The Effect of Semantic Context and the Task Types on Turkish EFL Learners Use of English Articles: A Comparison of Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate Level Learners

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Abstract

This study investigated the use of English articles in five semantic contexts by pre-intermediate and intermediate level Turkish EFL students at a state university. Specifically, it explored a) whether the accuracy of article use by the students varied with respect to the types of noun phrase (NP) contexts b) the types of errors committed by the students in using English articles, and c) whether the accuracy of article use varied with respect to the proficiency levels and the tasks that the participants carried out. The data were collected through two task types: a multiple-choice (MC) task and a written production task. The results of these tasks revealed that the accuracy of article use by students varies with respect to the types of NP contexts in both the multiple-choice task and the written production task. Moreover, each proficiency level tended to omit or substitute the articles when they make a mistake. However, the variety and frequency of these errors depended on the proficiency level of the students, type of the NP contexts, and the tasks that were given to the students. The study also revealed that the accuracy of article use varied with respect to the proficiency levels, and the tasks that were given to the students.

Key words: Article, definite article, indefinite article, noun phrase (NP), NP types, NP contexts, omission and substitution

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Introduction

The English article system, which has been frequently used, is one of the most challenging language structures for both English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. In previous studies ESL learners' acquisition of the English articles has been ascertained as a tough process (Huebner, 1983; Ionin et al., 2008; Master 1987; Parrish, 1987; Pica, 1985; Robertson, 2000; Thomas, 1989). Master (2002) associated this difficulty with the three distinctive features of the article system. First of all, the articles (a, an, the and Ø - zero article) are the most frequently occurring function words. Therefore, the conscious use of articles in the course of sustained use of the target language, such as conversation, is a demanding task to perform. Secondly, since function words are normally unstressed, it is difficult for learners to notice them as input. Last, the article system has multiple functions, which requires learners' great efforts to decide over the correct article to use for each case. Not only ESL learners but also ESL teachers predicated the difficulty of using correct articles in English (Covitt, 1976; cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Han, Chodorow & Leacock, 2006). Moreover, the speakers of article-less languages may have more difficulty in choosing the correct article use compared to the speakers of languages which have article system (Yoon, 1993). Turkish context is one of the EFL settings consisting of such learners as Turkish and English do not have a one-to-one correspondence with regard to the article system.

Background

The acquisition of English articles is a difficult process for most of the EFL and ESL learners. Many studies (e.g., Huebner, 1983; Master, 1987; Parish, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Murphy, 1997; Leung, 2001, among many others) have revealed that L2 English learners make errors in using English articles such as omitting, overusing and/or misusing. Although this case was examined in Turkish context, the researchers mostly investigated the use of English articles either with one proficiency level (e.g., Ürkmez, 2003) or with two or more proficiency levels which are not close to each other (e.g., Önen, 2007) and with a limited number of participants, or the limited types of NP environments as in Yılmaz's (2006) study. Moreover, to my knowledge, there has been no recent study on the use of the English articles considering five types of noun phrase (NP) environments through a receptive and a productive task conducted with Turkish tertiary level students who are considered as "independent users" according to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

English article system

When English article system is taken into account, basically, two marking terms are used: definiteness and indefiniteness. English uses free prenominal morphemes to indicate the definiteness and indefiniteness of a noun phrase (NP). In general, 'the' marks definite nouns, and 'a' marks indefinite ones. The definite article in English displays that the NP is familiar and identifiable by both the speaker and hearer, and will be demonstrated as [+/-speaker] and [+/-hearer]. That the noun refers to a particular example of something indicates the major use of the definite article *the* (Richard, Platt, & Platt, 1992). They also pointed out that when a noun refers to something general or when the speaker has not something identified the noun yet, then the indefinite article *a/an* is preferred, as in the following example:

(1) I bought *a* book and *a* DVD. *The* book was about an immigrant's life and *the* DVD was about a fictional future life in another planet.

In this example the two entities, *book* and *DVD*, are initially known only to the speaker and are introduced with an indefinite article (*a* book, *a* DVD). If the speaker mentions about the same entities in subsequent phrases or sentences, one or both entities require the use of a definite article. The main reason for this is that the entities now constitute shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer, [+speaker] and [+hearer], and they are part of the common ground. That is to say, familiarity is established through linguistic means, namely the definite phrases signal referents available in the previous linguistic context with the use of indefinite noun phrases.

Definite articles can also have associative uses named as bridging uses, whereby a

referent becomes definite without previous introduction into discourse but by reference to shared world knowledge between the speaker and the hearer, as in (2):

(2) Jane wanted to open a jar. She removed the lid and scooped out some jam.

In (2), although the definite NP *the lid* constitutes a first mention definite expression, since it is shared world knowledge between the speaker and the hearer, the definite article is used with the entity *lid.*

Indefinite NPs in English can also take a non-referential reading as in (3):

(3) I would like a pen to fill the form.

In (3) the entity denoted by the indefinite NP is not known to either the speaker or the hearer. It refers to an unspecified pen that has the property of belonging to the class of 'pens' rather than to a specific pen.

Certain noun phrases sometimes do not refer to particular individuals/objects, and considered as non-referential. These non-referential NPs can also constitute complements of predicates such as be or have, as in (4) below:

(4) A referee has a whistle.

In this context, the noun phrase a whistle is part of the predicate have + indefinite NP and is within the scope of another indefinite noun phrase a policeman. This is called the predicational use of indefinite articles, and in such uses, the entities denoted by the two NPs are in an associative relationship because it is shared world knowledge that referees have whistles.

Sometimes, certain nouns do not require an article at all. In that case the *zero article* is used. Yotsukura (1970) suggests there were two types of *zero article*. He found it necessary to separate two types of noun phrases (NP) occurring without tangible articles, which he defined as the *zero forms*. This is in parallel with the opinion of Sinclair (1991), Master (1997) and Chesterman (2005), who separated *zero article* (indefinite, with mass and plural) and *null article* (definite, with singular proper nouns and some singular count nouns). The following sentences underpin the differences:

(5) *Elephants* are huge animals.

(6) I can see *Jupiter* tonight.

In (5) *elephants* are used in plural form and in indefinite context, therefore, does not need any article, which is defined as zero article. However, in (6), as *Jupiter* is a definite proper noun, the use of article is named as null article.

1.1. NP environments in English

The articles *the, a(n),* and Ø do not merely convey a lexical meaning. Instead, they mark definiteness, genericness, and referentiality. Thus, the acquisition of these articles needs to be examined together with the noun phrase (NP) contexts for the appearance of articles. Bickerton (1981) was the first researcher who employed the classification of the semantic function of an NP and made a significant contribution to the existing literature. He proposed two discourse features of referentiality. The first one was whether the noun has a specific referent [+/- SR], and the second was whether it is known by the hearer [+/- HK]. Huebner (1983, 1985) developed a system of analysis based on Bickerton's distinctions ([+/- SR], [+/- HK]). Taking these two binary features into consideration, he classified the semantic functions of the NPs into four types: Type 1 [-SR; +HK], Type 2 [+SR; +HK], Type 3 [+SR; -HK], and Type 4 [-SR; -HK]. His classification focuses not only on the presence or absence of articles in obligatory contexts, but also on the semantic types of NPs and the article usage for each type. His classification as well as idiomatic and conventional uses of *a/an, the* and Ø, which were classified as Type 5 by Butler (2002), Ekiert (2004), and Thomas (1989), constituted the core classification of this study (See Figure 1).

2. Type 1	3. [-SR; +HK]	4. generics
5. Type 2	6. [+SR; +HK]	7. referential definites
8. Type 3	9. [+SR; -HK]	10. referential indefinites
11. Type 4	12. [-SR; -HK]	13. non-referentials
14. Type 5	15. idiomatic and conventional uses of a/an, the, and Ø	

Figure 1. NP Types

In Type 1, which is considered as - Specific Referent, + Hearer Knowledge ([-SR; +HK]), nouns are called generics. A generic noun refers to all or most members of an entity that can be identified by the hearer from general knowledge. All three articles a/an, the, Ø may take place in this type as all of them may express generic meaning, as in the following example:

A cat likes mice.

The cat likes mice

Ø Cats like mice.

In Type 2, which is considered as + Specific Referent, + Hearer Knowledge ([+SR; +HK]), nouns are called referential definites. These referential definites can be categorized as previous mention, specified by entailment, specified by definition, unique in all contexts, and unique in a given context, and all of these categories require *the*, as in:

The shade on this lamp is really ugly.

I saw a strange man standing at the gate.

There are nine planets travelling around the sun.

We rented a boat last summer in Antalya. Unfortunately, the boat hit another boat and sank.

Type 3 is considered as + Specific Referent, - Hearer Knowledge ([+SR; -HK]), and nouns are called referential indefinites as these nouns are mentioned for the first time and their referent is identifiable to the speaker but not to the listener. They are marked with *a/an* or *Ø*.

I keep sending Ø messages to him.

My computer has a new sound card.

Type 4 is considered as - Specific Referent, - Hearer Knowledge, *and represented* as [-SR; -HK]. These are called non-referentials, and marked with *a/an,* and *Ø*. The difference between Type 3 and Type 4 is that in Type 4 nouns are nonspecific for both the speaker and the listener.

Love and hate are Ø two extremes.

What's the sex of your baby? It's a boy.

Finally, Type 5 comprises idiomatic expressions and conventional uses of all articles, *a/an, the* and *Ø,* as in the following examples:

Sally Ride was the first American in Ø space.

Writing letters is a pain in the neck.

Studies on the article acquisition by L2 learners

The accuracy on the use of English article system has been explored several times in the literature. Yet, despite having extensive research on the L2 acquisition of articles (Chaudron & Parker, 1990; Butler, 2002; Jarvis, 2002; Kharma, 1981; Liu & Gleason, 2002; Mizuno, 1999; Yamada & Matsuura, 1982; Yoon, 1993), it is undeniable that some of the researchers were mainly interested in the acquisition of articles rather than the acquisition of the grammatical morphemes in general (e.g., Master, 1987; Parrish, 1987; Tarone & Parish, 1988; Thomas, 1989). The early studies looked mostly into the presence or absence of articles in obligatory contexts. However, Huebner (1983) opened up a new avenue of research on L2 article acquisition by employing Bickerton's (1981) noun classification system. Butler (2002), who employed Huebner's (1983) semantic wheel, was another researcher who focused on the reasons of difficulties that Japanese EFL learners faced while acquiring the English articles. Ekiert (2004) also emphasized the difficulty of acquiring these articles, and claimed that this difficulty might vary according to the level of the learners. For some researchers including Hiki (1991), Butler (2002) and White (2009), the learners' finding the use of articles in accordance with the countability challenging is the chief reason of this difficulty.

Liu and Gleason (2002) were the other leading researchers who investigated the acquisition of the definite article by ESL learners. They examined the nongeneric use of the definite article *the* in four categories, and claimed that ESL students acquire situation use first, cultural use last, and structural and textual uses in between. Also, in the process of the acquisition of *the*, the more proficient an ESL learner, the less underuse of obligatory use of *the* was observed. Trenkic (2014), another prevailing researcher, suggested that structures that are difficult to process in comprehension are often the same ones with which L2 users struggle in production. There are two main reasons why L2 grammar may not be processed in a target-like way. The first is language transfer vis a vis learners' extensive experience with their first language (L1) may influence how they process aspects of L2 grammar. In addition to the L1-specific transfer effects, L2 processing may generally be less automatic and more resource-draining than L1 processing.

Among these researchers, it was Master (1997) and Parish (1987) who posited that Ø article dominates in all environments for articles used by L2 learners, particularly the ones whose L1s lack articles. Parrish (1987) proposed that the Ø 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 Ø" (p. 216). He also reports that the overuse of Ø decreases with an increase in proficiency level, although the overuse of Ø 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 Ø article and underuse of *the*. They suggested that the reason for this was that the two articles, namely Ø and *the*, are acquired rather late (p. 5). The hypothesis was justified by Young's (1996) data on the use of articles by Czech and Slovak [-ART] learners of English, and he claimed that this problem persevered even at the more advanced stages. In a similar vein, on the basis of a study conducted with Turkish EFL learners, Ürkmez (2003) suggested that the Ø article was the most overgeneralized, and *the* was the second most overgeneralized article. On the contrary, Yılmaz (2006) pointed out that definite contexts are perceived earlier than indefinite contexts.

Chan (2019) investigated the use of English articles and the types of errors Cantonese learners made in their free writing tasks. The findings revealed that over-extension, a superfluous use of article, and under-extension, the omission of an article, occur the most while almost no co-occurrence errors, the occurrence of an article with another determiner, were detected.

Qian, Li and Cheng (2021) examined the accurate use of articles (a, the and Ø) two different levels (Low and Medium) of Chinese EFL learners via three tasks. Both groups demonstrated accurate usages in definiteness and specificity contexts rather than zero-licensing contexts. Also, the researchers found inconsistent results in the sense of the

proficiency level on the variability in learners' article selections.

However, the acquisition of the English article system has still been an issue to be investigated. The previous comparative studies mainly targeted the low and advanced level learners' acquisition of the articles. Yet, pre-intermediate and intermediate level learners' use of these articles might be of importance, especially in Turkish context, which lacks the overt use of articles. Thus, the following research questions were inquired to be able to find out the accurate use of English articles considering the five semantic environments:

1. Does the accuracy of article use by Turkish EFL learners vary according to the five types of noun phrase contexts?

    a. Does the accuracy of article use by Turkish EFL learners vary with respect to proficiency level?

    b. Does the accuracy of article use by Turkish EFL learners vary according to the tasks?

2. What type of errors do Turkish EFL learners commit in these five article contexts?

    a. Specifically, do they tend to omit and/or substitute the articles?

Methodology

Participants

A homogenous group of 50 Turkish EFL learners volunteered to participate in the study. The half of the participants were pre-intermediate and the other half was intermediate level learners, all of whom were at tertiary level and studying at Anadolu University School of Foreign Languages at the time of data collection. The reason for choosing pre-intermediate and intermediate level students was that the lower level students, particularly the beginner and elementary level learners, did not have enough competence and knowledge on the use of English article system as they were not instructed on the acquisition of these articles specifically. Therefore, it seems useless to explore the accuracy of the use of these articles by these lower level language learners. Pre-intermediate level group was consisted of 14 male and 11 female students. On the other hand, intermediate level group comprised 15 male and 10 female students. The level of the participants was determined at the very beginning of 2017-2018 Fall term with a proficiency test based on the Global Scale of English (GSE). GSE is a scale from 10 to 90, which pinpoints the four skills; speaking, listening, reading and writing as well as grammar and vocabulary, and can be regarded as an extension of Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Pre-intermediate level refers to B level on this scale, whereas intermediate level refers to A level at AUSFL context.

Instruments

In order to analyze the use of English articles by the participants, two types of instruments were utilized. The first one was a multiple-choice task (MC), in which the participants chose the correct article *a/an, the* or *Ø* (See Appendix A). MC task consisted of forty-four sentences, and seventy-five obligatory uses of these articles across five NP types; namely, fifteen instances for each type of NP appeared in the task. The learners were given twenty minutes to complete the task. The task was piloted and applied by Önen (2007) at Pamukkale University with 45 EFL learners. The task items were adapted from Ekiert (2004), who adapted the items from Butler (2002), Liu and Gleason (2002) and Master (1994). Also, two of the sentences were adapted from Murcia & Freeman (1999) and Hawkins (2001). The second data tool was a written production task. The students' writings were downloaded from an online platform called Turnitin where they uploaded their written tasks in due course. As the syllabus for each level was designed accordingly, the tasks were not identical. For the pre-intermediate level, students' writing task on "writing about a new experience" were collected, and for the intermediate level, students' writings on "writing a story" were gathered (See Appendix C and D for sample student written tasks). Since these two tasks were similar to one another among the other tasks, they were deliberately chosen as the second data tool for this study.

Procedure and Data Analysis

The data gathered from the MC task were collected within the 12th week of the Fall term. The participants were given twenty minutes to complete the task. All of the students took the task in their own classes under their class teachers' supervision. The papers were grouped according to the level of the participants. Meanwhile, the participants' writing tasks were downloaded from the Turnitin and grouped according to the levels. Each MC paper was assigned a number, and the same numbers were given to the same students' written production tasks. In short, each number of the two tasks represented the same participant. The MC task answers were analyzed with the help of an answer key, which was prepared beforehand (See Appendix B). The number of correct uses of each student from each group as well the misuse and the missing answers in the five NP contexts were calculated and entered into Statistics Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to be able to obtain the frequencies of the uses. In addition, the difference in the accurate use of these articles between two groups was also evaluated.

For the written production task, first of all, the writings of each student were downloaded and then, the accurate, misused and missing articles in these five NP contexts were calculated. In order to obtain better results, two experienced colleagues, working at the same institution followed the same procedure, and examined all of the papers one by one. In order to set the standard among these three instructors, first of all, a norming session was organized, which took approximately one hour. The instructors and the researcher came together and looked into two different writing tasks from each group. We analyzed the writings in terms of accuracy, misuse and missing article by using color-codes (See Appendix C and D). The instructors crosschecked their answers to see whether there was any mismatch. Later, each instructor analyzed each student's paper in two days and came together to check the final results for each student's paper. If there was any mismatch, we negotiated and came up with a common consensus. While analyzing the data, first of all, the required articles in five NP contexts in each paper were determined, and then the data gathered were entered into SPSS. For each written task, first the number of the NP context was entered. Next, the article required in that context and the article used by the participant was entered, which lead to see whether the students omitted the necessary article, or substituted it with another one. As a final step, the number of the accurate and inaccurate uses of the articles as well as the omission and the substitution errors were counted.

Results and Discussion

This study investigated the use of English articles in five semantic contexts by pre-intermediate and intermediate level Turkish EFL students through two instruments: a multiple-choice test and a written production task. For the first research question and its sub-questions, which attempted to find out the accurate use of the articles in five types of NP contexts, and whether the accuracy of use vary with respect to the level and tasks, both the MC tasks and the written production tasks were analyzed.

For the MC tasks, when intermediate level students' accuracy was taken into account, the results of the study indicated that in all NP contexts, the accurate uses were higher than the misuses (See Figure 2). To be more specific, in Type 1 [-SR; +HR], although 23 items were missing, students gave 235 accurate and 117 inaccurate answers to the items. In Type 2 [+SR; +HR], there were only 9 missing answers, and the students performed much better than Type 1 as they gave 58 inaccurate answers and 308 accurate answers. When Type 3 [+SR; -HR] is examined, it can be concluded that the participants performed the best in the use of articles in this semantic context with a number of 348 accurate, 25 inaccurate and 2 missing answers. For the fourth type, Type 4 [-SR; -HR], the participants performance was very similar to the one in the use of Type 2 with a number of total 305 correct, 64 incorrect and 6 missing answers. Students accomplished the least success in the use of the last NP context, Type 5, which included idiomatic or conventional uses, with 217 accurate, 135 inaccurate and 23 missing answers.
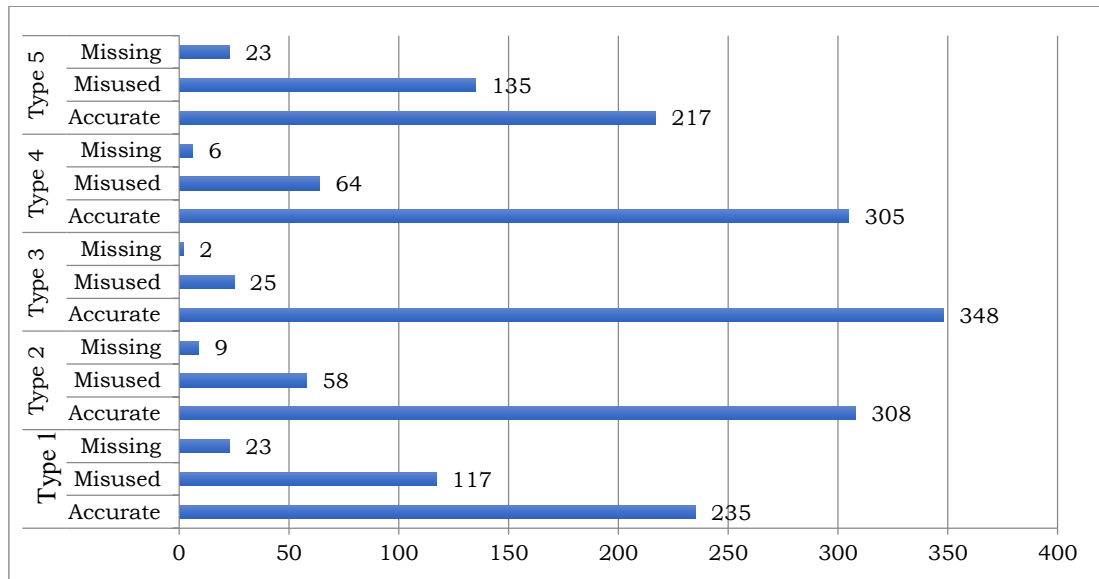
Figure 2. Use of Articles by Intermediate Level Learners in the Multiple-Choice Task

The data generated from the performance of the pre-intermediate level learners in MC task was reported in Figure 3. Except Type 5, participants' accurate performance was higher than the misused and missing ones. In terms of the first type, Type 1 [-SR; +HR], participants answered 206 items accurately, 151 items inaccurately and did not answer 18 items at all. For Type 2 [+SR; +HR], there were 271 correct, 92 incorrect and 12 missing items. Similar to the intermediate level learners, pre-intermediate level students gave more accurate answers to Type 2 questions when compared to Type 1. As in intermediate group, the findings displayed that the best performance was seen in Type 3 [+SR; -HR] with 297 correct, 72 incorrect and 6 missing answers. The scores in Type 4 [-SR; -HR] were similar to the scores in Type 2 as there were 275 accurate, 87 misused and 13 missing items. Only in Type 5, which was defined as idiomatic or conventional uses, the misused items outweighed the accurate ones. Particularly, students gave 161 correct and 198 incorrect answers as well as 16 missing answers.
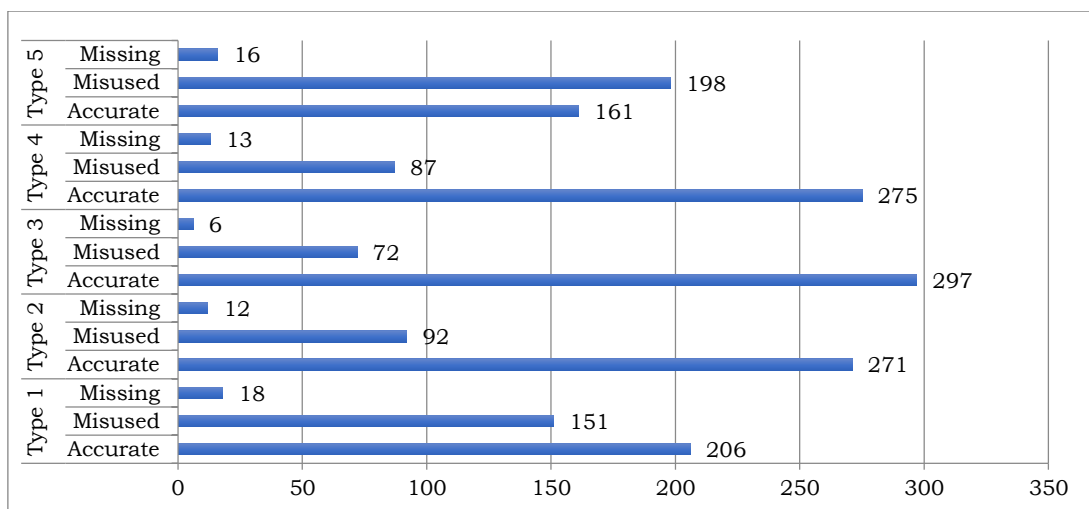

Figure 3. Use of Articles by Pre-Intermediate Level Learners in the Multiple-Choice Task

Although Master (1997) and Parish (1987) claimed that zero article dominates in all environments for articles used by L2 learners, particularly the ones whose L1s lack articles, the participants' performance was relatively good in the Type 2 [+SR; +HR], which is used

with definite article *the*. Yet, Ekiert (2004) claimed that difficulty might vary according to the level of the learners, and for the intermediate level learners the acquisition of the definite article might not be challenging. When Type 3 is examined, it can be concluded that the participants performed the best in the use of articles in this semantic context in both groups. This is in line with Önen (2007), who conducted a research with Turkish university students at different proficiency levels. She found that in all levels, learners did the best in Type 3 [+SR; -HR]. Moreover, the findings of the study were parallel to Ekiert's (2004), who examined the Polish students' use of articles in EFL and ESL settings and Önen's (2007) findings. Furthermore, in both studies, Type 1, [-SR; +HR] and Type 5, idiomatic and conventional uses, were the most challenging uses of English articles. In addition, Liu and Gleason (2002) also suggested that the use of definite article *the* was the most challenging in cultural use, which was in consonance with the findings of the current study.

For the written production tasks, the data in the current study suggest that the intermediate level learners performed best in the use of Type 2 [+SR; +HR], with a number of 187 accurate instances though there were 40 missing obligatory uses. It was followed by Type 3 [+SR; -HR], Type 5, Type 4 [-SR; -HR], and Type 1 [-SR; +HR], from the highest to the lowest in terms of accuracy (See Figure 4).
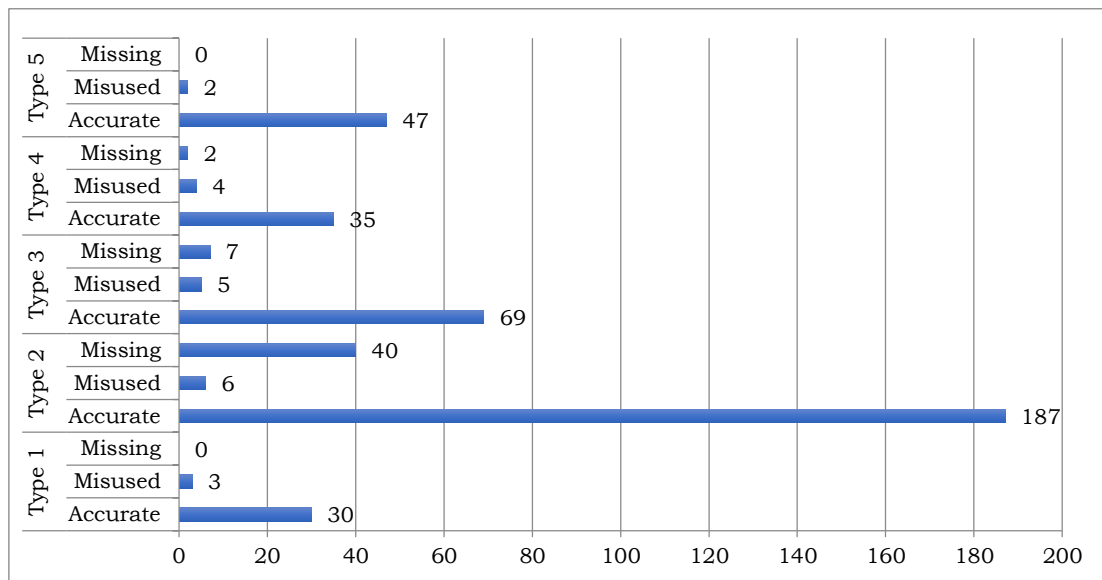

Figure 4. Use of Articles by Intermediate Level Learners in Written Production Task

The pre-intermediate level learners, on the other hand, displayed similar performance in the use of Type 2 and Type 5, which gained the highest accurate scores (52 correct instances) among other NP types. This was followed by Type 3 (32 instances), Type 1 (31 instances) and Type 4 (23 instances), from the most accurate to the least.
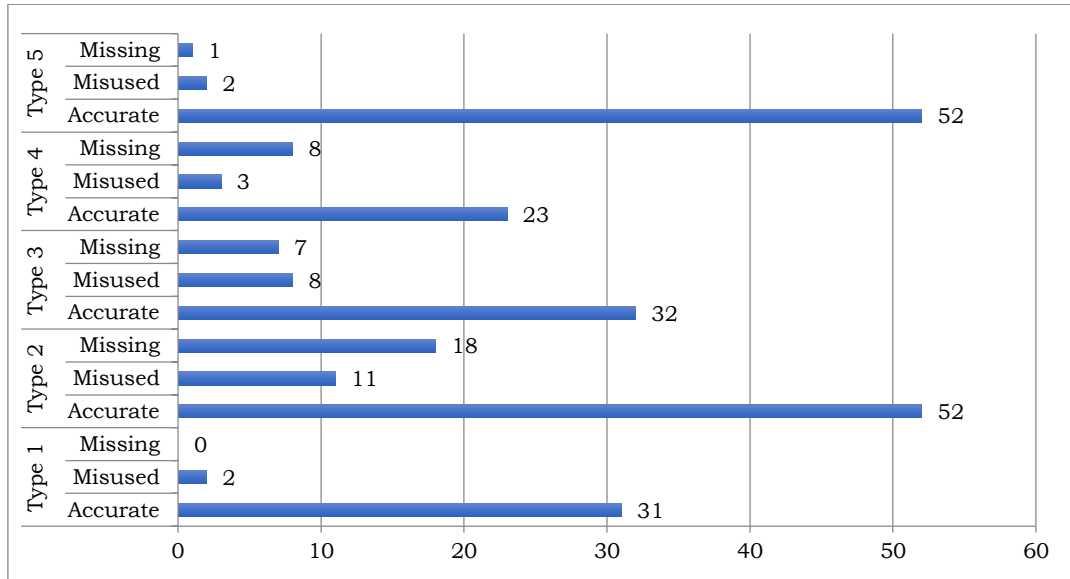
Figure 5. Use of Articles by Pre-Intermediate Level Learners in Written Production Task

In order to answer the question (1a), which inquired whether the accuracy of article use by Turkish EFL learners vary with respect to proficiency level, the answers to the MC and written tasks of each group were analyzed and compared (See Figure 6 and 7). When the MC scores were taken into account, it can be inferred that even though the number of the missing items was quite similar in each group, 63 missing items in intermediate and 65 in pre-intermediate, the intermediate level students performed better than the pre-intermediate level learners in all NP types. The findings were in agreement with Ekiert (2004), who suggested that the difficulty in acquiring the article system might vary with respect to the proficiency level of the learners. Likewise, when written production task scores were compared, it can be concluded that the intermediate level learners performed better than the pre-intermediate level participants except in the use of Type 5. Pre-intermediate level learners did slightly better than the intermediate level participants.
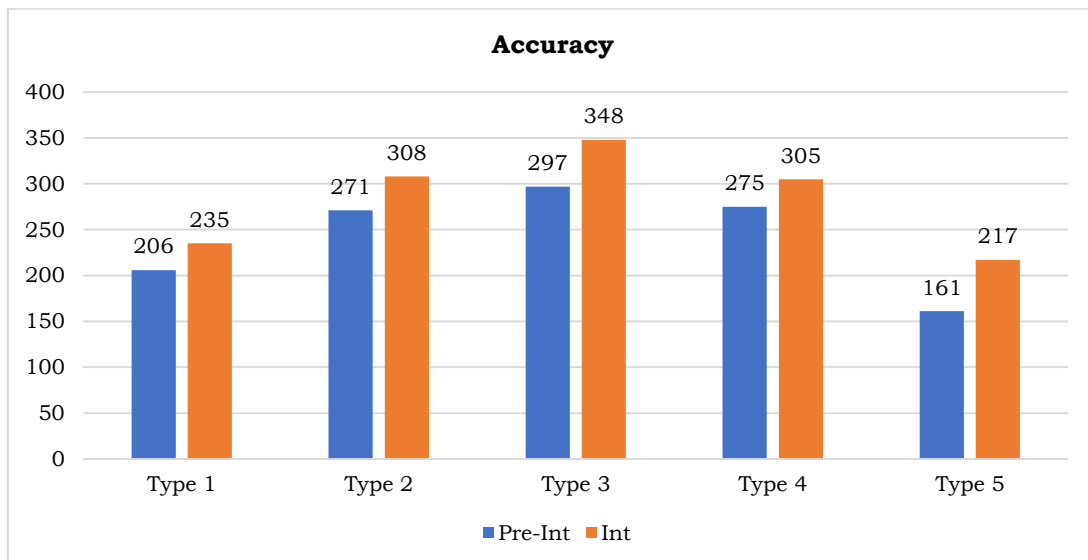

Figure 6. Use of Accurate Articles in the Multiple-Choice Task Across Levels
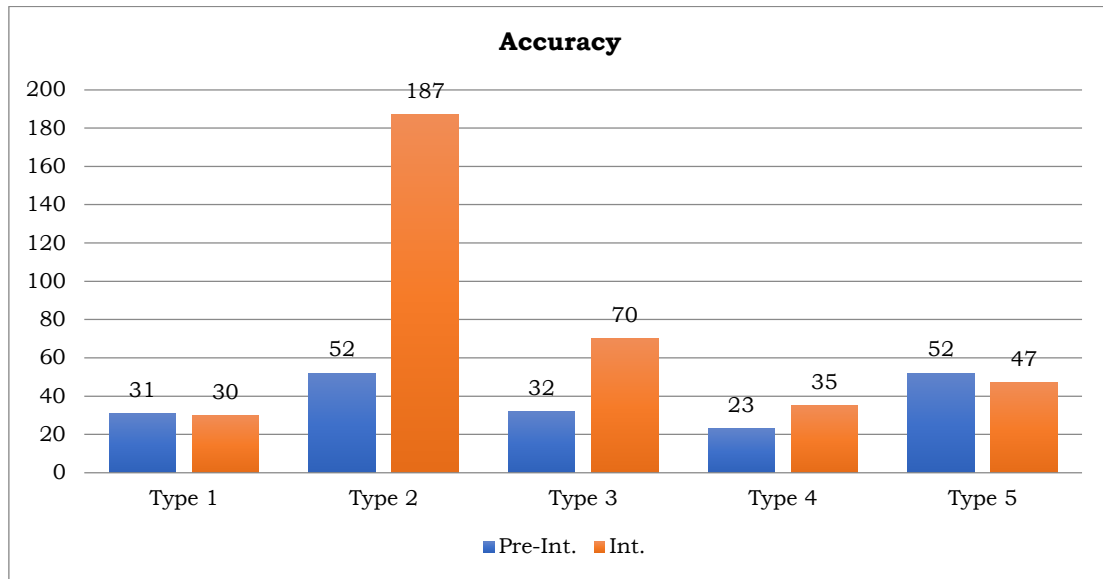
Figure 7. Use of Accurate Articles in Written Production Task Across Levels

As suggested by various researchers (e.g., Hiki; 1991, Butler; 2002; Ekiert, 2004 and White, 2009), the proficiency level plays an important role on the accurate choice of English articles. Specifically, learners who are more proficient are expected to master the use of articles better.

For the question (1b), which explored whether the accuracy of the article use by Turkish EFL learners vary with respect to the task type, both MC scores and written production scores were examined and compared (See Figure 6 and 7). The results of the data yielded that in MC the most accurate answers were employed in the use of Type 3, whereas in written production task, both groups performed better in using Type 2. The reason for this could be the former task was a receptive one and the latter task was a productive one. This may be because, as Trenkic (2014) proposed, L2 structures that are difficult to process in comprehension are often the same ones with which L2 users struggle in production.

In order to answer the second research question and its subquestion, which inquired whether the participants tended to omit and/or substitute the articles, the written production tasks were examined. The results demonstrated that the participants did not miss any obligatory uses in the use of Type 5 and Type 1. Yet, the highest missing score was obtained in the use of Type 2, with 40 instances, followed by Type 3 and Type 4 respectively. The highest misuse was reported in the use of Type 2, followed by Type 3, Type 4, Type 1 and Type 5, respectively (See Figure 4, 5, 6 and 7). The pre-intermediate level students were examined, it can be inferred that they did not miss any obligatory uses in the use of Type 1, and there was only one instance displayed in the use of Type 5. Yet, the highest missing score was obtained in the use of Type 2, with 18 instances, followed by Type 4 and Type 3, respectively. The highest misuse was reported in the use of Type 2, followed by Type 3, Type 4, and Type 1 and Type 5 in a similar amount (See Figure 4 and 5).
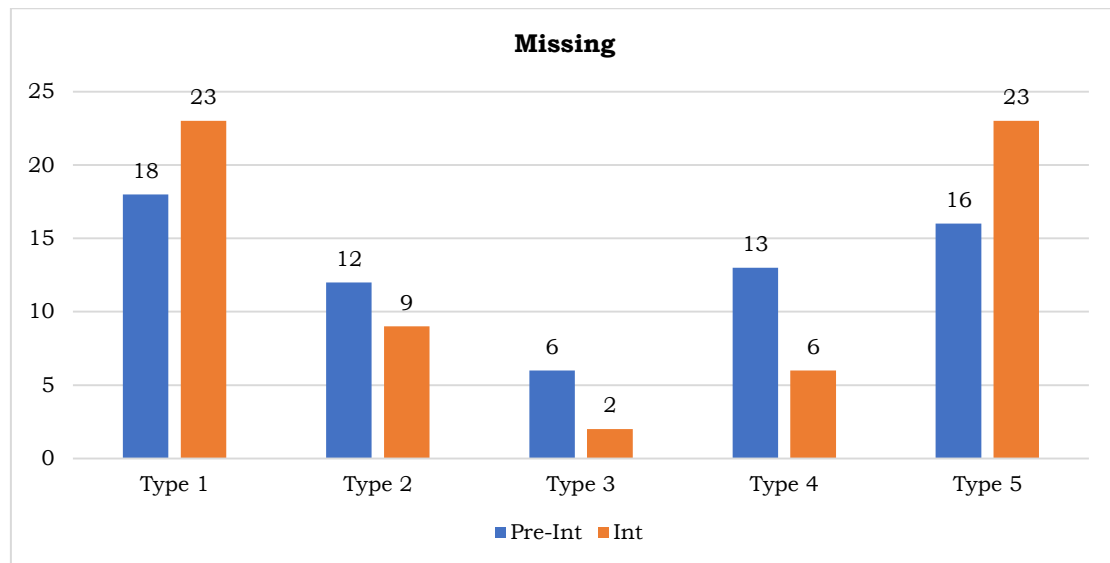
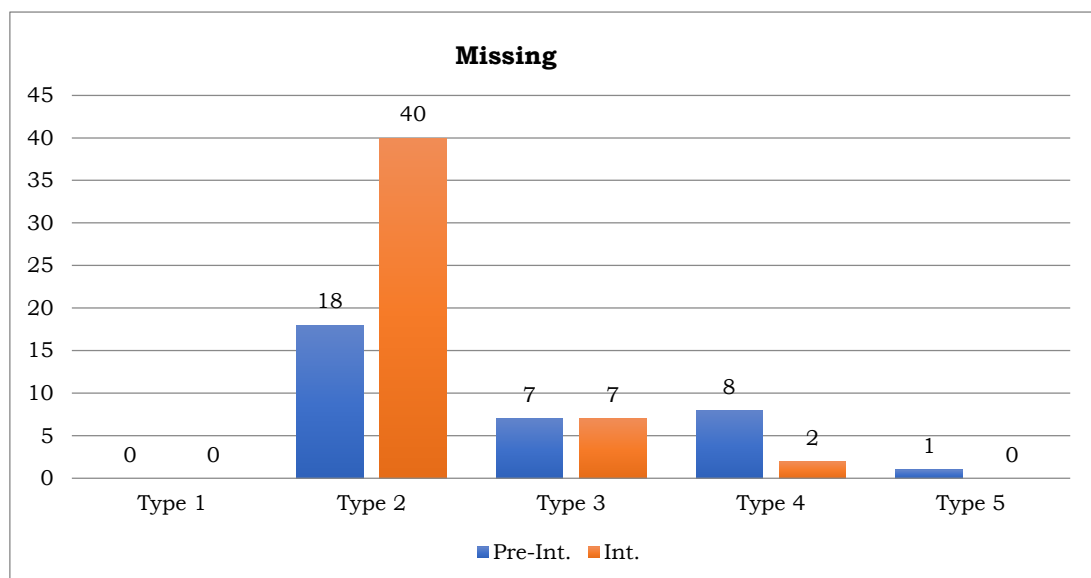*Figure 8.* Use of Missing Articles in the Multiple-Choice Task Across Levels

Figure 9. Use of Missing Articles in Written Production Task Across Levels
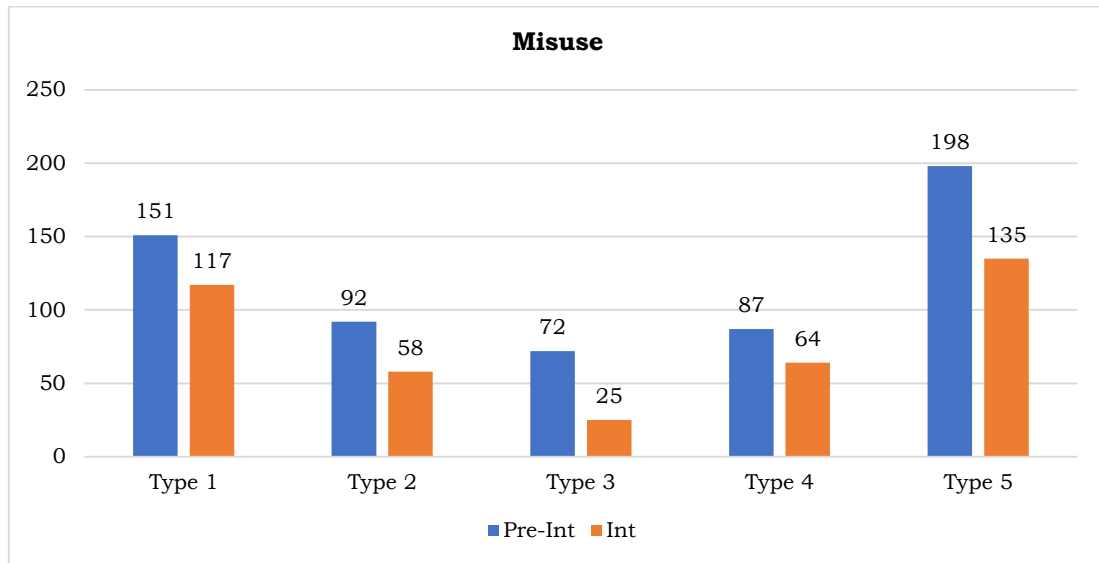
Figure 10. Use of Inaccurate Articles in the Multiple-Choice Task Across Levels
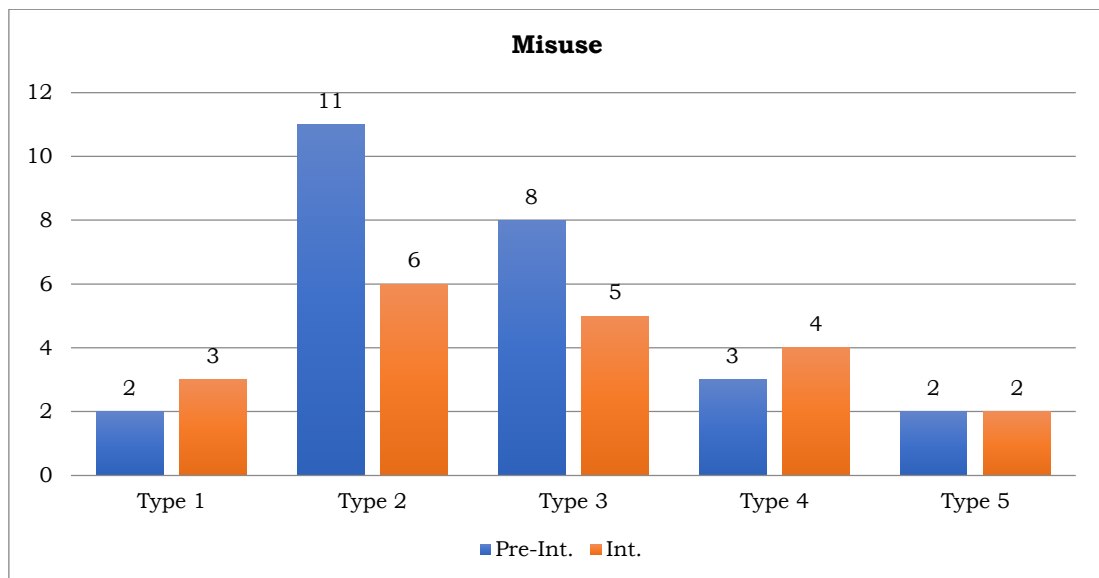

Figure 11. Use of Inaccurate Articles in the Written Production Tasks Across Levels

On the contrary to the MC scores, in which Type 3 had the highest score among other NP types, in written production task, the both groups used Type 2 more accurately. That is, it can be concluded that both pre-intermediate and intermediate level learners used the definite article *the* more than the others, thus, performed better. The reason may be because the was emphasized more in the language classrooms, especially when the native languages of the learners do not have any article system. Although Ekiert (2004) claimed that difficulty might vary according to the level of the learners, and for the pre-intermediate level learners, similar to the intermediate students, the use of the definite article was not that challenging, which is in line with the findings of Qian, et. al. (2021). Furthermore, in both groups, the highest misuse was observed in the use of Type 5. The reason for this can be the learners' lacking cultural knowledge of the target language, and is in line with Liu and Gleason (2002). They underpinned that the use of definite article *the* was the most challenging in cultural use.

Conclusion

This study investigated the use of English articles in five different semantic contexts through two task types: a receptive and a productive task. The participants were pre-intermediate and intermediate level EFL learners studying at Anadolu University School of Foreign Languages. The data yielded by this study provide convincing evidence that the proficiency level plays an important role on the accuracy of article selection. Also, the most challenging article use was observed in Type 5, which was used in idiomatic and/or conventional uses of a/an, the and zero article. This finding was in line with Liu and Gleason (2002) and Önen (2007). Furthermore, it can be inferred that the participants tended to omit or substitute data when they made mistakes in the use of articles.

As for the limitations of the present study, it should be noted that only a limited number of participants took part in the study, which made it difficult to make generalizations about the use of English article system. Another limitation could be the data instruments. As for the written production tasks, may be because of the task type, which was writing about an experiment and writing a story, the distribution of the instances of five NP types was not equal. In future studies, it would be wise to gather more written data so as to obtain more various NP environments.

The English article system is considered as one the most difficult structural elements of English grammar for ESL and EFL learners in acquiring English. It is obvious that the acquisition and the correct use of English articles are among the most problematic structures for most ESL learners (Chodorow, Gamon & Tetreault, 2010; Liu & Gleason, 2002; Master, 1990). If the learners' native language lacks overt articles, or employs only one or two of them, it leads to extra difficulties for them in acquiring the English articles, as in the case of Turkish context. Some studies as in Murphy (1997) and Robertson (2002) acknowledge the articles' being *unteachable.* The reason for this could be the inability to process L2 morphosyntactic information in a target-like manner, particularly in productive tasks. As Trenkic (2014) claimed learners have the same amount of difficulty in comprehending the structure process and producing the language; and one reason may be the negative L1 transfer. In particular, learners' extensive experience with their first language may influence how they process aspects of L2 grammar.

Another reason might be the lack of clear-cut rules for article selection. Therefore, it could be better for course designer and language teachers to give more attention to the article rules and their semantic environments. Another reason might be most Turkish EFL learners do not seem to understand the logic behind English articles and thus commit many errors while using them. In addition to this problem, some Turkish EFL teachers may also have trouble with English articles, possibly because they face difficulties in identifying their students' errors in article usage, determining the causes of these errors. Thus, the English teachers need to be more cautious when teaching the English article system.

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Appendix A - Multiple Choice Task

Değerli Arkadaşlar,

Bu anket sizin İngilizce'de yer alan tanımlılıkları kullanımınızı ölçmek için hazırlanmıştır. Katılımınız için teşekkür ederim.

Öğr. Gör. Meriç Akkaya

Önal

Name: Date:

Group:

Read the sentences and choose the correct article (*a/an - the- Ø*) for the given contexts. The symbol *Ø* refers to the zero article, when no article is used. If you believe there is more than one possibility, circle the most appropriate answer.
(Cümleleri okuyunuz ve doğru cevabı yuvarlak içine alınız. Ø sembolü tanımlılığa gerek olmadığı anlamına gelmektedir. Eğer birden fazla olaslılık olduğunu düşünüyorsanız, lütfen size en yakın gelen cevabı işaretleyiniz.)

1. Did you hear that Fred bought (**a/an - the - Ø**) car? However, because of some financial problems he had to sell (**a/an - the - Ø**) car.

2. What is (**a/an - the - Ø**) sex of your baby? It's (**a/an - the - Ø**) boy!

3. (**A/An - The - Ø**) Language is (**a/an - the - Ø**) great invention of (**a/an - the - Ø**) humankind.

4. There are (**a/an - the - Ø**) nine planets traveling around (**a/an - the - Ø**) sun.

5. Could you please pass me (**a/an - the - Ø**) salt? Sorry, I can't reach it.

6. In (**a/an - the - Ø**) 1960s, there were lots of protests against (**a/an - the - Ø**) Vietnam War.

7. (**A/an - The - Ø**) Cat likes (**a/an - the - Ø**) mice.

8. I'm going to buy (**a/an - the - Ø**) new bicycle.

9. He has been thrown out of (**a/an - the - Ø**) work, and his family is now living (**a/an - the - Ø**) hand to (**a/an - the - Ø**) mouth.

10. We rented (**a/an - the - Ø**) boat last summer in Antalya. Unfortunately, (**a/an - the - Ø**) boat hit another boat and sank.

11. I saw (**a/an - the - Ø**) strange man standing at (**a/an - the - Ø**) gate.

12. I keep sending (**a/an - the - Ø**) messages to him.

13. All of (**a/an - the - Ø**) sudden, he woke up from his coma.

14. I like to read (**a/an - the - Ø**) books about (**a/an - the - Ø**) philosophy.

15. (**A/an - The - Ø**) Love and (**a/an - the - Ø**) hate are (**a/an - the - Ø**) two extremes.

16. Your claim flies in (**a/an - the - Ø**) face of all (**a/an - the - Ø**) evidence.

17. (**A/an - The - Ø**) Tiger is (**a/an - the - Ø**) fierce animal.

18. My computer has (**a/an - the - Ø**) new sound card.

19. I don't have (**a/an - the - Ø**) car, but I'm planning to buy one soon.

20. (**A/An - The - Ø**) French are against (**a/an - the - Ø**) war in Iraq.

21. Last month we went to (**a/an - the - Ø**) wedding. (**A/An - The - Ø**) Bride was beautiful.

22. I look after (**a/an - the - Ø**) little girl and (**a/an - the - Ø**) little boy on Saturdays.

23. (**A/An - The - Ø**) Horse I bet on is still in (**a/an - the - Ø**) front.[SEP]

24. I think she is at (**a/an - the - Ø**) end of her rope.[SEP]

25. Jane bought (**a/an - the - Ø**) ring and (**a/an - the - Ø**) necklace for her mother's birthday. Her mother loved (**a/an - the - Ø**) ring but hated (**a/an - the - Ø**) necklace.

26. Steve's wedding is in (**a/an - the - Ø**) two weeks and he is getting (**a/an - the - Ø**) cold feet.[SEP]

27. There is (**a/an - the - Ø**) orange in that bowl.[SEP]

29. Sally Ride was (**a/an - the - Ø**) first American woman in (**a/an - the - Ø**) space.

30. Writing (**a/an - the - Ø**) letters is (**a/an - the - Ø**) pain in (**a/an - the - Ø**) neck for me.[SEP]

31. I would like (**a/an - the - Ø**) cup of coffee, please.

32. (**A/An - The - Ø**) Shade on this lamp is really ugly.[SEP]

33. This room has (**a/an - the - Ø**) length of 12 meters.[SEP]

34. (**A/an - The - Ø**) Water is essential for (**a/an - the - Ø**) life.[SEP]

35. I ordered (**a/an - the - Ø**) bottle of wine for us.[SEP]

36. (**A/an - The - Ø**) Telephone is (**a/an - the - Ø**) very useful invention.

37. We don't know who invented (**a/an - the - Ø**) wheel.[SEP]

38. He used to be (**a/an - the - Ø**) lawyer.

39. I'm in (**a/an - the - Ø**) mood to eat (**a/an - the - Ø**) hamburger.[SEP]

40. He is as poor as (**a/an - the - Ø**) mouse.[SEP]

41. Do you have (**a/an - the - Ø**) pen? I lost mine yesterday.[SEP]

42. He can be very dangerous. Always keep (**a/an - the - Ø**) eye on him.

43. (**A/an - The - Ø**) Rabbits can cause problems for (**a/an - the - Ø**) gardeners.[SEP]

44. I saw (**a/an - the - Ø**) funny looking dog today. I have never seen one like that before.

Appendix B - Multiple Choice Task – Key

1. Did you hear that Fred bought **a** car. However, because of some financial 1.[Type 3]

problems he had to sell **the** car. 2.[Type 2]

2. What is **the** sex of your baby? It's **a** boy! 3.[Type 2] 4.[Type 4]

3. **Ø** Language is **a** great invention of **Ø** humankind. 5.[Type 1] 6.[Type 4] 7.[Type 1]

4. There are **Ø** nine planets traveling around **the** sun. 8.[Type 4] 9.[Type 2]

5. Could you please pass me **the** salt? Sorry, I can't reach it. 10.[Type 2]

6. In **the** 1960s, there were lots of protests against **the** Vietnam War. 11.[Type 5] 12.[Type 2]

7. **A / the** Cat likes **Ø** mice. 13.[Type 1] 14.[Type 4]

8. I'm going to buy **a** new bicycle. 15.[Type 4]

9. He has been thrown out of **Ø** work, and his family is now living **Ø** hand to 16. [Type 5] 17.[Type5]

Ø mouth. 18.[Type 5]

10. We rented **a** boat last summer in Antalya. Unfortunately, **the** boat hit

19.[Type 3] another boat and sank. 20.[Type 2]

11. I saw **a** strange man standing at **the** gate. 21.[Type 3] 22.[Type 2]

12. I keep sending **Ø** messages to him. 23.[Type 3]

13. All of **a** sudden, he woke up from his coma. 24.[Type 5]

14. I like to read **Ø** books about **Ø** philosophy. 25.[Type 3] 26.[Type 1]

15. **Ø** Love and **Ø** hate are **Ø** two extremes. 27.[Type 1], 28.[Type 1], 29.[Type 4]

16. Your claim flies in **the** face of all **the / Ø** evidence. 30.[Type 5] 31.[Type 1]

17. **A / the** Tiger is **a** fierce animal. 32.[Type 1] 33.[Type 4]

18. My computer has **a** new sound card. 34.[Type 3]

19. I don't have **a** car, but I'm planning to buy one. 35.[Type 4]

20. **The** French are against **the** war in Iraq. 36.[Type 2] 37.[Type 2]

21. Last month we went to **a** wedding. **The** Bride was beautiful. 38.[Type 3], 39.[Type 2]

22. I look after **a** little girl and **a** little boy on Saturdays. 40.[Type 3] 41.[Type 3]

23. **The** Horse I bet on is still in **Ø** front. 42.[Type 2] 43.[Type 5]

24. I think she is at **the** end of her rope. 44.[Type 5]

25. Jane bought **a** ring and **a** necklace for her mother's birthday. Her mother 45.[Type 3], 46.[Type 3]

loved **the** ring but hated **the** necklace. 47.[Type 2] 48.[Type 2]

26. Steve's wedding is in **Ø** two weeks and he is getting **Ø** cold feet. 49.[Type 4] 50.[Type 5]

27. There is **an** orange in that bowl. 51.[Type 3]

28. **A / the** Paper clip comes in handy. 52.[Type 1]

29. Sally Ride was **the** first American woman in **Ø** space. 53.[Type 2] 54.[Type 5]

30. Writing **Ø** letters is **a** pain in **the** neck for me. 55.[Type 4], 56.[Type 5], 57.[Type 5]

31. I would like **a** cup of coffee, please. 58.[Type 4]

32. **The** Shade on this lamp is really ugly. 59.[Type 2]

33. This room has **a** length of 12 meters. **60.**[Type 4]

34. **Ø** Water is essential for **Ø** life. 61.[Type 1] 62.[Type 1]

35. I ordered **a** bottle of wine for us. 63.[Type 3]

36. **The** Telephone is **a** very useful invention. 64.[Type 1] 65.[Type 4]

37. We don't know who invented **the** wheel. 66.[Type 1] [SEP]

38. He used to be **a** lawyer. 67.[Type 4] [SEP]

39. I'm in **the** mood to eat **a** hamburger. 68.[Type 5] 69.[Type 3] [SEP]

40. He is as poor as **a** mouse. 70.[Type 5] [SEP]

41. Do you have **a** pen? I lost mine yesterday. 71.[Type 4] [SEP]

42. He can be very dangerous. Always keep **an** eye on him. 72.[Type 5] [SEP]

43. **Ø** Rabbits can cause problems for **Ø** gardeners. 73.[Type 1] 74.[Type 1] [SEP]

44. I saw **a** funny looking dog today. I have never seen one that before. 75.[Type 3] [SEP]

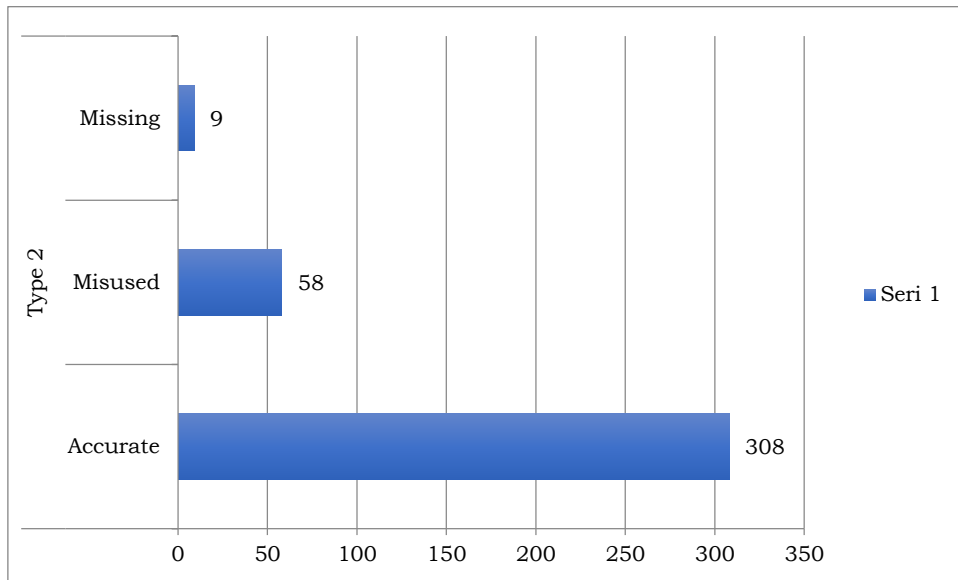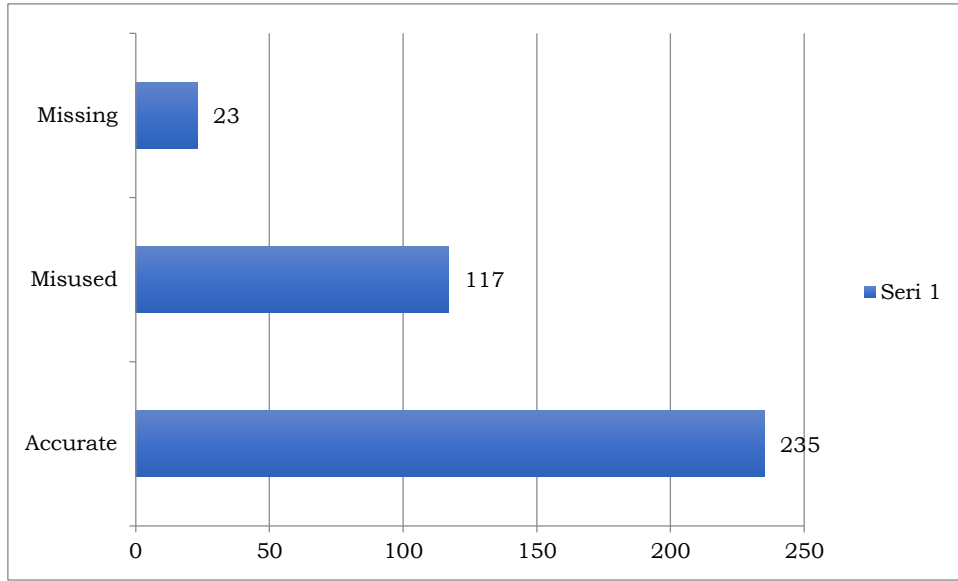**Appendix C -** Sample Pre-Intermediate Level Student Written Production Task

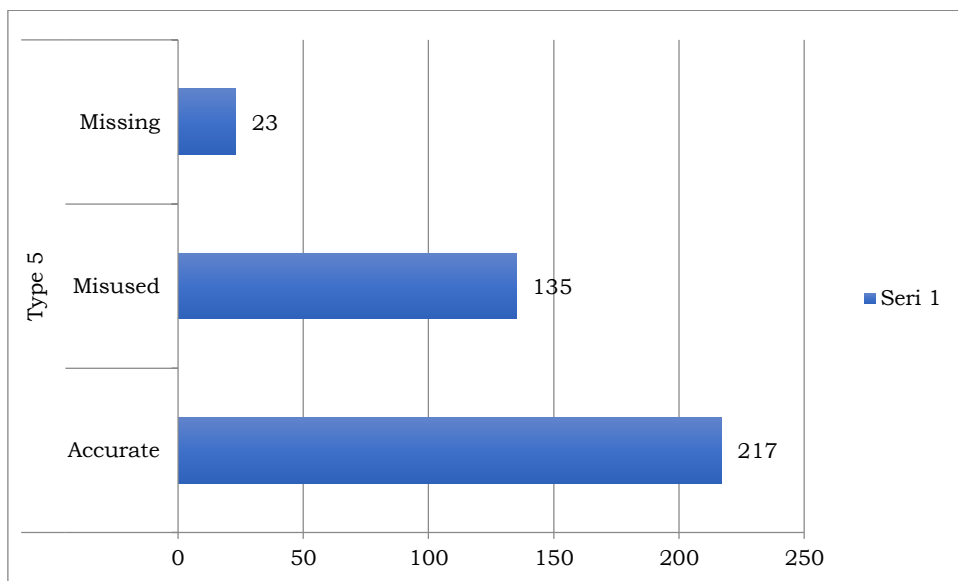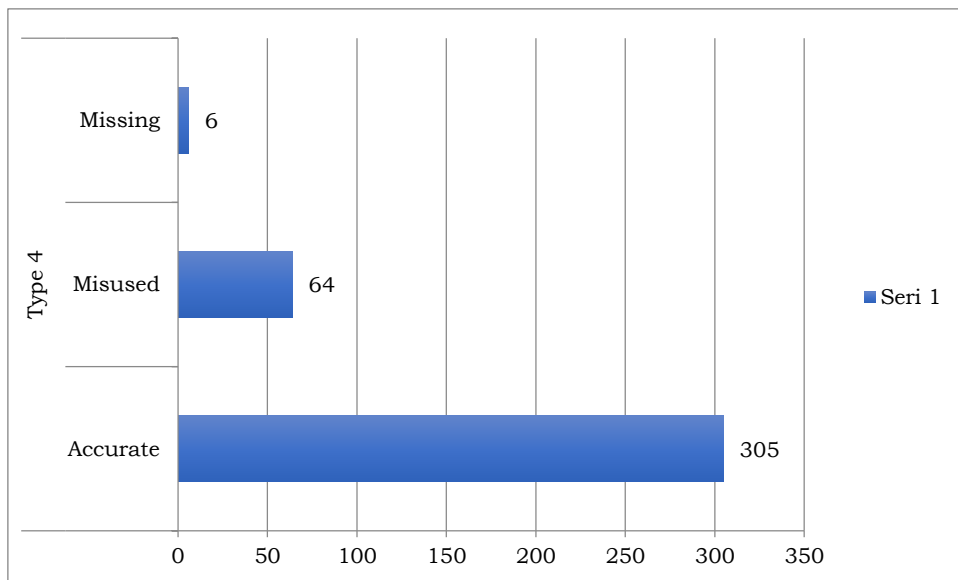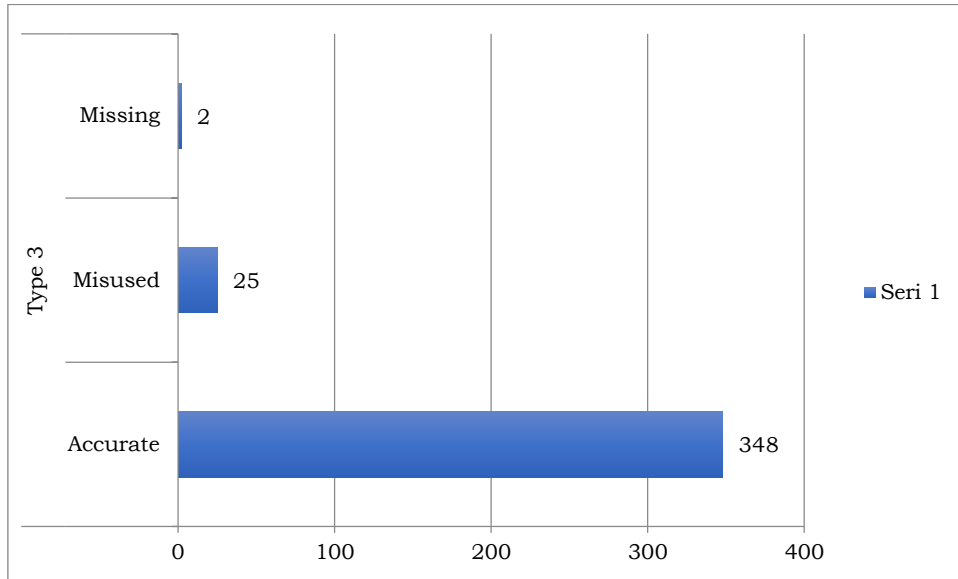| TASK 7	Writing
Description turnitin	Write a paragraph about a new experience (e.g. when you moved to a new place/ started a new course/job/hobby). Consider the following questions: 1. What did you experience? 2. Whom did you meet? 3. How did you feel? 4. Did you have any problems? What did you do about them? 5. How do you feel now? Write 100-120 words.

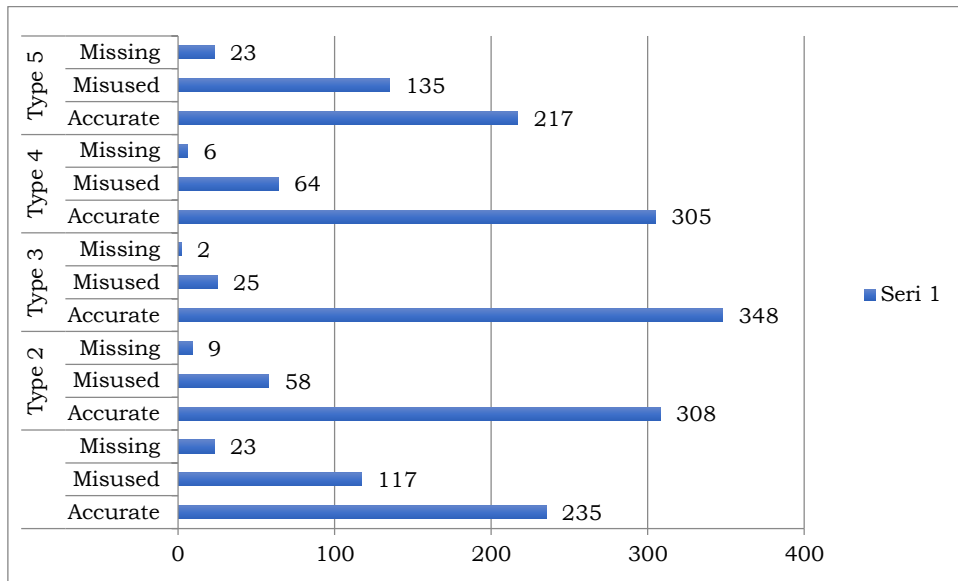**Appendix D -** Sample Intermediate Level Student Written Production Task

TASK 3	Writing a story
Description	Choose one of the story beginnings below and write a story.
	• *It was 7 pm. Erica and her son Sam were preparing dinner. They heard the doorbell ring. Before Erica could stop him, Sam ran to the door and opened it. .....* 16.
	• *I never much cared about having a boyfriend/girlfriend. I really couldn't understand why it was so important for my friends. But one day .... walked into the classroom. ....* 17.
	• *When she looked at the old photos, she realized how old she had gotten and how much time had passed - and what an interesting life she'd had. ....* 18. 19.
	Write 180-200 words.
Outcomes	Can narrate a story demonstrating a range of language within a simple linear sequence
Task Requirements	narrative tenses expressions of time, nouns with prepositions and fixed expressions linkers, *as soon as, while, during, until, by the time* appropriate punctuation organization
	Uninvited Guest It was 7 pm. Erica and her son Sam were preparing dinner. They heard the doorbell ring. Before Erica could stop him, Sam ran to the door and opened it. When he opened the door , they came across a small space shuttle. They was very shock. It was out of order and broken . When they went near its , voices were coming from behind the garden still. They went behind the garden and they were very frightened . They had never seen anything like that in their lives. It was a live but it didn't belong to the world . It could have been an alien . It had got three big eyes, two antennas and a small noise.It was not in a good situation. As soon as they realized the seriousness of the situation , they took it home. After that, they looked at its wounds, while it was regaining consciousness. It didn't make a sound until they talked. It must be multilingual because when they started talking , it was trying to communicate with them. After a few minutes , it told them what they needed to do . It wanted to bring space shuttle . It explained to them how to repair it . As soon as they repaired the machine, they heard great noise and doorbell rang. When they opened the door , they saw very big space shuttle . It sounded like this immediately bring our friend . As soon as Erica heard instruction , she brought it. She delivered it to them and they went away quickly . After the event , they have lived the most interesting moment of their lives and they have been suspicious about the reality of this event. Word count: 293

Appendix E - Multiple Choice Task Charts for Level A and Level B

Level A

Level B

Type 2
- Missing: 12
- Misused: 92
- Accurate: 271

(Seri 1)

Type 3
- Missing: 6
- Misused: 72
- Accurate: 297

(Seri 1)

Type 4
- Missing: 13
- Misused: 87
- Accurate: 275

(Seri 1)