



**TEFL: theory, practice, and methodology**

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# Portuguese Learner's Overproduction of the Definite Article: a cross-sectional study

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## GENERIC

(0) CDs are cleaner than tapes.

## SPECIFIC

Are these *the* CDs you asked for?

# Language transfer

*"... language transfer is indeed a real and central phenomenon that must be considered in any full account of the second language acquisition process."*

(Gass & Selinker, 1992: 7)

## Transfer to somewhere

*"A grammatical form or structure will occur consistently and to a significant extent in interlanguage as a result of transfer **if and only if** there already exists within the L2 input the potential for (mis-)generalization from the input to produce the same form or structure."*

(Andersen 1983b: 178)

# Conceptual transfer

*“There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that many instances of transfer arise not from the learner’s reliance on the formal L1 system itself, but from the conceptual system that underlies the L1.”*

(Jarvis 1999: 2)

# Hypotheses

1. Overproduction of the definite article by Portuguese learners in *zero article* contexts is due to the fact that they use their L1 as a reference.
2. This fact should in turn predict no *zero article* production in 'definite article' contexts, since the *zero article* does not exist in their L1, at least in the same contexts as it occurs in L2.

# The subjects

- 12 students randomly chosen out of 26
- first grade of EFL in the Business Communication Course
- all native speakers of Portuguese
- 11 female, one male
- aged 18-23
- seven-eight years of learning English
- assessment: FCE (= B2 of Common European Framework of Reference for Languages)

# Materials

- 1.A **blank-filling** exercise on the use of articles in English, consisting of 30 sentences, with one blank in each, of which one half was designed to elicit 'the' and the other '0'.
- 2.A **composition** on a topic familiar to the students, with no restriction on its length, no previous knowledge of the topic and no access to dictionaries.

# Results

Student	Blank-filling			Composition		
	Overproduction of 'the'	Overproduction of '0'	Total nr of non-target-like forms	Overproduction of 'the'	Overproduction of '0'	Total nr of non-target-like forms
2	2	3	5	16	1	17
4	6	2	8	2	0	2
6	1	1	2	3	0	3
8	1	0	1	3	1	4
10	4	4	8	9	4	13
12	3	1	4	3	0	3
14	2	2	4	4	1	5
16	5	3	8	2	1	3
18	1	1	2	5	1	6
20	4	2	6	1	6	7
22	2	5	7	5	0	5
24	5	5	10	2	2	4
Total nr of non-target-like forms	36	29	65	55	17	72

# Results

Production	Blank-filling		Composition	
	Nr of cases	%	Nr of cases	%
+ THE	5	41.7	10	83.3
+ 0	2	16.7	1	8.3
=	5	41.7	1	8.3

## **CONCLUSIONS FROM THE BLANK-FILLING EXERCISE**

Most of these students have already been able to master the similarities between the two languages in their interlanguage.

**Transfer to somewhere**

## CONCLUSIONS FROM THE COMPOSITION

This is precisely where learners are a great deal more likely to actually use the system of mental concepts that they have acquired from their native language.

**Conceptual transfer**

## DISCUSSION

The findings do not support the 2<sup>nd</sup> hypothesis raised: the rate of *zero article* production was much higher than expected.

## Interpretation

- ☞ overuse/overgeneralization of the L2 norms
- ☞ insufficient exposure to the definite article in English.

## FURTHER STUDIES

a longitudinal study

a larger number of students

different developmental stages

a meaningful number of native

speakers

# WHAT ELSE MATTERS?

learning environment

the learner's personality

language aptitude

motivation

learning

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