

Sentence-level vs. NP-level Genericity: Are Arabic Learners of English Sensitive to Genericity Type?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: November 18, 2018

Accepted: February 10, 2019

Published: April 30, 2019

Volume: 10 Issue: 2

Advance access: March 2019

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

Key words:

L2 Acquisition,

Genericity,

Arabic,

EFL Learners,

L1 Transfer

ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to investigate the L2 acquisition of English generics by L1 Arabic speakers. The present study considered the two types of genericity (NP-level vs. sentence-level). Since generics in Arabic are always definite, the study investigated whether L1 Arabic speakers perform similarly in both types. The study recruited 43 participants (36 Saudi-Arabic-speaking participants and seven native English speakers). The Saudi-Arabic-speaking participants were assigned to two proficiency levels (23 elementary and 13 lower intermediate) in accordance with the Oxford Quick Placement Test. An Acceptability Judgement Task was administered to test their use of English generics. Five types of nouns were used (definite singulars and plurals, indefinite singulars and plurals, and bare singulars). The results revealed that: a) statistically, the Arabic speakers were significantly less accurate than the native English speakers; b) the Arabic speakers rated the non-target definite plurals highly in both types of genericity; and c) they rated the target indefinite singulars low with sentence-level genericity. These findings demonstrated that Arabic speakers were sensitive to genericity type, and that their selections cannot be explained solely in terms of their L1.

INTRODUCTION

The second language (L2) acquisition of English articles has received significant attention from several researchers over the last 35 years. However, the L2 acquisition of the generic use of articles has been neglected to some extent. The researchers differed in terms of accounting for why the L2 acquisition of English articles is challenging. First-language (L1) influence and L2 influence are renowned as primary sources of difficulty (Avery and Radisic 2007). Regarding L2 influence, the English article system is considered complex, despite being used frequently in English (Shintani et al. 2014). Conversely, L1 effects can be grouped into: a) syntactic deficit; b) phonological deficit; and c) semantic deficit. Syntactic deficit occurs when L2 learners' L1 does not have articles (Hawkins and Chan 1997). Phonological deficit is attributed to articles in some languages not being 'free clitics'; thereby, resulting in difficulty acquiring English articles (Goad and White 2009; Goad et al. 2011). With regard to semantic deficit, languages sometimes differ from English in terms of semantic settings, which will create difficulties using articles (Ionin et al. 2004; Ionin et al. 2008).

Studies conducted on L2 acquisition of English generics have yielded diverse findings (e.g., Alzamil 2016; Ionin and Montrul 2010; Ionin et al. 2011; Kupisch 2012; Sarko 2009;

Snape et al. 2014). L1 transfer and the nature of English generics were deemed the culprits. The present study aims to address: a) whether Arabic learners of English would face difficulty using English articles with generics; and b) whether the differences in grammaticalisation of generics in Arabic and English would play a role in article selections. As far as the author is aware, this study is the first to focus on the L2 acquisition of English generics by L1 Arabic speakers at the two aforementioned levels. Previous studies examining the L2 acquisition of English generics by L1 Arabic speakers failed to address the fact that English generics fall into two categories (noun phrase- (NP)-level and sentence-level). Consequently, the present study fills this gap by examining the L2 acquisition of English genericity by L1 Arabic speakers. The current study addresses the following two questions:

- (1) Will L1 Arabic speakers be target-like with English generics regardless of how their L1 grammaticalises generics?
- (2) Will L1 Arabic speakers' performance be different on NP-level generics vs. sentence-level generics?

The following section discusses the use of generics in English and Arabic.

GENERICITY IN ENGLISH AND ARABIC

Genericity in English

Generics are nouns that refer to a kind (Reiter and Frank 2010). Semantics literature has focused on the distribution of NP forms in various generic environments (e.g. Chierchia 1998; Dayal 2004; Krifka et al. 1995; Longobardi 2001). English grammaticalises generics and non-generics by one of the three articles *the*, *a* and zero article (\emptyset), as illustrated below.

(1) (English articles)

- a) The lion is eating. [definite singular]
- b) The lions are eating. [definite plural]
- c) A lion is eating. [indefinite singular]
- d) Lions are eating. [indefinite plural]
- e) *Lion is eating. [bare singular]

The examples given above (1a-d) are not generic as they are particular sentences; therefore, they do not refer to kind or make general statements about lions. As demonstrated in (1e), English does not permit the appearance of singular nouns without the indefinite article *a*. Genericity can occur at NP-level or sentence-level (Krifka et al. 1995). Sentence-level generics are those where the kind-referring meaning does not come from only the NP, but rather from the whole sentence. Conversely, NP-level generics require what Krifka et al. (1995) referred to as 'kind predicates'. Kind predicates are the subject arguments for phrases such as 'die out' and 'be extinct' or the object arguments for phrases such as 'invent' and 'exterminate'. The examples below highlight the sentence-level generics (adapted from Krifka et al. [1995, 9]).

(2) (sentence-level generics)

- a) The lion has a tail. [definite singular $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
- b) A lion has a tail. [indefinite singular $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
- c) Lions have tails. [indefinite plural $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
- d) #The lions have tails. [definite plural #generic]

The above examples demonstrate that (2a-c) are generic, as they make general statements about 'lions'. Conversely, (2d) is not generic as definite plurals in English do not refer to kinds. It can be noted from examples (2a-c) that generics can be grammaticalised by the three articles *the*, *a* and zero.

One of the tests applied by Krifka et al. (1995, 11) to assess whether a sentence is sentence-level generic or particular is the 'usually' test. In other words, the sentence is generic if it is used with no drastic alteration of the meaning.

(3) (the 'usually' test)

- a) A lion usually has a tail. [indefinite singular $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
- b) A lion has a tail. [indefinite singular $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
- c) Lions usually have tails. [indefinite plural $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
- d) Lions have tails. [indefinite plural $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]

Below are examples of generics at the NP-level.

(4) (NP-level generics)

- a) The dinosaur is extinct. [definite singular $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
- b) Dinosaurs are extinct. [indefinite plural $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
- c) #The dinosaurs are extinct. [definite plural #generic]
- d) #A dinosaur is extinct. [indefinite singular #generic]

Examples (4a-b) illustrate that definite singulars and indefinite plurals can be kind-referring at the NP-level, which

is not the case with definite plurals (4c). Conversely, indefinite singular nouns can be generic at the sentence-level, as in (2b) and (3b), but not at the NP-level (4d).

Genericity in Arabic

The Arabic article system contains two articles: a) the definite article '*al-*' (the counterpart of *the*); and b) the zero article ' \emptyset '. Arabic does not have a counterpart to '*a*'. With regard to generics, Arabic always grammaticalises genericity by '*al-*'. The aforementioned sentence-level and NP-level generic examples are translated into Arabic below; Arabic varieties grammaticalise articles similarly (Habash et al. 2006). The examples are presented in Hijazi, as the study was conducted in Saudi Arabia and this is the variety spoken by participants.

(5) (sentence-level generics)

- a) **Al-ʕasad** luh ðeɪl. [definite singular $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
The-lion has tail
'The lion has a tail.'
- b) **Al-ʕusud** laha ðjul. [definite plural $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
The-lions have tails
'The lions have tails.'
- c) **#ʕasad** luh ðeɪl. [indefinite singular #generic]
lion has tail
'A lion has a tail.'
- d) **#ʕusud** laha ðjul. [indefinite plural #generic]
The-lions have tails
'Lions have tails.'

Sentences 5c-d above highlight that Arabic does not express genericity at the sentence-level with indefinite nouns.

(6) (NP-level generics)

- a) **Al-dainasʕur** mungariðʕ. [definite singular $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
The-dinosaur extinct
'The dinosaur is extinct.'
- b) **Al-dainasʕurat** mungariðʕah. [definite plural $\sqrt{\text{generic}}$]
The-dinosaurs extinct
'Dinosaurs are extinct.'
- c) **#Dainasʕur** mungariðʕ. [indefinite singular #generic]
dinosaur extinct
'A dinosaur is extinct.'
- d) **#Dainasʕurat** mungariðʕah. [indefinite plural #generic]
dinosaurs extinct
'Dinosaurs are extinct.'

Similar to sentence-level generics, Arabic generics are possible only with definite NPs. Table 1 below summarises the distribution of generics in both languages.

Table 1. Distribution of generics in English and Arabic

Nouns types	Sentence-level		NP-level	
	English	Arabic	English	Arabic
Definite singulars	-	√	√	√
Definite plurals	-	√	-	√
Indefinite singulars	√	-	-	-
Indefinite plurals	√	-	√	-

Literature Review

Researchers differ regarding semantic frameworks they have adopted to examine the L2 acquisition of articles. Early studies (e.g., Huebner 1983; Parrish 1987; Thomas 1989) adopted Bickerton's (1981) semantic features [+/-hearer knowledge, +/-specific referent]. Meanwhile, later studies (e.g., Alzamil 2016; Garcí'a Mayo 2008; Sarko 2009; Snape 2006; Tryzna 2009) adopted the semantic-based classification by Ionin et al. (2004), who proposed that articles are used based on [+/-definite] and [+/-specific]. All these studies focused primarily on the non-generic use of articles and the semantic mismatch between first language and L2. Relatively few studies have addressed the generic use of articles (Alzamil 2016; Ionin and Montrul 2010; Ionin et al. 2011; Kupisch 2012; Sarko 2009; Snape et al. 2014), and not all examined genericity at NP-level and sentence-level these will be discussed later in this paper. Specifically, studies that examined the L2 acquisition of generics by Arabic-speaking participants (e.g., Alzamil 2016; Sarko 2009) overlooked the difference between the two types of generics. The present study addresses this gap. This section discusses studies that addressed the L2 acquisition of English generics. Some of the following studies addressed the non-generic and generic uses of English articles; however, here, only generics will be discussed.

Sarko (2009) conducted a study of the L2 acquisition of generic and non-generic uses of English articles by 57 Syrian Arabic and 18 French speakers (all of whom were ESL speakers). French has an article system and generics are always definite (similar to Arabic). The participants covered broad levels of proficiency, ranging from lower-intermediate to very advanced, in accordance with the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT). The author administered two written tasks and an oral task. The tests revealed that: a) the Arabic speakers overused *the* with indefinite generics; and b) the French speakers did not overuse *the* and made a high rate of omission errors. In another study, Alzamil (2016) examined the L2 acquisition of generic and non-generic English articles. The study was conducted with 56 Saudi Arabic ESL speakers and 66 Mandarin ESL speakers (Mandarin lacks articles). The participants were placed into lower-intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced, in line with the OQPT. Alzamil (2016) administered a forced-choice elicitation task and an oral task. He found that both groups made a high rate of omission errors and that Arabic speakers did not overuse *the* given that generics in Arabic are always definite. The two studies presented above reached different findings regarding Arabic speakers. This could be attributed to researchers making no distinction between the two types of generics. The present study addresses this issue.

A few studies examined the L2 acquisition of NP-level vs. sentence-level generics. For example, Ionin et al. (2011) examined the L2 acquisition of English generics by conducting a study of 45 Korean EFL speakers and 33 Russian EFL speakers in addition to 22 English-speaking controls. Two tests were administered: a cloze proficien-

cy test and an acceptability judgement task (AJT). The researchers found that the participants performed accurately with sentence-level genericity as they rated generic indefinite singulars highly. This was not the case with NP-level genericity, where they rated the target definite singulars low. These findings were supported by Snape et al. (2014), who conducted a longitudinal study of 35 native English speakers and 4 L1 Japanese children (aged 19, 15, 11 and 15) who began acquiring English in the United States at a young age, and were deemed bilingual. The children were tested two months following their return to Japan. A 40-item AJT was administered. Surprisingly, the results revealed the participants experienced difficulty using English articles, especially with NP-level generics, regardless of their bilingual status. The aforementioned studies confirm that L2 learners find generics problematic.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted with 43 participants (36 Saudi-Arabic-speaking participants and seven native English speakers). The average age of the Saudi-Arabic-speaking participants was 22.2 years (aged 26-21), and they were students in an English department at a Saudi university. The native English speakers comprised university-level students who were recruited and tested in the UK (aged 19-22).

The participants completed two paper and pen tests: an AJT and an OQPT (Syndicate U.C.L.E. 2001). The OQPT is a proficiency test used widely in SLA. The test comprises 60 items and places participants into one of six levels (beginner, elementary, lower-intermediate, upper-intermediate, advanced and very advanced). The AJT replicates a test used by Ionin et al. (2011) and comprises eight short stories. The stories were categorised as sentence-level genericity (four stories) and NP-level genericity (four stories). Each story was followed by five sentences. Five noun types were included (definite singulars and plurals, indefinite singulars and plurals, and bare singulars). The participants were asked to rate the sentences from 1 (unacceptable) to 5 (acceptable).

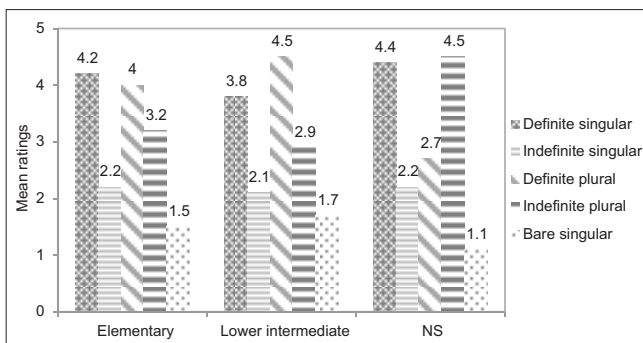
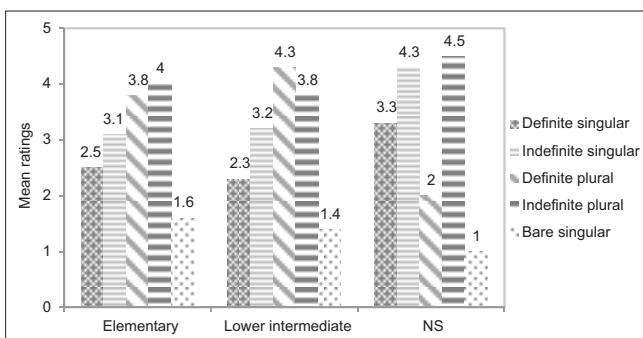
After completing the consent forms, the participants were asked to take the tests. The AJT took an average of 35 minutes and was not timed. The OQPT was timed (30 minutes). The OQPT placed 23 of the participants into the elementary level ($M = 24.2$, $SD = 2.8$) while 13 were put into the lower-intermediate level ($M = 35.1$, $SD = 3.3$). The two groups varied significantly ($t(34)=10.645$, $p < .001$).

RESULTS

This section contains two subsections that will answer the two research questions. Non-parametric tests were used, as the data was not normally distributed ($p < 0.05$), in accordance with the Shapiro-Wilk test. The mean ratings are reported below before the inferential statistics are presented.

Table 2. Mann-Whitney results for elementary, lower intermediate and native control groups (NP-level)

Sentence type	Elementary vs. Lower Intermediate	Elementary vs. NS	Lower Intermediate vs. NS
Definite singular	$U=72.500$ $Z = -2.594$ $p=0.010$	$U=10.500$ $Z = -3.490$ $p<0.001$	$U=22.500$ $Z = -1.940$ $p>0.016$
Indefinite singular	$U=116.500$ $Z = -1.108$ $p>0.016$	$U=54.500$ $Z = -1.294$ $p >.016$	$U=41.000$ $Z = -0.370$ $p>0.016$
Definite plural	$U=82.000$ $Z = -2.260$ $p>0.016$	$U=0.000$ $Z = -3.992$ $p<0.001$	$U=2.000$ $Z = -3.480$ $p<0.001$
Indefinite plural	$U=103.000$ $Z = -1.555$ $p >.016$	$U=1.000$ $Z = -3.921$ $p<0.001$	$U=0.000$ $Z = -3.653$ $p<0.001$
Bare singular	$U = 98.500$ $Z = -1.701$ $p >.016$	$U = 21.000$ $Z = -2.974$ $p = 0.002$	$U = 33.500$ $Z = -1.007$ $p >.016$

**Figure 1.** Mean ratings elementary, lower intermediate and native speakers of English (NP-level)**Figure 2.** Mean ratings elementary, lower intermediate and native English speakers (sentence-level)

The figure above illustrates that the elementary and low intermediate group gave higher ratings to definite plurals than the native control group. For the native control group, high ratings were assigned to definite singulars and indefinite plurals.

The figure above highlights that definite and indefinite plurals were rated highest by the elementary and lower intermediate groups. The native control group rated indefinite singulars and plurals the highest.

Between-group Results

This section provides a statistical comparison of the numbers presented in the graphs to discover whether the experimental groups were target-like. They were compared with the English native controls to address research question 1. Multiple Kruskal-Wallis tests were run for each sentence type. If the results yielded significant differences, Mann-Whitney tests were conducted as post hoc tests (Bonferroni correction sets the significance value at $p < 0.016$).

Regarding NP-level genericity, the Kruskal-Wallis tests highlighted significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between the three groups regarding definite singulars, definite plurals, indefinite plurals and bare singulars. All groups were subjected to Mann-Whitney tests and the results are presented in Table 2, where the statistically-significant findings are highlighted in grey.

The findings above illustrate that definite singulars were assigned higher ratings by the elementary group than both the lower intermediate group and the native control group. The elementary and lower intermediate groups rated definite plurals higher and indefinite plurals lower than the native control group. Furthermore, bare singulars were ranked higher by the elementary group than the native control group.

The findings in Table 3 below reveal the lower intermediate group assigned higher ratings to definite plurals than the elementary group. The elementary and lower intermediate groups ranked definite singulars, definite plurals and bare singulars higher than the native control group. The two groups ranked indefinite singulars and plurals lower than the native control group.

Comparisons between the Two Types of Genericity

For research question 2, a comparison was made of the performance of the three groups in both types of genericity. Wil-

Table 3. Mann-Whitney results for elementary, lower intermediate and native control groups (sentence-level)

Sentence type	Elementary vs. Lower Intermediate	Elementary vs. NS	Lower Intermediate vs. NS
Definite singular	$U=140.000$ $Z = -0.329$ $p > 0.016$	$U=6.000$ $Z = -3.739$ $p < 0.001$	$U=12.500$ $Z = -2.664$ $p = 0.006$
Indefinite singular	$U=137.000$ $Z = -0.419$ $p > 0.016$	$U=3.000$ $Z = -3.835$ $p < 0.001$	$U=0.000$ $Z = -3.650$ $p < 0.001$
Definite plural	$U=65.000$ $Z = -2.849$ $p = 0.005$	$U=0.000$ $Z = -3.991$ $p < 0.001$	$U=0.000$ $Z = -3.716$ $p < 0.001$
Indefinite plural	$U=127.000$ $Z = -0.751$ $p > 0.016$	$U=25.500$ $Z = -2.724$ $p = 0.005$	$U=15.000$ $Z = -2.485$ $p = 0.014$
Bare singular	$U = 144.000$ $Z = -0.189$ $p > 0.016$	$U = 30.000$ $Z = -2.602$ $p = 0.012$	$U = 5.500$ $Z = -3.641$ $p < 0.001$

Table 4. NP-level vs. sentence-level genericity

Group	Definite singular	Indefinite singular	Definite plural	Indefinite plural	Bare singular
Elementary	$Z = -4.207$ $p < 0.001$	$Z = -3.866$ $p < 0.001$	$Z = -1.536$ $p > 0.05$	$Z = -3.467$ $p = 0.001$	$Z = -2.480$ $p = 0.013$
Lower intermediate	$Z = -3.068$ $p = 0.002$	$Z = -3.070$ $p = 0.002$	$Z = -0.892$ $p > 0.05$	$Z = -2.870$ $p = 0.004$	$Z = -0.158$ $p > 0.05$
NS	$Z = -2.384$ $p = 0.017$	$Z = -2.410$ $p = 0.016$	$Z = -2.410$ $p = 0.016$	$Z = -0.000$ $p > 0.05$	$Z = -1.732$ $p > 0.05$

coxon Signed-Ranks tests were run between the two types of genericity in each sentence type.

Table 4 highlights that definite singulars were rated significantly higher by all three groups, and indefinite singulars significantly lower with NP-level than with sentence-level genericity. The elementary and lower intermediate groups ranked indefinite plurals higher with sentence-level genericity than NP-level genericity. Definite plurals were ranked higher with NP-level genericity by the English control group than sentence-level genericity. Finally, bare singulars were ranked higher with sentence-level genericity by the elementary group than NP-level genericity.

DISCUSSION

As discussed previously, earlier studies on the L2 acquisition of English generics varied concerning article selections despite the similar L1 backgrounds (e.g. Alzamil 2016; Sarko 2009). Alzamil (2016) found that Saudi-Arabic speakers omitted articles with generics, while Sarko (2009) found that Syrian-Arabic speakers overused *the*. Conversely, L1 speakers who lack articles struggled with NP-level genericity more than with sentence-level genericity; for instance, Russian and Korean in Ionin et al.'s (2011) study or Japanese in the study conducted by Snape et al. (2014). Overall, the findings of the present study support those yielded by earlier studies; whereby, English genericity is regarded as challenging to Arabic speakers who are EFL learners. Furthermore, this study's participants demonstrated sensitivity to genericity

type (NP-level vs. sentence-level). The research questions are as follows:

- (1) Will L1 Arabic speakers be target-like with English generics regardless of how their L1 grammaticalizes generics?
- (2) Will L1 Arabic speakers' performance be different on NP-level generics vs. sentence-level generics?

The findings of the present study highlight that the Arabic speakers rated definite plurals the highest (incorrectly) for both types of genericity. This is not surprising if we assume that the participants rely on their L1 (Arabic); whereby generics are always definite. Therefore, these results are less accurate than those for the native control group, which assigned a low rating to definite plurals. The high rating of definite singulars with NP-level genericity awarded by both experimental groups can be attributed to the grammaticalisation of generics in Arabic. However, they correctly rated definite singulars low with sentence-level genericity. Their low ratings for definite singulars cannot be attributed to their L1. It is not clear why they opted for definite plurals (incorrect) over definite singulars (correct) with NP-level genericity. The performance of both groups was significantly less accurate than that of the native control group, especially in sentence-level genericity. The elementary group rated definite singulars higher than the lower intermediate group with NP-level genericity. This may indicate that the group placed greater reliance on their L1 than the group with a higher proficiency level. Aside from this difference between the two experimental groups,

both groups performed similarly despite their different proficiency levels. This is possibly because the levels are so close to each other

The comparison of the test categories (NP-level genericity and sentence-level genericity) for the experimental groups yielded similar ratings for definite plurals in both types of genericity. Statistical comparisons of NP-level and sentence-level genericity found higher ratings of indefinite singulars and plurals with sentence-level, rather than NP-level, genericity. However, the descriptive findings highlighted a low rating to indefinite singulars and plurals with sentence-level genericity. Moreover, definite singulars were rated higher with NP-level, rather than sentence-level, genericity; thereby supporting the distinction between the two. No distinction would have been observed if they relied solely on their L1, as generics in Arabic are always definite. It is important to remember that the participants study in the English department of a Saudi university, which means they may receive an abundance of English input. This could explain why they did not demonstrate L1 effects across all aspects of their performance.

The results of the present study are not compatible with the research conducted by Ionin et al. (2011) and Snape et al. (2014), as the participants in both studies struggled more with NP-level genericity than sentence-level genericity. This could be because the participants in both studies spoke languages that do not have articles, and definite generics are not used widely in English (Biber et al. 1998). Unlike Arabic speakers, they could not rely on their L1 with regard to using definite articles with generics. It is noteworthy that the participants' proficiency levels in the present study are relatively low; therefore, they may improve as their English proficiency levels increase. The results of the present study support those achieved by Sarko (2009). However, the findings are not compatible with Alzamil (2016), despite the participants having the same L1 backgrounds (except the Mandarin speakers). It is significant that the present study's participants are EFL students. Moreover, Alzamil did not explore the distinction between NP-level and sentence-level genericity.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the L2 acquisition of English generics by L1 Arabic speakers. It addressed whether Arabic speakers would be sensitive to genericity type in English (NP-level vs. sentence-level), especially given that Arabic does not make a distinction. In other words, would Arabic speakers rely on their L1 or be sensitive to the semantics of English generics? The findings reveal that Arabic speakers opted for definite plurals (incorrect) over indefinite singular to express genericity at the sentence-level, while they accepted definite plurals (incorrect) over definite singulars to express genericity at the NP-level. This demonstrated that the L2 acquisition of English generics remains difficult for L2 learners, regardless of how their L1s grammaticalise articles. More importantly, they reveal that L1 Arabic speakers are sensitive to genericity type, and that their performance (apart from the high rat-

ings for definite plurals) cannot be explained in terms of their L1.

The present study has the following limitation. Only one L1 background was examined. Adding an L1 background that grammaticalises generics differently would provide deeper insight into the L2 acquisition of English generics. However, it was difficult to recruit other EFL learners from another country. Future research should recruit participants from more than L1 backgrounds.

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