

On the Acquisition of English Articles with Bosnian L2 Learners of English

Adi Maslo

Department of English Language and Literature
University of Džemal Bijedić Mostar, BiH
adi.maslo@unmo.ba

Abstract: Regarding the discrepancy between the English and the Bosnian language concerning an article system, this paper attempts at clarifying the difficulties for Bosnian L2 learners of English. Based on a similar study and an experimental study with Bosnian learners, this paper illustrates and copes with the very apparent and widely present issue of English articles among Bosnian learners. The principles of *Definiteness* and *Specificity* are introduced to contrast the two languages, aiding to a deeper understanding of this conceptual difference between English and Bosnian. The paper first states the current position of the English (definite and indefinite) article in the light of the Bosnian language, and specifies their respective Bosnian equivalents, eventually giving a suggestion to a deeper understanding.

Key Words: articles, the, a, English, Bosnian, language, article, system

Introduction

According to different authors, the English article system is one of the most difficult elements for L2 learners of English. The problem can be found by both English language learners whose L1 language has an article system, and the ones whose L1 language lack such structural element. However, the manifestation of this issue is different. Students of the English language whose L1 language does have an article system, tend to reflect the article system regulations onto the English article system, whereas ESLs whose L1 language lacks an article system cannot find underpinnings in their mother tongue. Among languages such as Japanese, Russian, Finish and Chinese, the Bosnian language is one that lacks a formal element which would stay for the English article. However, the Bosnian language has different means of referring. Be it as it may, for the purposes of a better cross-cultural understanding, such a discrepancy must be kept in mind, being aware that English articles are the most widely spread in any written text or speech in English.

Having stated that there is no formal item which would be an equivalent for the English article, the question arises – how to teach Bosnian students to adopt this phenomenon? What does it depend on, if there isn't a formal substitute for the English article? What the Bosnian literature offers is merely a division of places where *the* or *a(n)* or a *zero article* appear which is not a solution to the issue, since this issue is more deeply rooted and linked to a conceptual understanding of language.

The English articles as perceived in Bosnian

The English articles are not to be omitted in Standard English language. They represent a common picture of both spoken and written English. As it is formally known, the English language article system consists of the definite *the*, the indefinite *a(n)* and the so-called *zero article*. The definite article is a demonstrative determiner in its origin, whereas the indefinite article is a number by its origin – both must be kept in mind. The definite article is most often translated with Bosnian demonstratives whereas the indefinite article is most commonly translated (if at all) with numerals (Tanović, 2002: 127). Both cases reflect their respective origin, but this is the case in few contexts where the article is to be understood literally i.e. when the English language refers to it like that. Examples for this are:

- (1) There is *a* man waiting for you. (Čeka te *jedan* čovjek.)
- (2) This is *the* woman I told you about. (Ovo je *ta* žena o kojoj sam ti govorio.)

The meaning of the numeral *jedan* in (1) is close to that of the English indefinite article (*a, an*). Unlike English, however, which must use *a* or *an* whenever the meaning expressed by the indefinite article is desired, the use of *jedan* in Bosnian is optional. When a speaker chooses to use it, s/he sometimes has in mind the additional idea *a certain* (Alexander, 2006: 44). As another substitute for the English indefinite article, however

not functioning as such, there is the indefinite pronominal adjective *neki* meaning *some/certain*. However, these differ in their function, and don't stand as the counterpart of English articles but for purposes of the inner structure of Bosnian.

The perception of English articles by Bosnian L2 learners is 'blinded' by the lack of their own language i.e. language learners simply skip these 'little words' in front of the noun(s). One reason for this could be the fact that these 'little words' have no semantic meaning in Bosnian and they cannot occur as the head of a (Bosnian) phrase. Were it only for the 'size of the word' prepositions wouldn't be recognized either, and were it only for the semantic meaning, prepositions, again, at times have no formal equivalent in the Bosnian language, but that doesn't make them disappear in a Bosnian learner's usage. However, the conceptual basis of referring in the respective languages tends to be the issue number one.

Referring in English and in Bosnian

The English article system is simple in its form, not, however, in its use. Articles are used as follows: the definite article is used for referents which are either an apparent element of the context in which the speech act is taking place or they are previously used (Jeffries, 2006).

The criterion for the usage of either the definite or indefinite article can briefly be described as such: the definite nominal phrase (NP) has a referent which the speaker holds as an undoubtedly clear element (familiar) to the hearer, whereas the indefinite NP has a referent for which the speaker doesn't assume to be clear (familiar) to the hearer (Chesterman, 1991).

According to the above quotes, we can see that the distinction is made on the principle of common knowledge of the speaker/hearer. The speaker and the hearer need to know what the other is referring to i.e. the speaker needs to linguistically isolate an entity from the non-linguistic reality to make the hearer understand which referent is being referred to.

This can be explained with an example given by Trenkić¹ (2009). She makes us imagine a situation where both the speaker and the hearer are standing in a kitchen, both having this image (Figure 1) in front of them. The speaker wants the hearer to hand him the black mug. An English speaker would express his/her wish with:

- (3) Pass me *the black mug*, please.

The NP is marked for definiteness by the usage of the definite article *the*. The definite article signals that the referent is uniquely identifiable, that it exists and is unique in one of the pragmatically delimited domains mutually manifest to speaker and hearer on-line – in this case the visually present objects in the immediate situation (Hawkins, 1991).



Figure 1

Speakers of the Bosnian language wouldn't have the choice to use a definite article, but they could express their request with:

- (4) Dodaj mi *crnu šolju*, molim te.

¹ Trenkić's research was conducted with Serbian L2 learners of English, but the two languages (Bosnian and Serbian) don't differ in this matter

[Pass me black mug, please.]

The NP isn't marked for *definiteness*; however, reference is successfully remained. The referent exists (there is a black mug in front of them) and is unique (there is only one black mug) in one of the pragmatically delimited domains (Trenkić, 2009). The context is definite even though not marked as such. The speaker would have every reason to expect his reference to be unambiguous and successful; the outcome of reference resolution in (4) should be identical to that in (3). This example illustrates how definiteness is perceived differently; the context, and therefore the non-usage of articles, for Bosnian speakers would be even more justified for the entity referred to is visible i.e. the context is obvious. The Bosnian sentence, and language in general, are case marked, and the accusative case of the above Bosnian sentence does perform a deictic function.

If an English speaker wanted to receive one of the white mugs, s/he would say:

(5) Pass me *a white mug*, please.

whereas the Bosnian speaker would express the request with:

(6) Dodaj mi *bijelu šolju*, molim te.
[Pass me white mug, please.]

The NP in (5) is marked as indefinite by means of the indefinite *a*. The indefinite article signalizes that the criterion for uniqueness isn't fulfilled, for there is more than one referent which could be referred to with *white mug*. The Bosnian sentence (6) isn't marked as indefinite but the context is the same: the speaker is aware that there are more referents which could be referred to with 'bijela šolja'. In both cases, the need for a specific white mug would need more explanation (Trenkić, 2009). However, in (6) the numeral *jedan* (Dodaj mi jednu bijelu šolju, molim te.) would be even more appropriate to, in a slightly different way, refer to the entity not being unique. Formally, sentences (4) and (6) don't differ, but referring is conducted successfully.

On this example we can see that each language has its own means of remaining reference within its structure. In English, it is an article; the Bosnian language doesn't offer an equal element, but still doesn't lack reference and the successful communication isn't threatened.

Specific and generic reference

When we speak about articles, a major point is the distinction between specific and generic reference (Quirk, Greenbaum, 1973). If we say,

(7) A lion and two tigers are sleeping in the cage.

The reference is specific, for we have an image of a specific kind from the group *tiger*. If we, on the other hand, say

(8) Tigers are dangerous animals.

The reference is generic, for we think of the species *tiger*, without having one particular animal on mind (Quirk, Greenbaum, 1973).

We use generic reference when the linguistic expression needs to indicate a group of things, people or phenomena, whereas the specific reference is used when we want to talk about individual entities (Bilbija, 2001). For the realization of the generic reference we have three forms; one with the definite article, one with the indefinite article, and one without an article (zero articles) in plural form.

(9) *The tiger* is a dangerous animal. (Quirk, 1985)

(10) *A computer* can only do what you program it to do. (Collins Cobuild English Grammar)

(11) *Girls* can be tough. (Biber, 1999)

Examples (9), (10), and (11) can represent an individual's statement about the non-linguistic reality. Generic reference, being a sub-group of the anaphoric reference, enables us to talk about something that isn't present in the same spatial environment as the speaker. This, however, may not be evident to an ordinary L2 Bosnian speaker of English, but his/her mother tongue will 'force him/her' to omit the English article. We could

easily state here that when talking about things in general i.e. using the generic reference the most secure way is to use the plural noun without an article.

Specific reference is somewhat more complex. In its specificity, the referent can be definite and indefinite, which might sound perplexing to a non-native of English. In,

- (12) A cat was the victim of a cruel attack when she was shot in the neck by *a* pellet. (Biber, 1999)

The nouns *cat* and *pellet* are specific (belong to specific reference) in the sense that there is a/some (a specific) cat/pellet, but they are indefinite in terms of us not knowing which cat/pellet in particular, therefore the use of the indefinite article. The same kind of sub-reference is employed with nouns in plural which denote one specific/particular entity but we don't know (or it is of no importance) details about it:

- (13) The House passes *laws* with a certain honesty of intention behind them. (Bilbija, 2002)

Definiteness and Specificity

Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004) tested the acquisition of English articles among two groups of learners, Korean and Russian. Both languages, Korean and Russian, don't have a formal equivalent for the English article. They found out that Korean and Russian L2 learners of English fluctuate between English articles according to their *Article Choice Parameter – Definiteness and Specificity*. Speakers of these two languages tend to use the definite article both in definite and indefinite specific context whereas the indefinite article is used in both indefinite and definite non-specific contexts.

Cross-linguistically, articles encode semantic distinctions of *Definiteness* and *Specificity* (Ionin, Ko, Wexler 2004). The notion of *Definiteness* refers to the state of knowledge shared between the speaker and the hearer (or writer and reader). The notion of *Specificity* refers to knowledge only the speaker (writer) has (Kim, Lakshmann, 2009). Ionin, Ko and Wexler defined *Definiteness* and *Specificity* as follows:

If a Determiner Phrase (DP) of the form [D NP] is :

- a. [+definite], then the speaker and hearer presuppose the existence of a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP.
- b. [+specific], then the speaker intends to refer to a unique individual in the set denoted by the NP and considers this individual to possess some noteworthy property. (Ionin, Ko, Wexler 2004)

It is important to note that in the Standard English language, article choice depends on the notion of *Definiteness*, not *Specificity* (Kim, Lakshmanan, 2009) i.e. the shared knowledge is the context for the definite article *the*, whereas a nondefinite context, where there is no shared knowledge, the indefinite article is introduced (*a*, *an*, or the indefinite quantifier *some*). For example, if we A says to B:

- (14) A: I saw *a* girl

the context is indefinite for the shared knowledge is not given, therefore the indefinite article. However, if in a subsequent sentence, speaker A was to mention the same referent (girl), it should be expressed as:

- (15) *The* girl was blond.

The concept of the English language understands the second mention (even only a second later) of an entity as falling under the notion of shared knowledge – therefore, the definite article is to be introduced. But not only it is shared knowledge but, hearer B would be able to understand that speaker A still speaks about the same referent (girl). This is a point the Bosnian language doesn't reflect.

That the notion of *Definiteness* is perceived differently by speakers whose L1 language doesn't have an article system is reflected in the study of Trenkić (2002). Her research on a group of Serbian speakers of an intermediate level showed that article omission was more present in the second and each subsequent mention of a referent which on the first mention had an article. The research of Avery and Radišić (2007) showed the same – on a retelling task, Serbian learners of English tended to omit articles.

- “... but in the middle of the wallet there is *a lottery ticket*... he took *the lottery ticket*... He took the money and *the lottery ticket*... he checked *the lottery ticket*... to give back *lottery ticket*... the original owner of *lottery ticket*... he took money and *lottery ticket*...”

This example given by Avery and Radišić (2007) shows the perception of the notion of *Definiteness* by Serbian speakers. The Serbian speaker (and so the Bosnian) perceives that each subsequent mention the referent is (more and more) ‘settled’ and that it need not more be marked with a definite article. The perception of the two speakers (Bosnian/Serbian and English) is rather swapped – whereas the English language in each mention of a referent needs an article, the Bosnian language, even without an article equivalent, perceives a referent ‘settled’ and doesn’t need to define it further. A referent becomes more established with every mention, and the more established a referent is in a discourse model, the more likely the article is to be omitted (Žegarac 2004). Besides the dropping articles in subsequent mention Huebner (1983), Jarvis (2002) and Trenkić (2002) observe that articles are more likely to be dropped in a topic than in a non-topic position, just as Robertson (2000) stated that when speakers are referring to objects present in the immediate environment than in other definite contexts. Trenkić (2007) states that the article dropping patterns can be observed even in highly advanced L2 speakers. Previous research on L2 article use suggests that articles tend to be omitted more often when reference is to a more salient than to a less salient referent. This asymmetry has been observed in several guises (Trenkić, 2009).

These empirical findings will be tested on Bosnian L2 learners of English in order to find out if they apply to Bosnian learners, too.

Research with Bosnian L2 learners of the English language

Method

Three groups of English language learners will be tested: Intermediate, Upper-Intermediate, and Advanced. The theoretical frame is adopted from Huebner (Table 1) where the use of English articles is determined by the semantic function of the NP in discourse. In the model, English NPs are classified on the basis of referentiality i.e. whether a noun is [+specific], and whether it is assumed as known to the hearer [+definite]. In this model sentences are given in five contexts to determine article use.

Environment for the appearance of articles

Type 1 – [-specific], [+definite]

Environment

Articles

Examples

Generic nouns *a, the, 0 0 Fruit flourishes in the valley.*
The Grenomian is an excitable person.
A paper clip comes in handy.

Type 2 – [+specific], [+definite]

Environment

Articles

Examples

Referential definites *the*
 previous mention *Pass me the pen.*
 specified by entailment *The idea of coming to the US was...*
 specified by definition *I found a book. The book was...*
 unique in all contexts *The first person to walk on the moon...*
 unique in a given context

Type 3 – [+specific], [-definite]

Environment

Articles

Examples

Referential indefinites *a, 0*
 First-mention nouns *Chris approached me carrying a dog.*
I keep sending 0 messages to him.

Type 4 – [-specific], [-definite]

Environment

Articles

Examples

Nonreferential nouns *a, 0*
 Attributive indefinites *Alice is an accountant.*
 Nonspecific indefinites *I guess I should buy a new car.*
0 Foreigners would come up with a better solution.

Type 5 – [-specific], [-definite]

Environment	Articles	Examples
Idioms	<i>a, the, 0</i>	<i>All of a sudden</i> , he woke up.
Other conventional uses		<i>In the 1950s</i> , there weren't many cars.
His family is now living <i>0 hand to mouth</i> .		

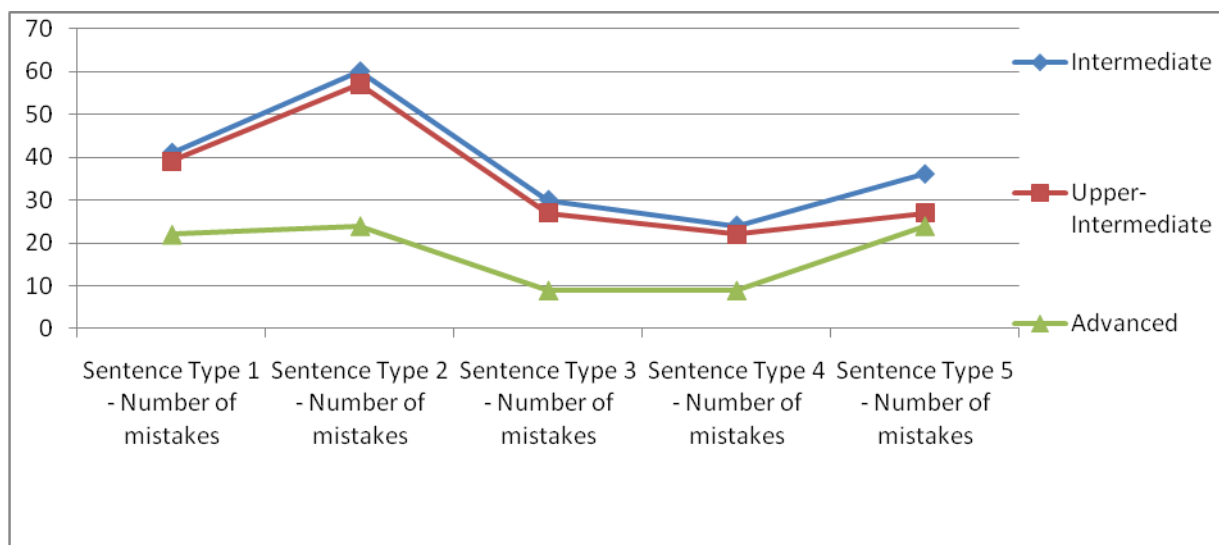
Table 1

Students will receive 40 sentences (adapted) divided in four groups (tasks). The first ten sentences are translated into the Bosnian language and they need to be translated back into English. This will show how students perceive articles in direct contrast of the two languages. Students aren't told they are being tested on articles. In the second group of sentences, students are told to insert a word into sentences where they are needed – students aren't told the focus is on articles. However, most of the sentences do need articles, but there are distracting items with banal mistakes also. In the third group of sentences students *are* told to insert an article into each sentence. Here the point is to contrast the conditions when students are focused on articles, and where they are not. In the last group of sentences, students are told that there are five incorrect sentences and five correct ones. Students need to correct the false ones by adding words (mostly articles, but students aren't told so). In the 40 sentences, there are 50 places where articles are needed: **Type 1** – 10 entries, **Type 2** – 15 entries, **Type 3** – 10 entries, **Type 4** – 10 entries, **Type 5** – 5 entries. Sentences skipped by the students were not considered.

Data analysis

Table 1 - Mistakes in article usage per article context type

It can be observed that the incorrect use of articles with Intermediate and Upper-Intermediate groups is just slightly less in favor of the Upper-Intermediate group. It is only in Article Context Type 5 i.e. idiomatic and conventional usage with articles, that the Upper-Intermediate have the better proficiency. Surprisingly enough, this is the context where the Advanced group is almost at the same level with the Upper-Intermediate i.e. fairly no distinction. However, let us treat the groups in detail.



It can be observed that the Intermediate learners have the lowest proficiency in articles, obviously enough. On the translation task there were quite interesting remarks. Out of ten learners none of them recognized the need of an article when a sequence of Type 3 and Type 2 (a referent is firstly mentioned, and in the next sentence referred again) is needed. The ones that did do it correctly relied rather on possessives or pronouns than articles. In general, the sequence of Type 3 and Type 2 are not at a high level. Surprisingly enough, this is a point that is being treated in the Bosnian literature when articles are concerned.

However, article proficiency is better in the third task where the learners were told to insert an article. But even here only one out of ten Intermediate learners recognized the Type 3 – Type 2 sequence. It can be observed that compound NPs are considered as one and therefore added (if at all) only an article in front of the first noun, as in the sentence the learners were given:

(16) Jane bought *a* ring and *a* necklace for her mother's birthday. Her mother loved *the* ring but hated *the* necklace.

At this level L2 learners of English don't seem to distinguish, or at a very low percentage, the difference between nouns mentioned for the first time and the ones specified by entailment.

Another remarkable finding was that Intermediate L2 learners of English have difficulties in distinguishing specific and generic reference. This yields in a result that the latter is being thought of as nonspecific indefinites, whereas they are quite the opposite. The following three sentences were included:

- (17) Is it true that *the* owl cannot see well in daylight?
- (18) *The* telephone is a very useful invention.
- (19) We don't know who invented *the* wheel.

None of the Intermediate learners could recognize the generic reference here. But a more remarkable error rate was with context Type 2 with specific definites and even unique nouns, some of them yielding in grammatically incorrect sentences like:

- (20) *French are against war in Iraq.
- (21) *In 1960s, there were lots of protests against Vietnam War.

Upper-Intermediate learners of English don't differ too much in regard to Intermediates. Context Type 2 remains an issue. Even at this level learners tend not to make definite, by means of the definite article, NPs in generic reference. Again, context Type 2 where the referents were both specific and definite yielded in ample of mistakes even among Upper-Intermediate ESL learners. This illustrates the different perception of definiteness between the two languages. It is especially with the sequence of Type 3 and 2 where a referent is being firstly mentioned and then referred to again. Here we have the same finding as Trenkić and Žegarac where we see that ESL learners tend to omit articles in subsequent mentions. An overuse in zero articles can only be stated as such having in mind that Bosnian L2 learners of English don't see it as a zero article, but simply reflect their own language in English and omit the article.

Advanced learners are weakest in context Type 2, just as the two other groups of learners. Surprisingly enough, advanced learners seem to have a lower proficiency in idiomatic and other conventional uses, in comparison. Again, we have least mistakes in sentence Type 3 and 4 where the indefinite article prevails and this seems to be reoccurring with all three groups. However, advanced learners do show a higher proficiency in general.

Discussion

Regardless of the level of learners, articles remain an issue for Bosnian L2 learners of English. As we have previously stated, it is a matter of referring in the two languages that makes the difference, and, in the end, yields in mistakes in article usage. On one hand, each group of learners had the majority of mistakes in context Type 2, where referents are specific and definite – why is this so? The answer to this question lies in the fact that the English language depends on the notion of *definiteness*, not *specificity*, as opposed to the Bosnian language. On the other hand, each group had least mistakes in context Types 3 and 4. This may, then, lie in the fact that *definiteness* is excluded and *specificity* more emphasized. Be it as it may, Bosnian L2 learners of English should be more effectively taught articles, for they seem disregarded in the teaching process.

It has been observed that all levels of learners misunderstand referents in definite contexts and even unique ones. L2 learners of English should be taught that shared knowledge is a key notion (and this is disregarded). They have to be taught that each of these has to be regarded as unique in its context, and taking the mug example from above we can state that it is unique in its context even though there are numerous other black mugs in the world. If we take a sentence from the test given to students as an example:

- (22) Fred bought **a** car on Monday. On Wednesday, he crashed **the** car.

We can see that we have shared knowledge but that the car is unique in *its* context, too. Or let's take another sentence:

(23) Sally Ride was **the** first American woman in space.

We again see that the entity referred to is unique. This may be the more obvious case for using the definite article because the entity is marked for uniqueness in a wider context, and it seems to be the case that the smaller the context the higher the fluctuation rate. Here we have another sentence which carries this same attribute:

(24) **The** French are against **the** war in Iraq.

There is only one people called 'The French' and there is only one war that can be referred to as 'the war in Iraq', however, this sentence yielded in a majority of mistakes. So, these entities are linguistically isolated from all other entities and they shouldn't be mistaken when articles are concerned.

Another key problem seems to be generic reference or Type 1 context. Bosnian L2 learners of English don't seem to distinguish the 'generalization' of this reference, so the sentence

(25) **The** Telephone is a very useful invention.

was, in a majority of cases, written without the definite article. Entities under this reference are by their attribute of generalization unique. It is not that some telephone or a specific telephone is a very useful invention, but telephones in general. So, this makes the given context definite and therefore it needs the definite article. It may be the most convenient way to tell students to talk about things in general to use plural forms without articles. However, more advanced learners should be taught all forms of realization within generic reference.

Articles should generally be given more emphasis in the teaching process. They should be taught in the context of referring and shared knowledge. It is, basically, most convenient to teach students to always consider article use in front of NPs. As we have suggested, students should be advised to consider referents in isolated, unique, contexts and then decide on an article. As the study has shown, generic reference remains a greater problem than specific reference, and we recommend the pieces of advice mentioned above. In (19) (and in other cases) generic reference is quite obvious, but students should only be taught the conceptual basis of this reference, and the issues of referring in general. Conclusively, the advice for teacher is that semantics should be used as a means to explain the act of referring and eventually be able to teach articles more effectively.

Conclusion

As we have seen from both the theoretical findings of other authors and the one conducted with Bosnian learners, English articles still remain to be an issue. Bosnian L2 learners of English, not having the linguistic background in their own language, when articles are concerned, don't feel the necessity for the usage of articles. As we have recommended here, it is the lack of semantic interpretation (or the unwillingness to use it) of articles (on the teachers' side). The act of referring should be put into the center of interpretation where the different kinds of references should be introduced. As it was noticed, proficiency in generic reference and NPs as referential definites should also be improved. The conceptual underpinnings and the need for articles should be introduced very carefully. The notions of *Specificity* and *Definiteness*, and a cross-linguistic view of these two, as we have suggested, ought to be introduced as a cross-cultural perspective and means of teaching articles more effectively.

References

- Alexander, R. (2006), *Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, a Grammar – With Sociolinguistic Commentary*, The University of Wisconsin Press, London
- Avery, P., Radišić, M. (2007), Residual Optionality at the Interface: The L2-Acquisition of Articles, presented at the EUROSLA 2007., Newcastle upon Tyne
- Berry, R. (1996), *English Guides 3: Articles*, HarperCollins Publisher, London
- Biber, S. (1990), *Pronominalni anaforički proces u savremenom engleskom*, Univerzitet u Sarajevu, Sarajevo
- Bilbija, S. (2001), *Introducing Semantics*, Komunikološki fakultet Banja Luka, Banja Luka
- Chesterman, A. (1991), *On Definiteness – A Study with Special Reference to Finnish and English*, Cambridge University Press, New York
- Ekiert, M. (2010), Acquisition of the English Article System by Speakers of Polish in ESL and EFL Settings, Teachers College, *Columbia University Working Papers in TESOL & Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 4, No. 1
- Huebner, T. (1983). *A longitudinal analysis of the acquisition of English*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Karoma Press
- Ionin, T., Ko, H. i Wexler (2004), Article Semantics in L2-Acquisition: The Role of Specificit. *Language Acquisition* 12: 3-69
- Kim, L., Lakshmanan, U. (2007), The Processing Role of the Article Choice Parameter, *Second Language Acquisition of Articles*, (87-113), John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S. (1973.), *A University Grammar of English*, Longman Group UK LIMITED, London
- Tanović, M. (2002.), *Gramatika engleskog jezika*, Fakultet humanističkih nauka Univerziteta 'Džemal Bijedić' u Mostaru, Mostar