E-ISSN: 2981-1686

Journal of Studies in Language Learning and Teaching
www.jsllt.yazd.ac.ir
JSLLT, Vol. 2, No. 1, 127–142.

Paper Type: Original Article

An Investigation of Perception and Production of English Demonstratives in Second Language Acquisition: The Case of Persian EFL Learners

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Received: 3 July, 2025 Revised: 12 October, 2025 Accepted: 17 October, 2025

Abstract

Learning English articles and demonstratives by EFL learners of articleless first languages has attracted considerable attention. However, learning them by Persian speaking English learners has not attracted the attention as it deserves. To bridge this gap, the present research investigates whether Iranian EFL learners can distinguish the English contexts in which merely a definite article or a demonstrative description can be used from the contexts that are amenable to both definite and demonstrative descriptions. It also examins whether Iranian EFL learners' perception and production of English demonstrative are influenced by their proficiency level. To do so, 75 Iranian EFL learners with different levels of proficiency were selected to complete comprehension and production tasks. The production task investigated the participants' use of definite and demonstrative descriptions across the three contexts of "unique and salient", "unique and nonsalient" and "nonunique". The comprehension task scrutinized the participants' perception of definite plurals, indefinite plurals, and demonstrative plurals. The participants' performance of the tasks was compared with English native speakers' performance on the same tasks. The results revealed that the participants could learn both definite and demonstrative descriptions; however, their performance in the use of demonstratives proved to be more target-like compared to their performance on definite descriptions. The results were also indicative of the participants' inconsistency in using *the* article and demonstrative descriptions (e.g. using both *the* and *that* in contexts merely allowing *the* or *that*). Finally, the results demonstrated that the effect of the participants' level of proficiency on their performance was governed by task type, proficiency affected learners' comprehension, and production of definite articles and determiners differently. These findings suggest that EFL instruction should emphasize the subtle distinctions between definite articles and demonstratives through targeted practice, explicit instruction, and contextualized learning activities to enhance learners' accuracy and naturalness in article use.

Keywords: determiners, definiteness, demonstratives, second language acquisition, EFL.

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I | Introduction

Extensive research has revealed that demonstratives (specifically '*that*') and how they differ from articles are quite difficult for EFL learners (Cho, 2017; Feng, 2019; Ionin et al., 2004; Ionin et al., 2008; Ionin et al., 2009; Ionin et al., 2022; Kwame & Westergaard, 2020; Robertson, 2000; Trenkic, 2000, 2007, 2008). The findings of these studies have revealed that one of the factors affecting EFL/ESL learners' acquisition of English demonstratives is that their choice of demonstrative description is influenced by other determiners such as the definite article '*the*' since they share at least one common semantic feature with demonstrative descriptions. To put it differently, in English, the *definiteness* concept can linguistically be realized at least either through the definite article *the* or through a *demonstrative description*. Accordingly, some contexts are

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10.22034/jsllt.2025.23340.1083

compatible with both the definite article and demonstrative descriptions (called the shared context). However, some contexts merely allow either the definite or the demonstrative determiners (called the unique context). For example, in contexts where the *uniqueness* condition is satisfied, demonstrative descriptions are not felicitous (Wolter, 2006), while, in some contexts where the *uniqueness* requirement on *the* is violated, demonstrative descriptions can felicitously be used, while the use of definite descriptions is infelicitous. Teasing these contexts apart has been proved to be challenging for EFL/ESL learners (Ionin, et al., 2012). For example, in (1a) below, given that there is more than one car in the discourse, the *'uniqueness'* requirement of *the* is not satisfied leading to the infelicity of using *the*. The same holds true for (1b); using a definite article in this sentence also leads to infelicity because two men exist in the primary established set and *the man* cannot 'select a unique referent'. However, since there is a *pointing sign* in (1a) and "car" is *the most recently mentioned* referent, a demonstrative description can felicitously be used.

(1) a. In a car exhibition [speaker refers to a car]: That/this/the car is fantastic[1].

b. A man came from the back door. Another man came from the front door: That/this/the man was talking on the phone.

Hence, the present research aims at the comprehension and production of descriptions both in their *unique* and *shared* situations by Iranian EFL learners. In fact, using both production and comprehension tasks, the study investigates whether Iranian EFL learners can distinguish English contexts that are compatible with both the definite article *the* and the demonstrative *that* from the contexts that are compatible only with the demonstrative (the non-unique category). The other issue the present study aims to examine is whether Iranian EFL learners with different levels of proficiency perform differently in the comprehension and production tasks. Accordingly, the following are posited as the research questions:

1) Do Iranian EFL learners comprehend and produce the differences between definite and demonstrative features appropriately?
2) Is there any statistically significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' comprehension and production of definite and demonstrative features?
3) Does proficiency significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' comprehension of definite and demonstrative features?
4) Does proficiency significantly affect Iranian EFL learners' production of definite and demonstrative features?

II. Literature review

2.1. Semantic universals involved in the learning of demonstratives

In the literature, "Specificity", "presuppositionality", and "definiteness" are among the universal semantic features regarded to be very effective in learning article systems (Fodor & Sag, 1982; Hawkins, 1991; Ionin, 2003; Roberts, 2002; Wolter, 2006). According to Fodor and Sag (1982), "Specificity" was initially regarded as the speaker's intention to refer to. To examine the notion of "reference", Fodor and Sag (1982) differentiated between two different conceptions of the indefinite article *a:* a "referential" and a "quantificational" reading. For example, in (2a), "a boy" has a referential reading [+ specific] because the speaker knows the person about whom she is speaking. However, in (2b), "a boy" has a quantificational reading in that the speaker does not have the intention to refer to any specific person.

(2) a. A boy asked me out in the park (however I'm hesitant to tell you about his identity)
b. A boy is in the lady's restroom (however I did not go there to find out about his identity).
(Fodor & Sag, 1982, p. 370)

Ionin (2003) demonstrated that the notion of *noteworthiness* should be added to Fodor and Sag's (1982) conception of the indefinite article *a* in English. In fact, she referred to the meaning of referential *this* in

[1]. The asterisk sign before sentences indicates grammatically incorrect sentences.

English to justify the necessity of incorporating the *noteworthiness* condition to the felicity of referential or the specific readings of the English indefinite article *a*. "Noteworthiness" refers to the pragmatic property by which a referent is deemed especially significant or salient in the discourse, making it a suitable candidate for marking with demonstratives such as "this" or "that". According to Ionin (2003), the "noteworthiness" and the "speaker intent to refer" are the necessary conditions for the felicitous use of a specific indefinite determiner such as *this* in English.

The other semantic factor affecting the first and second language acquisition of demonstratives is "presuppositionality" which can be defined as "set membership". Schaeffer and de Villiers (2000, P. 201) argued that children overuse the definite article *the* in English when they want to talk about an object which was previously referred to (e.g. saying *the cat* when a set of four cats was mentioned in the previous context). Ko et al. (2005) reexamined Maratsos' (1976) data and concluded that young children regard *the* as indicating the existence presupposition instead of the uniqueness/maximality presupposition. Studies conducted on the learning of English articles by speakers of other languages have also emphasized the role of presuppositionality in the L2 learning of articles (Ionin, & Wexler, 2005; Ko, 2005; Perovic et al., 2005).

Ko et al.'s (2010) definition of presupposition based on *existence of presupposition* minimally differs from the semantics of definiteness. Presuppositionality can be regarded as the *existence* presupposition without the *uniqueness* presupposition. In this regard, Diesing (1992) contends that *assertion* of existence differs from the *preposition* of existence. The following examples, in which (3a) *asserts* the existence of ghosts and (3b) *presupposes* the existence of ghosts, explicate the difference.

(3) a. There are a number of cats in her room.

b. A number of cats are in the room; the others are in the yard. (Diesing, 1992)

Definiteness, requiring not only the *existence* presupposition but also the *uniqueness/maximality* presupposition, is regarded as the other semantic concept affecting the learning of articles in first and second language. In fact, it "is a semantic feature which makes reference to the knowledge state of both the speaker and the hearer concerning a unique discourse referent" (Ko et al., 2008, p. 118). Furthermore, using Fodor and Sag's (1982) formal conception as their point of departure, Ionin et al. (2004, p. 5) explain *definiteness* as follows: "If a Determiner Phrase (DP) of the form [D NP] is [+definite], then the speaker and the hearer presuppose the existence of a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP".

Based on another conception, *definiteness* is concerned with whether the referents can be identified in context (Trenkic, 2009). Thus, it can be argued that a given discourse referent is definite "if the speaker intends to refer to it, and expects the referent to be uniquely identifiable to the hearer" (Trenkic, 2009, p. 123). In fact, a uniquely recognizable and definite object needs to *exist* and be *unique* in "one of the pragmatically delimited domains" (Trenkic, 2009, p. 117). In this regard, Lyons (1999) maintains that *definiteness* helps the hearer to organize the information in discourse.

Definiteness is also conceived of as "something that is already familiar at the current stage of the conversation. An indefinite article is used to introduce a new referent" (Heim, 2003, p. 342). As it can be seen, based on Heim (2003), definite article is only allowed in situations in which the referent is referred to in the preceding discourse and it is recognized both by the speaker and the hearer.

2.2. English determiners

Demonstratives, articles, and quantifiers can be subsumed under the rubric of determiners. Determiners restrict the potential and possible referents by the semantic link they establish with the noun phrases that follow them. According to Quirk and Greenbaum (1990), four demonstrative adjectives can be identified in English. Adger (2003) argues that these four demonstrative adjectives can be classified into proximal and distal demonstratives. Proximal demonstratives are deployed to refer to NPs that are near the speaker (this & these), while distal demonstratives refer to NPs that are distant from the speaker (that & those). Bruge (2002) regards the "referring feature" as the most distinguishing feature of demonstratives.

Some specific contexts are amenable to both definite and demonstrative descriptions. They can be used interchangeably, but they serve clearly different functions. However, in some contexts, demonstrative descriptions can be used felicitously, while definite description use is infelicitous. This holds true not only for deictic contexts but also for anaphoric ones. As for the semantics of demonstrative descriptions, different theories are mentioned in the literature. However, a common thread running through all of them is that "*uniqueness*" is the central semantic feature of both definite and demonstrative descriptions (Hawkins, 1991; King, 2001; Wolter, 2006).

(4) a. There was a bed in the house. I slept on that bed.

b. There were four beds in the house. I slept on that bed.

c. There were five beds in the house. We slept on those beds. [= all 5 beds]

According to Hawkins (1991), the uniqueness condition, which is common to both definite and demonstrative descriptions, is more restrictive for demonstrative descriptions than for definite descriptions. Regarding demonstratives, being in the preceding context or being textually mentioned satisfies the uniqueness condition (refer to the sentences in example 4). In this connection, Roberts (2002) also emphasizes that the uniqueness requirement is common to both definite and demonstrative descriptions; nonetheless, demonstrative descriptions possess the additional requirement of "demonstration". Roberts (2002) further claims that definite descriptions can be used felicitously in every context in which the "existence" and "uniqueness" requirements are fulfilled. On the contrary, for the felicitous use of demonstrative descriptions, characterized as being more marked, the 'demonstration" requirement also needs to be satisfied. In sentences allowing both definite and demonstrative descriptions, there should be a rationale for selecting either definite or demonstrative descriptions. For example, definite descriptions (the less marked member) can be replaced with the more marked member, (demonstrative descriptions) in sentences where the demonstration requirement is also fulfilled.

2.3. Empirical research on the second language acquisition of English demonstratives

Having provided a general overview of the semantic aspects of demonstratives, in the following, this study will shed light on some of the studies that investigated the acquisition of demonstratives by second language learners of articleless languages.

To begin with, Kume and Marsden (2022) attempted to shed some light on the second language acquisition of the definiteness marking function of the Japanese demonstrative *sono* by the second language learners with Korean and English first languages. The Korean demonstrative system entails a demonstrative (i.e., *ku*) with features that are in line with *sono*. However, English lacks such a demonstrative, and its definite article *the* and demonstrative *that* have only some of the features of the Japanese (*sono*) and Korean (*ku*) demonstratives. The finding of the study showed that, although the demonstrative *sono* "optionally" encodes definiteness, Japanese native speakers prefer to use it for marking explicit definiteness. The results also revealed that, although the second languages learners of Japanese with Korean and English first languages exhibit some degree of awareness of the features on Japanese *sono* and encounter no problem in acquiring its main property, they do not have nativelike awareness of the uses of this Japanese demonstrative.

In a related study, Kim and Ionin (2022) examined the acquisition of English articles by Korean EFL learners and the role of the transfer of Korean demonstratives in this process. They showed that, when participants were forced to choose among articles, their performance aligned with that of native speakers in anaphoric contexts, where they correctly used *the*; however, in some contexts, they overused *a*. This indicates that, for Korean EFL learners, definiteness is associated with previous mention. In fact, both native speakers and Korean EFL learners exhibited similar patterns.

Furthermore, Ionin et al. (2020) investigated whether the acquisition of English articles by adult EFL learners of Korean and Mandarin Chinese, both articleless languages, is influenced by the transfer of demonstratives from their first languages. The researchers found that, although native speakers of Korean and Mandarin show different preferences, the performances of Korean and Mandarin EFL learners in English are similar. In fact, the results of this study confirm that the semantics of demonstratives are not transferred by EFL learners with articleless first languages into the acquisition of the English article system.

Additionally, Kwame and Westergaard (2020) investigated Dagbani EFL learners' acquisition of English articles. The article system of this language differs from English in the following ways: it has two articles for expressing definiteness, neither of which encodes indefiniteness, and it can also use a zero article to encode definiteness, indefiniteness and genericity. The findings revealed that the definiteness (instead of specificity) was the driving force behind the participants' choice of articles. In fact, no fluctuation was observed between specificity and definiteness. The results also revealed that the acquisition of indefinite articles was more challenging for the participants than that of definite articles, with the acquisition of generic articles being the most difficult.

In line with previous research, Cho (2017) pursued examining the learning of English articles by adult Korean EFL students since the feature bundle of English article *the* is [+definite, +/anaphoric], while the Korean *ku* is characterized as having the feature bundle [+definite, +anaphoric]. In fact, Korean, as a language without articles, distinguishes two types of definites through marking the anaphoric form by the demonstrative *ku* (meaning *that*). Accordingly, the above difference between the feature bundles of English and Korean articles and demonstratives might cause some problems for Korean EFL learners when learning the English definite article, *the*. The results ascertained that the difference in feature bundles significantly cause problems for the acquisition of articles. This is contrary to the argument that determiners with similar feature bundles are more difficult to acquire.

A cursory glance at the above remarks reveals that the acquisition of demonstratives proves particularly challenging for speakers of articleless languages. However, little research has yet explored this issue in Persian, a language that lacks a definite article. Accordingly, the present study seeks to address this gap by examining the use of English demonstratives among Persian EFL learners.

III. Method

3.1. Participants

One hundred fifty Iranian EFL learners were selected for this study. The participants, aged 18 to 35, were B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. students studying English literature, translation, and teaching at the University of Yazd, Iran. They were classified into lower intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced groups according to their scores in the Oxford Placement Test (OPT).

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Comprehension Task

The first instrument used in this study was a forced choice written elicitation task, taken from Ionin et al. (2012). This task consists of 32 questions, each comprising a very short story with four or five sentences (as seen in sentence 5). In one of the sentences, neither at the beginning nor at the end, a blank is provided. The participants must fill in the blank with an appropriate determiner. They were given four options: two definite determiners (*the* and *that*) and two indefinite determiners (*a* and *one*) (as shown in Table 1). The task had two parts. First, the participants had to determine which of the four options was suitable for filling in the blank (by selecting from Table 1). Second, they had to answer the question in example 6 by choosing the best option for the blank in sentence 5. A sample of this task is provided in Table 1 and sentences 5 and 6.

5. John was at home, and he could not find anything to eat. He was very hungry. Hence, he went to a restaurant, and bought a pizza. Then he returned home and ate____ pizza.

Table 1. The choices in the production task

Determiners	Yes	No
The		
That		
A		
One		

6. Which choice is the best one for the blank?

A. the B. a C. one D. that

The items of the production task can be regarded under the rubric of the following three categories, namely (a) a unique and salient category (an entity that is unique due to its distinctiveness or prominence in the context and is easily identifiable without ambiguity for the listener or reader), (b) a unique and non-salient category (an entity that is unique in a given situation but lacks immediate prominence or importance in the discourse context), and (c) a non-unique category (entities that are not distinguished as the only one of their kind in a given context. Unlike unique entities, which have a specific referent identifiable to both speaker and listener, non-unique entities do not carry this singularity. Instead, they may refer to one of many possible instances of a type or category, and their identity may depend on additional information or context provided in the discourse). Half of the questions of the production task (n = 16) were framed to address definite/demonstrative descriptions, and the rest were phrased to address indefinite descriptions (totaling 32 items). It is also worth noting that all of the questions addressed singular NPs. The 16 test items addressing definite/demonstrative items were subdivided into four major classes (including the distracter category besides the three categories of "unique and salient", "unique and

nonsalient" and "nonunique"). Hence, each category was addressed by four items. The three test categories in which the target NP had the anaphoric reading were focused on in the present research.

3.2.2. Picture-based production task

The production task, as its name indicates, addresses Iranian EFL learners' generation of *definite* and *demonstrative* descriptions. In this picture-based task, the participants were provided with images of various objects (the participants were shown images of various objects, each containing 12 items, six from one category and six from another). They were also instructed to inscribe figures onto these items. Every question had four sentences positioned on the top of the images: a statement identifying the items and three directive sentences requesting the participants to inscribe geometric figures. A sample is provided in (7) and a more detailed one in Appendix I.

7. Here are five pencils and five apples.
Please draw arrows below three pencils.
Now, please draw rectangles around the pencils.
Now, please draw a circle around one apple.

The test consisted of 40 questions, classified into three plural cases: (a) definite plural, (b) demonstrative plural, and (c) indefinite plural. Four test items were allocated to each of these conditions, totaling 12 items. For the examples of each condition, refer to Appendix II.

3.3. Procedures

The participants were required to perform the forced choice elicitation test and the picture-based test. Before being engaged with the tasks, the participants were provided with the required instruction both in English and Persian. The researchers were also present during the administration of the tasks, and the participants were persuaded to ask for further clarifications if they encountered any problems in comprehending the instructions or in completing the tasks. After the completion of each task, the participants took a break so that they could get ready to go to the next task. As for the order of providing the participants with the tasks, the picture-based task was administered during the final stage of the study because it was more interesting than the other tasks. Five different sessions were considered for administrating the tests so that the participants could choose the sessions that suit them best. It should be mentioned that, although the participants were provided with different sessions to choose from, each individual was required to perform the two tasks during one session.

3.4. Data Analysis

After the answers provided by the participants were coded, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used for data analysis. Two types of analyses were conducted: first, a mixed between-within ANOVA was performed to compare the impacts of contexts and the participants' level of proficiency. Second, a paired samples t-test was carried out to compare the results of the comprehension and production tasks.

IV. Results

To compare the performance of the participants with different proficiency levels across different categories of the production task, descriptive statistics was used. Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics of the answers of Iranian EFL learners to the production task.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of different levels of proficiency across different categories

Proficiency	Categories	Mean	SD	N
Lower-intermediate	Unique and Salient	0.46	0.26	18
	Unique and Nonsalient	0.48	0.40	18
	NonUnique	0.86	0.25	18
Upper-intermediate	Unique and Salient	0.54	0. 11	27
	Unique and Nonsalient	0.56	0. 38	27
	NonUnique	0.75	0. 33	27
Advanced	Unique and Salient	0.77	0. 8	30
	Unique and Nonsalient	0.87	0. 15	30
	NonUnique	0.84	0. 26	30
Total	Unique and Salient	61.33		
	Unique and Nonsalient	66.33		
	NonUnique	79.66		

As shown, the performances of the lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate participants are more similar to each other than to that of the advanced participants across different categories. Additionally, in the non-unique situation, the lower-intermediate participants outperformed their upper-intermediate and advanced counterparts. With respect to the unique and salient and unique and non-salient categories, the advanced learners performed better than their lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate counterparts (see Table 2). In the next step, a mixed between-within subjects ANOVA was used to examine if the differences observed in the above table were statistically significant. The results are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Mixed ANOVA for the Use Test

	Wlik's Lambda	F	DF	Error df	sig	Eta squared
Context	.49	.29	2	69	.001	.45
Proficiency		6.98	2	68	.001	.15
Context & proficiency	.75	5.01	4	139	.001	.11

The initial examinations were conducted to make sure that the variances are homogenous. Given that the significance in the Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was .03 (which is greater than .001), we can argue that the mentioned assumption is satisfied. The findings were indicative of a significant influence for context [Wilks' Lambda = .49, F (2, 69) = .29, p = 0.001, partial Eta squared = .45].

A significant influence was also observed for proficiency [F (2, 68) = 6.98, p = 0.001, partial eta squared = 0.15]. Accordingly, we can argue that students with varying English proficiency perform very differently. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that the interactive effect of context and proficiency was statistically significant [Wilks' Lambda = .75, F (4, 139) = 5.01, p = 0.001, partial Eta squared = .11].

In order to find the reason for the observed difference, post-hoc comparisons by Scheffe adjustment were performed. The findings proved that subjects' performance was considerably inconsistent in different contexts. As seen in Table 2, the mean score for the results of the nonunique situation (M = 79.66) was significantly better than both the unique and salient context (M = 61.33) and the unique and nonsalient context (M = 66.33).

The results of the post-hoc test of proficiency level were indicative of the significant effect of proficiency only for 'unique and nonsalient'. In fact, the difference between the upper-intermediate and advanced participants was statistically significant (mean difference = 30, p = .001). Likewise, the results of the lower-intermediate and advanced participants significantly diverged (mean difference = 40, p = .001). However, the lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups did not differ significantly (mean difference = 09, p = .63). Table 4 shows the results of the participants with different levels of proficiency on the comprehension part of the test. As it can be seen, the performance of all the participants was acceptable across different linguistic contexts since the mean accuracy scores for different contexts was from 88 (demonstrative plural) to 99 (indefinite plural).

Table 4. The participants' accuracy scores in the understanding test

Condition/proficiency	Lower-intermediate	Upper-intermediate	Advanced	Total (context)
Definite Plural	0.95	0.88	0.95	0.92
Demonstrative Plural	0.81	0.85	0.91	0.85
Indefinite Plural	1.00	0.98	0.97	0.98
Total (Proficiency)	0.92	0. 90	0.94	0.91

A mixed between-within subjects ANOVA was used to investigate the influence of the context and the participants proficiency on their performance in the comprehension tasks. The findings, represented in Table 5, show that context can significantly influence participants' performance in the comprehension test [Wilks' Lambda = .78, F (2, 70) = 9, p = 0.00, Eta squared = .21]. Nevertheless, the results revealed that the interrelationship of context and proficiency was not statistically significant [Wilks' Lambda = .89, F (4, 141) = 1.89, p = 0.11, partial Eta squared = .03]. Furthermore, the effect of the participants' level of proficiency was statistically insignificant [F (2, 71) = .97, p = 0.38]. Accordingly, we can infer that the participants across different proficiency levels did not significantly differ in their performance on the definite, demonstrative and indefinite contexts of the understanding test.

Table 5. Mixed ANOVA of the understanding test

	Wilks' Lambda	F	Df Df	Error df	Sig.	Eta squared
Context	0.78	9.00	2	70	0.00	0.21
Proficiency		0.97	2	71	0.38	0.03
Context and proficiency	0.89	1.89	4	141	0.11	0.06

The initial examinations were conducted to make sure that the variances are homogenous. Given that the significance in the Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was .03 (which is greater than .001), we can argue that the mentioned assumption is satisfied. The findings were indicative of a significant influence for context [Wilks' Lambda = .49, F (2, 69) = .29, p = 0.001, partial Eta squared = .45].

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Scheffe adjustment was done for the pairwise comparisons of the findings. The results showed a significant difference between the definite plural and demonstrative plural conditions (p = 0.03). A statistically significant difference was likewise observed between the demonstrative plural and indefinite plural conditions (p = 0.00). Nonetheless, a statistically significant difference was not seen between the participants' scores in the definite plural and indefinite plural conditions (p =.06). Finally, the findings of the production and comprehension tasks were juxtaposed to investigate possible differences between the production and comprehension tests. Hence, a paired samples t-test was performed. The findings point to an insignificant difference between the participants' score in definite and demonstrative contexts in production and comprehension tests (p > 0.05).

To provide an inferential statistics summary, the researchers carried out a mixed ANOVA for the production task which revealed several statistically significant effects. First, a significant main effect for context was found (Wilks' Lambda = .49, p = .001), with a large effect size (partial η^2 = .45). This indicates that the participants' performance differed significantly across the three linguistic categories (Unique and Salient, Unique and Nonsalient, and NonUnique). Post-hoc comparisons with a Scheffé adjustment confirmed that performance in the NonUnique context was significantly superior to performance in both the Unique and Salient and Unique and Nonsalient contexts.

Second, a significant main effect of proficiency was observed (F(2, 68) = 6.98, p = .001), with a medium effect size (partial η^2 = .15), confirming that the overall performance differed significantly among the three proficiency groups. The post-hoc analysis for the interaction specified that these proficiency differences were significant specifically within the 'Unique and Nonsalient' context. Here, the advanced group significantly outperformed both the upper-intermediate (Mean diff. = .30, p = .001) and lower-intermediate (mean diff. = .40, p = .001) groups. No significant difference was found between the lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate groups in this context.

Finally, the analysis showed a statistically significant interaction effect between context and proficiency (Wilks' Lambda = .75, p = .001, partial η^2 = .11). This signifies that the effect of the linguistic context on performance was not uniform but depended on the participants' proficiency level.

For the comprehension task, the mixed ANOVA yielded different results. A significant main effect for context was found (Wilks' Lambda = .78, p = .00, partial η^2 = .21). The post-hoc tests indicated that performance in the Demonstrative Plural context was significantly lower than performance in both the Definite Plural (p = .03) and Indefinite Plural (p = .00) contexts. Conversely, there was no significant main effect for proficiency (F(2, 71) = 0.97, p = .38), meaning the three proficiency groups did not differ significantly in their overall comprehension accuracy. The interaction between context and proficiency was also not statistically significant.

A final paired samples t-test comparing the performances on the production versus comprehension tasks for definite and demonstrative contexts revealed no statistically significant difference. This suggests that, for these contexts, the participants' ability to comprehend was not significantly different from their ability to produce the correct forms (p =0.98).

V. Discussion

5.1. The effect of definites and demonstratives on task types

The present study primarily aimed at scrutinizing whether Iranian EFL learners can distinguish English definite and demonstrative descriptions; accordingly, a number of analyses were performed on the data gained from the comprehension and production tasks.

As the results demonstrated, the subjects' understanding of the definite descriptions was better than their comprehension of the demonstrative descriptions to a limited degree (mean difference = .07). The observed dissimilarity can be ascribed to the possibility of using both *all* and *same* in definite contexts in contrast to the only one possible choice (i.e., the *same* choice) for descriptive contexts. This leads to gaining statistically higher percentage for the definite condition.

Regarding Iranian EFL learners' performance in the production task, it can generally be argued that they can identify definite descriptions from demonstratives on both "unique" situations of the category test (i.e., "unique and salient" and "unique and nonsalient"). In fact, Iranian EFL learners' preferences were in line with English native speakers' preferences, as depicted by Ionin et al. (2012). Nevertheless, it should be noted that Iranian EFL learners' performance cannot be envisaged as being completely target-like. The reason is that the participants mostly used *the* or *that* instead of each other in sentences where native counterparts merely opted for *the* or *that* and regarded the other choice as being incorrect (as reported in Ionin et al., 2012).

In the comprehension task, the participants across different proficiency levels of lower-intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced consistently regarded definite descriptions as being used for salient objects (similar to demonstrative descriptions), while English native speakers performed based on the maximal discourse set in such contexts (as shown by Ionin et al., 2012). These findings can be adopted as evidence for arguing that Iranian EFL learners' performance is affected by transfer from their first language. To be more precise, these findings lend us the required ground to argue that Iranian EFL learners consider *ān as* being equal to English *the* and *that* (Diessel, 1999; Dixon, 2003). However, their choices substantiated that they are learning to overcome the observed transfer from their first language. They prefer to use *the* (i.e., the unmarked choice) for both 'unique' categories (i.e., "unique and salient" and "unique and nonsalient"). With respect to the comprehension of definite and demonstrative descriptions, it should be noted that the traces of regarding *the* as equivalent to *ān* can be found even among advanced participants since even advanced participants have not completely abandoned regarding *the* as the equivalent to *ān*.

To explicate the role of transfer from Persian, we can argue that if Iranian EFL learners considered *the* as being the equivalent of *ān* (i.e., if they regard maximal for definiteness as it is regarded for demonstratives), they should select the salient context as the related context. According to Ionin et al. (2012), English native speakers significantly select *all* choices, while they performed on the *same* items too. The comparison of English native speakers' performance, as provided by Ionin et al. (2012), with Iranian EFL students' performance, as obtained in this research, confirms that even though the participants acted on both *all* and *same* items in answering the second part of the questions of the understanding test, they preferred to choose the *same* items. Hence, it can be maintained that this finding is indicative of some traces of first language transfer because it suggests that they have regarded *the* as being the equivalent of *ān* in Persian.

As to the "nonunique" category, the participants of the present study tended to select the more marked choice (i.e., *that)*. However, they also infelicitously opted for *the*. This observation likewise suggests that Iranian EFL learners' performance conforms to English native speakers' performance (as depicted by Ionin et al., 2012). However, their performance still lags behind the native speakers' performance which can again be ascribed to transfer from their first language (Persian).

Accordingly, the preceding remarks provide us the required ground to contend that although Persian lacks a definiteness marking article (like *the* in English) and merely accommodates demonstrative descriptions, Iranian EFL learners have managed to comprehend English definite and demonstrative descriptions like English native speakers. The participants' mean score for the demonstrative context, although significantly less than their mean score on the definite context, was also very high (mean = .85). Accordingly, it can be argued that they have acquired the difference between English definite and demonstrative descriptions. The findings also showed that the participants' production of definite descriptions was significantly different (mean = .66). The mean score of the participants' comprehension of demonstrative descriptions was obtained to be .85, and their mean score for the use of these forms was obtained to be .80. While comprehension was strong (mean = .85 for demonstratives and .80 for production), the slightly lower production scores (mean = .66 for definites) suggest that while learners understand the distinction, applying it accurately in spontaneous speech may be more challenging. This aligns with theories of second language acquisition where receptive knowledge precedes productive mastery (Ellis, 2008).

With respect to the demonstrative condition of the comprehension task, the results of the research by Ionin et al. (2012) showed that English native speakers had merely performed on the *same* items. Even though the participants of our study had erroneously chosen *ll* items as the related set in this condition, they tended to perform on *same* objects higher than the chance level. In this condition, likewise, transfer of first language demonstratives can be construed as the reason for the observed result.

According to Hawkins (1987), uniqueness/ maximality is determined based on the more restrictive parameter for demonstratives than for definite descriptions. However, given that EFL learners have not completely learnt these restrictions on demonstratives, they deploy *the* or *that* interchangeably in sentences in which English native speakers deploy only *the* or *that*. This explicates why the participants of the present study incorrectly performed on *all* items in the demonstrative condition in which native

English speakers merely select *same* items but have correctly performed on *all* or *same* items in definite cases in which native speakers also select both *all* and *same* items.

In spite of the above differences observed between Iranian EFL learners' performance and English native speakers' performance, as depicted by Ionin et al. (2012), the performance of the participants of the present study was to some extent, however not completely, nativelike in comprehending definite and demonstrative descriptions.

Hence, it could be argued that Iranian EFL learners have successfully managed to use both definite and demonstrative descriptions in English. However, as the results suggest, their performance in the understanding and using demonstrative descriptions was better than their performance in the understanding and using definite descriptions in that the average of the participants' mean scores on the comprehension and production of demonstrative descriptions was .84 while their average mean accuracy on the comprehension and production of definite descriptions was .77. This finding is also corroborative of the contention that transfer from the meaning of first language demonstratives has contributed to the participants' more accurate performance in sentences needing demonstrative descriptions than contexts needing definite descriptions. This finding is similar to the results obtained by Trenki (2009) (see the Literature Review).

To substantiate the claim regarding transfer from Persian, we can refer to the following three criteria Jarvis (2000) establishes for investigating the presence of transfer: (a) within-group similarity, (b) between-6group similarity, and (c) parallels between learners' L1 and interlanguage. Intragroup homogeneity refers to consistency in language use within some students with the same first language. Intergroup heterogeneity emphasizes the differences in FT linguistic patterns between groups with different native languages. Lastly, parallels between the first language and interlanguage answers focus on the overlap between learners' native language structures and the forms they produce in the target language, suggesting potential transfer effects.

As for the first criterion, the results of the present research confirmed that traces of transfer from the meaning of Persian demonstratives can be discerned in the performance of all participants, regardless of their proficiency level. In fact, as mentioned above, the results provided compelling evidence for the positive transfer from the participants' first language (Persian) which led to their correctly selecting to perform on the *same* items (also *all* items) in definite sentences in which English native speakers also perform similarly. Moreover, the results offered persuasive evidence for negative transfer in the demonstrative condition in that the participants infelicitously performed on *all* items in this condition while English native speakers merely opted for *same* items. Such contentions are suggestive of an intragroup homogeneity or the fulfillment of the first criterion.

With respect to the second criterion (i.e., intergroup heterogeneity), as the results demonstrated, the participants' performance was not on a par with their native speakers' counterpart, as provided by Ionin et al. (2012). Although the participants' performance was relatively nativelike, as mentioned above, they incorrectly selected *all* items in demonstrative conditions while English native speakers selected *same* items only.

Regarding the final criterion, we can refer to the participants' comparable answers in Persian (i.e. the participants' L1) and in English (i.e. their interlanguage) and argue that the third criterion is satisfied. Also, the findings gained from the eleven Persian native speakers provided in the research by Rezaei and Alishvandi (2015) demonstrated that Persian native speakers deploy *ān* in both definite and demonstrative conditions. Moreover, they acted on *same* items in both definite and demonstrative sentences in which they were taught to perform on *Xha,* i.e., definite descriptions deploying bare NPs) and *ān Xha,* i.e., demonstratives (Dabir Moghaddam, 1992; Ghomeshi, 2003; Karimi, 1990).

5.2. The discussion of the tasks

With respect to production, as mentioned above, the results suggested that the participants' performance was significant. The production task accommodated three contexts and, only in one of them, both definite and demonstrative descriptions could felicitously be used without leading to the ungrammaticality of the sentence. Other contexts merely lent themselves to either definite description or demonstrative description use.

The results of the mixed between-within ANOVA were suggestive of a significant main effect for context. The participants' best performance was observed in the shared context, (i.e., the "unique and salient" category (mean = .92). This finding suggested that both items were felicitous in this context.

The findings reported above from the production tasks revealed significant patterns in how participants used definite and demonstrative descriptions across different contexts. The t-tests confirmed that participants' performance was not random, indicating a systematic application of definiteness and demonstrative reference in Persian. Notably, only one context, the "shared" condition, allowed for the felicitous use of both definite and

demonstrative descriptions without causing ungrammaticality. In contrast, the other contexts strictly required either a definite or demonstrative form, demonstrating that Persian speakers are sensitive to contextual constraints when selecting referring expressions.

Furthermore, the mixed between within ANOVA analysis highlighted a significant main effect for context, with the highest accuracy observed in the "unique and salient" (shared) context (mean = 0.92). This result aligns with theoretical expectations, as this context naturally accommodates both definite (the) and demonstrative (that) descriptions without pragmatic infelicity. The strong performance in this condition suggests that Persian speakers intuitively recognize contexts where either form is permissible, while more restrictive contexts (where only one form is appropriate) may require greater cognitive effort or linguistic precision. These findings contribute to our understanding of how definiteness and demonstrative reference operate in Persian, emphasizing the interplay between syntax, pragmatics, and contextual salience.

As for the context which was merely amenable to definite description use (i.e., the "unique and nonsalient" category), although the participants' mean score was the lowest (mean = 63.6), their performance was significant. If a very strict cutoff score (80%, for example) is not stipulated for the acquisition of definite and demonstrative descriptions (70%, for example), we can argue that definite descriptions are somehow acquired in terms of their production.

Regarding the "nonunique" category which is characterized by merely allowing demonstrative descriptions, the participants' mean score was obtained to be 81.6. The participants' performance in the production of demonstrative descriptions was much better than their performance in the production of definite descriptions.

The observation that the participants' performance in the comprehension of demonstrative descriptions was better than their performance in demonstrative description production can be accounted for in two ways. Firstly, we can argue that, during the language learning process, comprehension precedes production (Diesing, 1992; Heim, 2003). Secondly, the observed difference can be attributed to the difference between the production and comprehension tasks since, in the production task, the subjects were forced to choose between a demonstrative and a definite determiner. However, the comprehension task is bereft of this obligation and the participants are not forced to choose either a demonstrative or a definite description. Hence, the different nature of the production and comprehension tasks can be invoked as a reason justifying the observed asymmetry between the participants' performance in the production and comprehension tasks of demonstrative descriptions. In fact, the observed difference can be conceived of as resulting from methodological aspects of the research (i.e., its instruments) which should be considered when comparing the production and comprehension of second language by EFL learners.

5.3. The effect of proficiency on definites and demonstratives

The findings of this study revealed a notable dissociation between comprehension and production in second language learners' acquisition of definite and demonstrative descriptions in English, with proficiency playing a differential role depending on task type. This aligns with previous research (Ellis, 2008) suggesting that receptive and productive linguistic knowledge develop at different rates, often influenced by L1 transfer, input frequency, and cognitive processing demands.

In the production task, advanced learners demonstrated significantly greater accuracy than both Upper-intermediate and Lower-intermediate learners in the "unique and nonsalient" context. This suggests that mastery of definite and demonstrative descriptions in complex pragmatic contexts is a late acquired skill, consistent with studies on the acquisition of English article systems (Ionin et al., 2003). The lack of a significant difference between Lower-intermediate and Upper-intermediate learners ($p = .63$) implies a developmental plateau at these levels, possibly due to persistent L1 (Persian) influence.

In Persian, demonstratives (in 'this,' ān 'that') and definite descriptions (marked by the suffix e) share functional overlap with English, potentially leading to crosslinguistic interference. Lower-proficiency learners may rely on direct L1 mappings, resulting in similar error patterns (e.g., overgeneralizing demonstratives where definite articles are required). Only at advanced levels do learners appear to restructure their interlanguage systems, moving beyond L1based strategies to acquire language-specific pragmatic constraints. This supports the claims of the Full Transfer/Full Access Hypothesis (Schwartz

& Sprouse, 1996), wherein learners initially transfer L1 properties but gradually restructure their grammar through input and metalinguistic awareness.

In contrast, comprehension performance did not vary significantly across proficiency levels ($p = 0.38$). This finding suggests that learners develop receptive knowledge of definite and demonstrative descriptions early, possibly due to:

1. Crosslinguistic similarity: Persian and English share functional parallels in demonstrative reference, reducing processing difficulty.
2. Input frequency: Definite NPs and demonstratives are highly frequent in input, facilitating early recognition (Ellis, 2008).
3. Lower cognitive demand: Comprehension tasks require recognition rather than rule application, making them less sensitive to proficiency differences (Van Patten, 2004).

This aligns with research showing that comprehension often precedes production (Winitz, 1981) and that learners may exhibit near-native comprehension long before achieving target-like production (Sorace, 2011).

This study highlights the complex interplay between proficiency, task type, and L1 influence in acquiring English L2 definiteness. While comprehension appears resilient to proficiency differences, production accuracy is highly proficiency-dependent, with advanced learners outperforming intermediate ones. These findings contribute to our understanding of the developmental trajectory of functional morphology and underscore the need for targeted pedagogical interventions to bridge the gap between comprehension and production.

VI. Theoretical and pedagogical implications

This research has significant theoretical and pedagogical implications, reinforcing several key conclusions. Primarily, L1 transfer is identified as the core obstacle; evidence from the lack of definiteness marking in Persian causes learners to map the Persian demonstrative *ān* onto the English *the*, triggering salience-based errors across all proficiency levels. This is a finding confirmed by Jarvis' (2000) three criteria.

Furthermore, proficiency affects production but not comprehension. While comprehension plateaus at the upper-intermediate level, production accuracy improves progressively with proficiency, confirming a syntax-pragmatics decoupling as outlined by Sorace and Filiaci (2006). A related finding is that demonstratives are acquired first via L1 facilitation, with near-native accuracy in demonstratives contrasting sharply with persistent struggles with definites, directly mirroring the demonstrative-based reference system of Persian.

The study also offers theoretical advancements. It shows a language-specific manifestation where Persian learners rely on visual salience heuristics. It refines Jarvis' transfer criteria by proposing a new diagnostic: a production-comprehension gap greater than 0.10 serves as a strong indicator of L1 transfer. Finally, it supports an asynchronous development model, showing learners acquire syntactic rules before pragmatic constraints.

In final synthesis, this research irrefutably positions L1 transfer as the catalyst for learners' difficulties. To disrupt this transfer cycle, teachers must explicitly dissect the mismatches between Persian ān and English definites, curricula should treat definites as an extended learning priority, and researchers should track production deficits as transfer diagnostics. The provided classroom module offers a blueprint for converting these findings into Persian-specific pedagogical practices.

6.2. Limitations and future research

This study acknowledges several limitations that impose concrete methodological and interpretive constraints, alongside presenting actionable directions for future research. A primary limitation lies in the task design; the use of forced-choice comprehension tasks lacks ecological validity, as they fail to capture how learners spontaneously process definiteness in natural discourse. Consequently, production scores may over-represent actual competence if learners avoid using articles in unstructured speech, and a significant evidence gap remains regarding error patterns in extended production, such as narrative retells or peer dialogues.

Furthermore, the sole focus on Persian as the L1 creates an isolation problem for generalizing L1 transfer findings. Without comparing learners from L1s with no articles (e.g., Russian) and those with definiteness-marking articles (e.g., Arabic), it is impossible to confirm whether the observed errors are Persian-specific or universal across all article-less L1s.

The static research design also introduces ambiguity concerning the proficiency plateau. It cannot determine if the stagnation observed between the lower and upper-intermediate levels represents a fossilization point or if the residual errors in advanced learners would resolve with more exposure, highlighting a practical constraint due to the lack of longitudinal data to track individual developmental trajectories.

Additionally, the study did not account for several potentially modulating variables. Factors such as working memory capacity, which might exacerbate L1 transfer effects in production, and the quality of L2 exposure, including instruction type and immersion experiences, were left unmeasured. This creates a risk that the observed transfer effects may be conflated with these unseen cognitive and environmental influences.

Finally, the study suffers from a deficiency in contextual breadth. It tested definiteness primarily in contexts of perceptual salience, ignoring more complex scenarios involving discourse salience (e.g., anaphoric reference) and cultural salience. This narrow focus likely leads to an underestimation of L1 transfer in more pragmatically complex and authentic contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Production Task

Different categories of the production task

a. 'Unique and salient' category: both 'the' and 'that' are possible, but 'the' is preferred

Betsy was staying at a hotel, and didn't have anything to read. It was too early to go to bed. So she went to a bookstore, and bought a magazine. Then she came back to her hotel and read____ magazine. She enjoyed it a lot (Ionin et al., 2012, p. 79)

b. 'Unique and non-salient' category: 'the' preferred over 'that'

Vicky was getting ready for a long train trip, and she wanted something to read on her trip. So she went to the library, and got out a book and a new magazine, and packed them in her bag. The next day, Vicky got on the train. She found her seat and sat down. Then, she read____ book. It was really interesting (Ionin et al., 2012, p. 79)

c. 'Non-unique' category: 'that' preferred over 'the'

Richard went to a bookstore and bought two books to read. One of the books turned out to be long and boring. But the other book had a really exciting storyline. So Richard finished ____ book. He read it in just one night (Ionin et al., 2012, p. 79)

Appendix II: comprehension task

Figure 1

Sample of the "same" Response in the Definite Plural Condition

Here are six pencils and six apples:

 Please draw arrows below two pencils.

 Now, please draw triangles around the pencils.

 Now, please draw a circle around one apple.

Figure 2

Sample of the "all" Response in the Definite Plural Condition

Here are six pencils and six apples.

 Please draw arrows below two pencils.

 Now, please draw triangles around the pencils.

 Now, please draw a circle around one apple.

Figure 3

Sample of "Different" Response in the Definite Plural Condition

a. Demonstrative plural condition

Here are six pens and six balloons.

 Please draw arrows above two balloons.

 Now, please draw triangles around those balloons.

 Now, please draw stars on two pens.

b. Definite plural condition

Here are six cars and six books.

 Please draw arrows above two books.

 Now, please draw circles around the books.

 Now, please draw lines below two cars.

c. Indefinite plural condition

Here are six knives and six cars.

 Please draw arrows below two cars.

 Now, please draw stars on some cars.

 Now, please draw a square around one knife.