reason can be; the learners realize the presence of zero article in English only when their English proficiency extended beyond a certain level.

To conclude, TLU scores report the accuracy order '*the*>*a*> $\emptyset$ ' in 2014 while the accuracy order remains the same '*a*>*the*> $\emptyset$ ' for the next two years. Besides, the UOC scores reveal the usage pattern of the articles: the learners in 2014 have overgeneralized *a/an*; in 2015 overused  $\emptyset$ , while in 2016 (at advanced level) they overused *the* when they acquired slight better control on *a*/ $\emptyset$ . But in pursuance of reporting an inclusive forthright area of difficulty for Urdu L2ers of English, the mean accuracy and misuse rates of the three articles in these three years are listed below:

Table 5

*TLU and UOC Results of 'a, the and  $\emptyset$ ' in 2014/2015/2016*

<i>Articles</i>	<b>TLU</b>	<b>UOC</b>
<i>a</i>	67%	105
<i>the</i>	62%	103
$\emptyset$	36%	89%

The mean accuracy rate of the three articles displayed in the above table demonstrate that the accuracy rate of indefinite article is higher than the accuracy rate of the definite article that in turn is higher than the accuracy rate of zero article. The accuracy rate of *a*, *the* and  $\emptyset$  is 67%, 62% and 36%, respectively. Furthermore, the mean UOC measures of the three articles indicate that the most easily acquired article is overused most in non obligatory context as the overuse of *a* is higher than the overuse of *the* that in turn is higher than the overuse of  $\emptyset$ . The overuse of indefinite and definite is 105 and 103, respectively; Zero article, however, is underused with the rate of 89%. In other words, the mean TLU and UOC measures

of the articles reveal that *Ø* is harder to acquire than *the* that is hard to acquire than *a*. The learners while acquiring English article system may realize it very late/at more advanced stages that zero article exist in English. It is quite logical that initially they discern only the presence of definite and indefinite article, so they oversupply these two articles almost everywhere with nouns in their speech and writing.

To provide the more authentic picture of the accuracy data, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) procedures with repeated measures is conducted for TLU, in order to confirm whether there is a significant difference in means. The results are displayed below:

Table 5.6

*ANOVA of Correct Use of Articles Measured by TLU*

VAR00001					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	337828.222	2	168914.111	36.366	.000
Within Groups	27869.333	6	4644.889		
Total	365697.556	8			

The independent variables in the test are articles (*a*, *the* and *Ø*) and the years of learning (2014, 2015 and 2016); the dependent variable is the scores for *the*, *a*, and *Ø*, measured by TLU. A repeated-measures design was necessary as the same groups of learners are examined for their usage for each article type. The overall TLU measures of the three articles with three years of learning is found to be significant,  $p < 0.5$ . It shows there is substantial difference between the accuracy rates of the three articles during three years. Therefore, it can be safely reported that the TLU and UOC measures reveal an acquisition order,  $a > the > Ø$ , across different proficiency level.

## Conclusion

It was hypothesized that the Urdu L2ers of English, based on the lack of an article system in their native language will underuse the definite and indefinite articles in English, overuse the zero article, and even misuse them until they manage to learn to restrict the use of them to the specific semantic contexts and pragmatic functions in which they are employed in English.

The results of the present study contradict previous studies (Huebner,1983; Master,1987 and Parrish, 1987) proposing that learners who belong to the [-Art] group acquire the zero article first; whereas, Yamada and Matsuura (1982), and Thomas (1989) claim early acquisition of the definite article in their studies. The study, on the other hand, supports Díez-Bedmar and Papp's (2008) findings that the indefinite article is acquired prior to the definite and zero article. It is evident from the data that the indefinite article seems to be less difficult to acquire, and it is rather the definite article that presents a problem, even at an advanced stage of acquisition for Urdu L2ers of English.

It seems reasonable to assume that Urdu L2ers of English use the indefinite article most accurately because they have a semi equivalent counter part of the indefinite article (i.e. *ek*) in their first language. In other words, Urdu L2ers of English have used indefinite article most accurately depending on consistencies and inconsistencies of the two languages. But it is quite surprising that the zero article is used least accurately by Urdu L2ers of English.

Thus Urdu L2ers of English undergo two different processes on their way to article acquisition i.e. overuse of zero and then of definite and indefinite article unless they learn to trickle their use. Here, the plausible explanation of the underuse of zero article can be the overuse of the indefinite and definite article that indicates the second process of their way to article acquisition. Moreover, Urdu L2ers of English have learnt to cope better with the indefinite article because of the presence of its semi equivalent counter part in Urdu whereas trickling of the definite article seems difficult for them. Nonetheless, there seems to be an increase on control of correct article usage as the learners' English proficiency level increased.

Conclusively, the study finds out a different route of acquisition ( $a > the > \emptyset$ ) of the English article system for Urdu L2ers of English and provides evidence that might dispute some of the claims of existing L2 article acquisition research. It is

hoped that the interpretation of the results of the present study will help to develop explicit teaching strategies to teach English article system to Urdu L2ers of English. Relying on the findings of the present study, the grammar teachers can decide their technique of teaching articles to L2ers of English. As the present study has identified the most challenging areas of difficulty for Urdu L2ers of English, teachers can provide variety of material to cater the most frequent errors in article use. Through translation activities from native language to the target language, teachers can put emphasize on the use of English articles by giving students the sense of general and specific. After that, teachers can assign students different assignments such as essay writing, story telling etc. to practice the use of English articles. To teach the generic use of English articles, teachers can ask students to watch English documentaries etc. Above all, the teachers should create a communicative environment in the class and should provide explicit remedial instructions to teach the use of English articles. To serve these purposes, the grammar teachers must be well acquainted with the knowledge of English article use and they must be trained to skillfully use different activities in the class.

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## Appendix A

### Quick Placement Test (Version 1)

#### Part 1

#### Question 1 – 5

- Where can you see these notices?
- For questions 1 to 5, mark one letter **A**, **B** or **C** on your **Answer Sheet**.

1. PLEASE LEAVE YOUR ROOM KEY AT RECEPTION			A	B	C
A. in a shop	B. in a hotel	C. in a taxi			
2. FOREIGN MONEY CHANGED HERE			A	B	C
A. in a library	B. in a bank	C. in a police station			
3. AFTERNOON SHOW BEGINS AT 2PM			A	B	C
A. outside a theater	B. outside a supermarket	C. outside a restaurant			
4. CLOSED FOR HOLIDAYS LESSONS START AGAIN ON THE 8 <sup>TH</sup> JANUARY			A	B	C
A. at a travel agent's	B. at a music school	C. at a restaurant			
5. PRICE PER NIGHT £10 A TENT £ 5 A PERSON			A	B	C
A. at a cinema	B. in a hotel	C. on a camp site			

**Question 6 – 10**

- In this section, you must choose the word which best fits each space in the text below.
- For questions 6 to 10, mark **one** letter **A,B** or **C** on your Answer Sheet

**SCOTLAND**

Scotland is the north part of the island of Great Britain. The Atlantic Ocean is on the west and the North Sea on the east. Some people (6).....Scotland speak a different language called Gaelic. There are (7) .....five million people in Scotland and Edinburgh is (8) ..... most famous city. Scotland has many mountains; the highest one is called ‘Ben Nevis’. In the south of Scotland, there are a lot of sheep. A long time ago, there (9) ..... many forests, but now there are only a (10) ..... Scotland is only a small country, but it is quite beautiful.

- 6. A on B in C at
- 7. A about B between C among
- 8. A his B your C its
- 9. A is B was C were
- 10 A a few B little C lot

**Questions 11 – 20**

- In this section you must choose the word which best fits each space in the texts.
- For questions 11 to 20, mark **one** letter **A,B, C** or **D** on your Answer Sheet.

**ALICE GUY BLACHÉ**

Alice Guy Blaché was the first female film director. She first became involved in cinema whilst working for the Gaumont Film Company in the late 1890s. This was a period of great change in the cinema and Alice was the first to use many new inventions, (11) .....sound and color. In 1970 Alice (12) ..... to New York where she started her own film company. She was (13)

.....successful, but, when Hollywood became the center of the film world, the best days of the independent New York film companies were **(14)** ..... When Alice died in 1968, hardly anybody **(15)** .....her name.

11. A bringing      B including      C containing      D supporting  
 12. A moved      B ran      C entered      D transported  
 13. A a next      B once      C immediately      D recently  
 14. A after      B down      C behind      D over  
 15. A remembered      B realized      C reminded      D repeated

### UFOs – DO THEY EXIST?

UFO is short for ‘unidentified flying object’. UFOs are popularly known as flying saucers, **(16)** ..... that is often the **(17)** ..... they are reported to be. The **(18)** ..... "flying saucers" were seen in 1947 by an American pilot, but experts who studied his claim decided it had been a trick of the light.

Even people experienced at watching the sky, **(19)** ..... as pilots, report seeing UFOs. In 1978 a pilot reported a collection of UFOs off the coast of New Zealand. A television **(20)** ..... Went up with the pilot and filmed the UFOs. Scientists studying this phenomenon later discovered that in this case they were simply lights on boats out fishing.

16. A because      B therefore      C although      D so  
 17. A look      B shape      C size      D type  
 18. A last      B next      C first      D oldest  
 19. A like      B that      C so      D such  
 20. A cameraman      B director      C actor      D announcer

### Questions 21 – 40

- In this section you must choose the word or phrase which best completes each sentence.
- For questions **21** to **40**, mark **one** letter **A**, **B**, **C** or **D** on your Answer Sheet.

21. The teacher encouraged her students ..... to an English pen-friend.

- A should write    B write    C wrote    D to write
22. They spent a lot of time ..... at the pictures in the museum.  
A looking    B for looking    C to look    D to looking
23. Shirley enjoys science lessons, but all her experiments seem to ..... wrong.  
A turn    B come    C end    D go
- 24 ..... from Michael, all the group arrived on time.  
A Except    B Other    C Besides    D Apart
- 25 She ..... her neighbour's children for the broken window.  
A accused    B complained    C blamed    D denied
- 26 As I had missed the history lesson, my friend went ..... the homework with me.  
A by    B after    C over    D on
- 27 Whether she's a good actress or not is a ..... of opinion.  
A matter    B subject    C point    D case
- 28 The decorated roof of the ancient palace was ..... up by four thin columns.  
A built    B carried    C held    D supported
- 29 Would it ..... you if we came on Thursday?  
A agree    B suit    C like    D fit
30. This form ..... be handed in until the end of the week.  
A hasn't got    B doesn't have    C needn't    D hasn't got
31. If you make a mistake when you are writing, just ..... it out with your pen.  
A cross    B clear    C do    D wipe
32. Although our opinions on many things ....., we're good friends.  
A differ    B oppose    C disagree    D divide
33. This product must be eaten ..... two days of purchase.  
A by    B before    C within    D under

34. The newspaper report contained ..... important information.  
A many      B another      C an      D a lot of
35. Have you considered ..... to London?  
A move      B to move      C to be moving      D moving
36. It can be a good idea for people who lead an active life to increase their ..... of vitamins.  
A upturn      B input      C upkeep      D intake
37. I thought there was a ..... of jealousy in his reaction to my good fortune.  
A piece      B part      C shadow      D touch
38. Why didn't you ..... that you were feeling ill?  
A advise      B mention      C remark      D tell
39. James was not sure exactly where his best interests .....  
A ~~is~~ stood      B rested      C lay      D centred
40. He's still getting ..... the shock of losing his job.  
A across      B by      C over      D through

**Appendix B**

**Quick Placement Test (Version 2)**

**Part 1**

**Question 1 – 5**

- Where can you see these notices?
- For questions 1 to 5, mark one letter **A**, **B** or **C** on your **Answer Sheet**.

1. YOU CAN LOOK, BUT DON'T TOUCH THE PICTURES			A	B	C
A. in an office	B. in a cinema	C. in a museum			
2. PLEASE GIVE THE RIGHT MONEY TO THE DRIVER			A	B	C
A. in a bank	B. on a bus	C. in a cinema			
3. NO PARKING PLEASE			A	B	C
A. in a street	B. on a book	C. on a table			
4. CROSS BRIDGE FOR TRAINS TO EDINBURGH			A	B	C
A. in a bank	B. in a garage	C. in a station			
5. KEEP IN A COLD PLACE			A	B	C
A. onclothese	B. on furniture	C. on food			

**Question 6 –10**

- In this section you must choose the word which best fits each space in the text below.
- For questions 6 to 10, mark **one** letter **A, B, or C** on your Answer Sheet

**THE STARS**

There are millions of stars in the sky. If you look **(6)**.....the sky on a clear night, it is possible to see about 3000 stars. They look small, but they are really **(7)**.....big hot balls of burning gas. Some of them are huge, but others are much smaller, like our planet Earth. The biggest stars are very bright, but they only live for a short time. Every day new stars **(8)**.....born and old stars die. All the stars are very far away. The light from the nearest star takes more **(9)**.....four years to reach Earth. Hundreds of years ago, people **(10)**.....stars, like the North Star, to know which direction to travel in. Today you can still see that star.

- |    |   |      |   |      |   |       |
|----|---|------|---|------|---|-------|
| 6. | A | at   | B | up   | C | on    |
| 7. | A | very | B | too  | C | much  |
| 8. | A | is   | B | be   | C | are   |
| 9. | A | that | B | of   | C | than  |
| 10 | A | use  | B | used | C | using |

**Question 11 - 15**

- In this section you must choose the word which best fits each space in the texts.
- For questions 11 to 20, mark one letter **A, B, C or D** on your Answer Sheet.

**Good smiles ahead for young teeth**

Older Britons are the worst in Europe when it comes to keeping their teeth. But British youngsters **(11)**.....more to smile about because **(12)**.....teeth are among the best. Almost 80% of Britons over 65 have lost all or some **(13)**.....their teeth according to a World Health Organisation survey. Eating

too **(14)**.....sugar is part of the problem. Among **(15)**....., 12-year-olds have on average only three missing, decayed or filled teeth.

- |               |          |            |           |
|---------------|----------|------------|-----------|
| 11. A getting | B got    | C have     | D having  |
| 12. A their   | B his    | C them     | D theirs  |
| 13. A from    | B of     | C among    | D between |
| 14. A much    | B lot    | C many     | D deal    |
| 15. A person  | B people | C children | D family  |

### Question 16 - 20

#### Christopher Columbus and the New World

On August 3, 1492, Christopher Columbus set sail from Spain to find a new route to India, China and Japan. At this time most people thought you would fall off the edge of the world if you sailed too far. Yet sailors such as Columbus had seen how a ship appeared to get lower and lower on the horizon as it sailed away. For Columbus this **(16)**.....that the world was round. He **(17)**.....to his men about the distance travelled each day. He did not want them to think that he did not **(18)**.....exactly where they were going. **(19)**.....,on October 12, 1492, Columbus and his men landed on a small island he named San Salvador. Columbus believed he was in Asia, **(20)**.....he was actually in the Caribbean.

- |            |            |           |          |
|------------|------------|-----------|----------|
| 16. A made | B pointed  | C was     | D proved |
| 17. A lied | B told     | C cheated | D asked  |
| 18. A find | B know     | C think   | D expect |
| 19. A Next | B secondly | C finally | D once   |
| 20. A as   | B but      | C because | D if     |

### Questions 21 – 30

- In this section you must choose the word or phrase which best completes each sentence.
- For questions **21** to **40**, mark one letter **A**, **B**, **C** or **D** on your Answer Sheet.

21. The children won't go to sleep.....we leave a light on outside their bedroom.  
A except B otherwise C unless D but
22. I'll give you my spare keys in case you.....home before me.  
A would get B got C will get D get
23. My holiday in Paris gave me a great.....to improve my French accent.  
A occasion B chance C hope D possibility
24. The singer ended the concert.....her most popular song.  
A by B with C in D as
25. Because it had not rained for several months, there was a.....of water.  
A shortage B drop C scare D waste
26. I've always.....you as my best friend.  
A regarded B thought C meant D supposed
27. She came to live her.....a month ago.  
A quite B beyond C already D almost
28. Don't make such a.....! The dentist is only going to look at your teeth.  
A fuss B trouble C worry D reaction
29. He spent a long time looking for a tie which.....with his new shirt.  
A fixed B made C went D wore
30. Fortunately,...from a bump on the head, she suffered no serious injuries from her fall.  
A other B except C besides D apart

**Question 31 – 40**

31. She had changed so much that.....anyone recognized her.  
A almost B hardly C not D nearly
32. ....teaching English, she also writes children's books.  
A Moreover B as well as C in addition D Apart

33. It was clear that the young couple were.....of taking charge of the restaurant.  
A responsible B reliable C capable D able
34. The book.....of ten chapters, each one covering a different topic.  
A comprises B includes C consists D contains
35. Mary was disappointed with her new shirt as the colour.....very quickly.  
A bleached B died C vanished D faded
36. National leaders from all over the world are expected o attend  
the.....meeting.  
A peak B summit C top D Apex
37. Jane remained calm when she won the lottery and.....about her business as if  
nothing had happened.  
A came B brought C went D moved
38. I suggest we.....outside the stadium tomorrow at 8.30.  
A meeting B meet C met D will meet
39. My remarks were.....as a joke, but she was offended by them.  
A pretended B thought C meant D supposed
40. You ought to take up swimming for the.....of your health.  
A concern B relief C sake D cause

