Japanese learners' reliance on specificity when using the English articles:
A forced-choice gap-filling study

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Introduction

Articles are difficult

(for Japanese learners of English).

- **The Article Choice Parameter (Ionin, 2003)**

  - **Languages with two articles encode either specificity or definiteness.**

- **Specificity**

  - **The speaker is certain about the identity of the referent, or the speaker has a specific referent in mind.**

- **Definiteness**

  - **Both the speaker and the hearer presuppose the existence of a unique individual.**

- **In English, articles encode definiteness, not specificity.**

Introduction

(1) I want to talk to <u>**the manager**</u> **of this store. I don't know who he or she is, but I need to make some complaints about the service of the store. [+definite, –specific]**

(2) I want to talk to <u>**the manager**</u> **of this store. She is my old friend. [+definite, +specific]**

(3) I met <u>**a lawyer**</u> **yesterday. He was a very interesting person. [–definite, +specific]**

(4) Our company is having a difficult case with an overseas client. We need to find <u>**a lawyer**</u> **who is experienced in international business. [–definite, –specific]**

- **When a learner of an article-less language learns English, s/he needs to learn…**

  - **that English has articles, and**

  - **that definiteness, not specificity, is encoded.**

- **Some researchers (e.g., Trenkic, 2007) argue that learners have difficulty in the first step.**

- **Others (e.g., Ionin, 2003) propose that the difficulty lies in the second step.**

Urano (2015)

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- **Production data, as opposed to judgment data, were collected to investigate…**

  - **whether or not Japanese learners think articles in English are optional, and**

  - **the extent to which their article choice depended on definiteness and specificity.**

Urano (2015)

- **Participants: 29 Japanese-speaking university students**

- **Materials: 8 tokens for each of the 4 conditions ([±Definite] x [±Specific]) taken from Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004)**

- **Procedure: The participants were asked to translate part of each dialogue into English.**
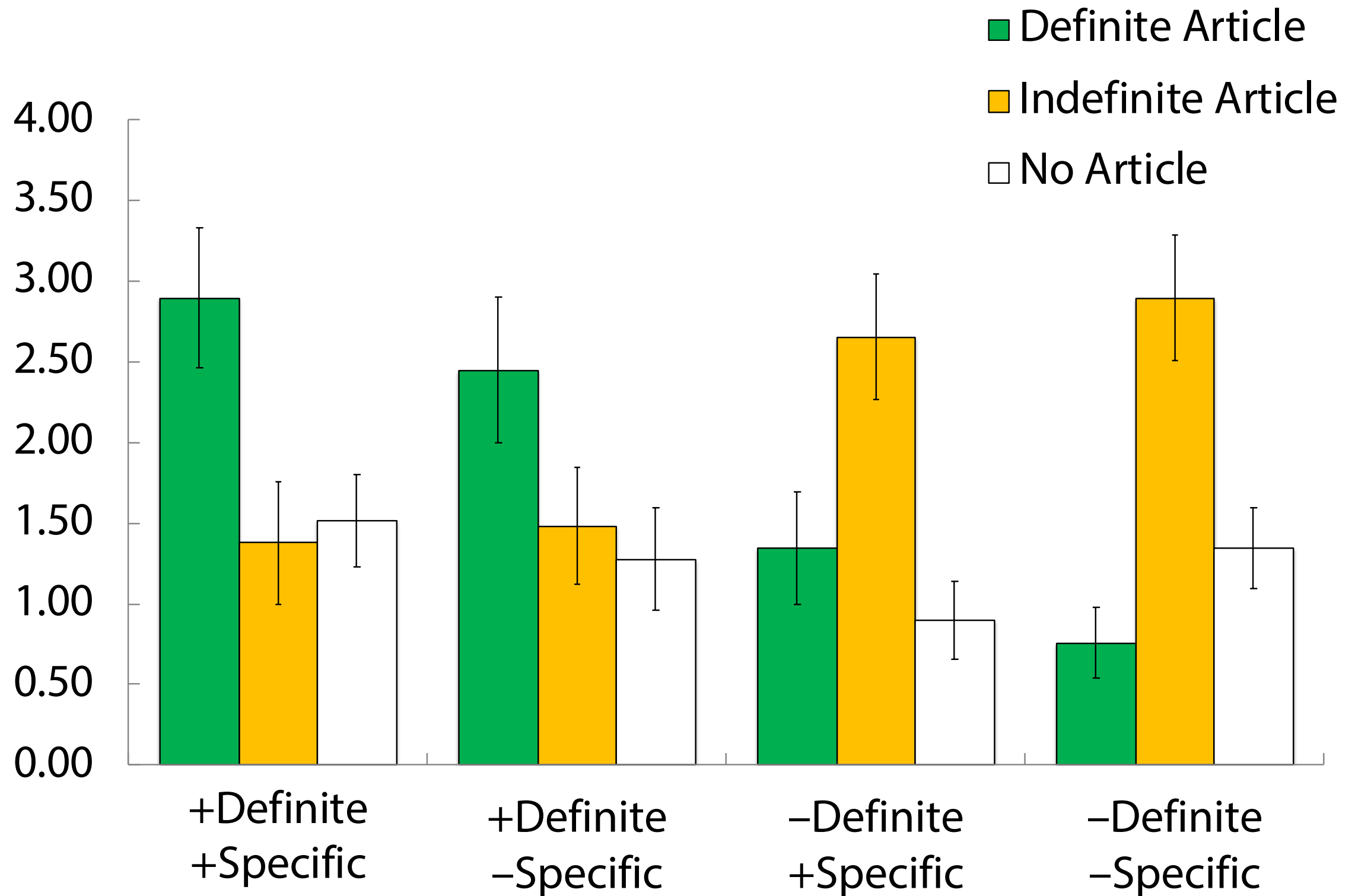
Urano (2015)

店員：お客様、どういたしましたか？

客：ちょっと苦情を言いに来たの。ここでお肉を買ったんだけど、完全に傷んでいたの。<u>この店のオーナーと話がしたいわ。</u>誰なのか知らないけど今すぐ直接会って話をしたいの!

Sales clerk: May I help you, sir?

Customer: Yes. I'm very angry. I bought some meat from this store, but it is completely spoiled. <u>I want to talk to the owner of this store</u>; I don't know who he is, but I want to see him right now. [+Definite, –Specific]

Urano (2015)

- **Main findings:**

1. **Article-less NPs were found across the 4 conditions.**

2. **Use of the definite article *the* was influenced by both definiteness and specificity.**

3. **Use of the indefinite article *a/an* was influenced by definiteness, but not specificity.**

- **Implications:**

1. **Japanese learners may not know that English articles cannot be dropped. It is possible that they have categorized articles as adjectives rather than determiners (Trenkic, 2007).**

2. **When articles are produced, Japanese learners seem to be able to use definiteness as a trigger for article choice, although they are also influenced by specificity to some extent, especially when they produce the definite *the*.**

The Present Study

The Present Study

- **Outline:**

  - **A follow-up study was conducted with a subset of the participants (n = 14) in Urano (2015).**

  - **The same 32 dialogs were used.**

  - **The participants were first asked to judge the acceptability of *the* or *a*.**

  - **If they accepted or rejected both, they were further asked to state their preference.**

The Present Study

- **Outline:**

  - **A follow-up study was conducted with a subset of the participants (n = 14) in Urano (2015).** **a similar and partially overlapping group of learners**

  - **The same 32 dialogs were used.**

  - **The participants were first asked to judge the acceptability of *the* or *a*.**

  - **If they accepted or rejected both, they were further asked to state their preference.**

(Meeting on a street)

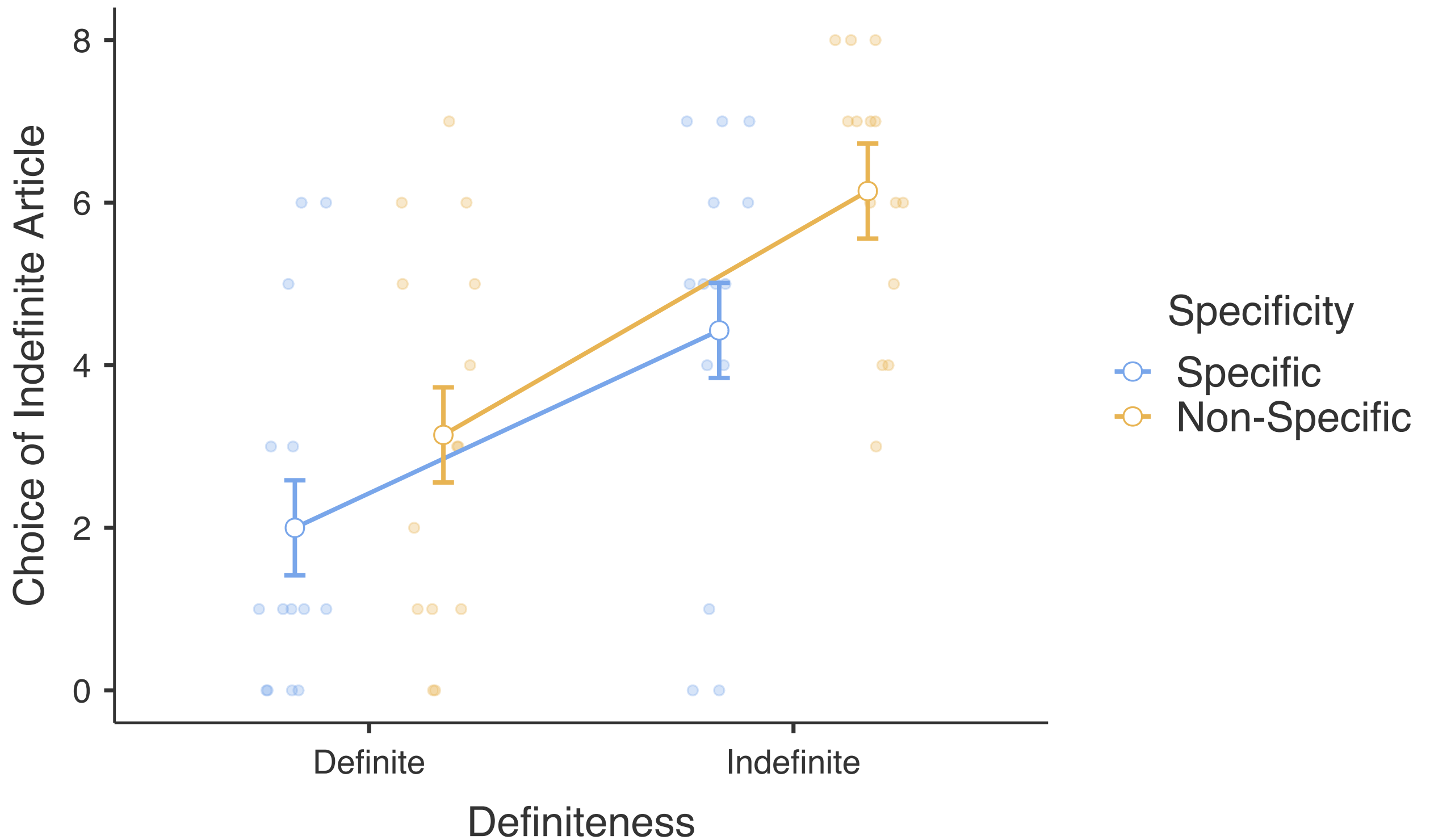**Roberta: Hi, William. It's nice to see you again. I didn't know that you were in Boston.**

William: I am here for a week. _____—his name is Sam Brown, and he lives in Cambridge now. [–Definite, +Specific]

- **[   ] A. I am visiting a friend from college**

- **[   ] B. I am visiting the friend from college**

- **If you accepted or rejected both, which do you think is more appropriate? [   ]**

The Present Study

The Present Study

- **Main findings:**

  1. **The participants were influenced both by definiteness and specificity when choosing articles.**

  2. **The participants relied primarily on definiteness when choosing articles, but their choices were sometimes disturbed by the specificity of the context.**

The Present Study

ID	DS	DN	IS	IN		ID	DS	DN	IS	IN
1	6	6	7	8		8	*0*	*2*	5	8
2	*0*	*0*	5	7		9	*0*	*0*	*0*	4
3	*1*	3	7	8		10	*1*	5	4	7
4	*1*	*1*	5	6		11	*1*	5	*1*	6
5	5	6	7	7		12	3	*1*	6	3
6	*0*	*1*	6	7		13	*1*	4	5	6
7	3	7	*0*	5		14	6	3	4	4

Note. **Highlighted cells indicate 6 or more uses of the indefinite article; italics indicate 2 or less.**

The Present Study

ID	DS	DN	IS	IN		ID	DS	DN	IS	IN
1	6	6	7	8		**8**	*0*	*2*	5	8
2	*0*	*0*	5	7		9	*0*	*0*	*0*	4
3	*1*	3	7	8		10	*1*	5	4	7
4	*1*	*1*	5	6		11	*1*	5	*1*	6
5	5	6	7	7		12	3	*1*	6	3
6	*0*	*1*	6	7		13	*1*	4	5	6
7	3	7	*0*	5		14	6	3	4	4

Participants 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8 performed more or less like native speakers, relying mainly on definiteness.

The Present Study

ID	DS	DN	IS	IN		ID	DS	DN	IS	IN
1	6	6	7	8		8	*0*	*2*	5	8
2	*0*	*0*	5	7		9	*0*	*0*	*0*	4
3	*1*	3	7	8		10	*1*	5	4	7
4	*1*	*1*	5	6		11	*1*	5	*1*	6
5	5	6	7	7		12	3	*1*	6	3
6	*0*	*1*	6	7		13	*1*	4	5	6
7	3	7	*0*	5		14	6	3	4	4

Participants 7, 10, and 11 used specificity as the trigger for article choice, not definiteness.

The Present Study

ID	DS	DN	IS	IN		ID	DS	DN	IS	IN
1	6	6	7	8		8	*0*	*2*	5	8
2	*0*	*0*	5	7		9	*0*	*0*	*0*	4
3	*1*	3	7	8		10	*1*	5	4	7
4	*1*	*1*	5	6		11	*1*	5	*1*	6
5	5	6	7	7		12	3	*1*	6	3
6	*0*	*1*	6	7		13	*1*	4	5	6
7	3	7	*0*	5		14	6	3	4	4

Participants 1 and 5 preferred the indefinite article regardless of definiteness or specificity.

The Present Study

ID	DS	DN	IS	IN		ID	DS	DN	IS	IN
1	6	6	7	8		8	*0*	*2*	5	8
2	*0*	*0*	5	7		9	*0*	*0*	*0*	4
3	*1*	3	7	8		10	*1*	5	4	7
4	*1*	*1*	5	6		11	*1*	5	*1*	6
5	5	6	7	7		12	3	*1*	6	3
6	*0*	*1*	6	7		13	*1*	4	5	6
7	3	7	*0*	5		14	6	3	4	4

Participant 9 chose the definite article in most cases.

The Present Study

- **Analysis of individual data:**

  - **Individual differences were observed.**

  - **Use of group means (and *SDs*) may not be appropriate for studies of L2 article acquisition.**

The Present Study

ID	DS	DN	IS	IN		ID	DS	DN	IS	IN
1	6	6	7	8		8	*0*	*2*	5	8
2	*0*	*0*	5	7		9	*0*	*0*	*0*	4
3	*1*	3	7	8		10	*1*	5	4	7
4	*1*	*1*	5	6		11	*1*	5	*1*	6
5	5	6	7	7		12	3	*1*	6	3
6	*0*	*1*	6	7		13	*1*	4	5	6
7	3	7	*0*	5		14	6	3	4	4

Participants 1, 2, and 3 also took part in the production study.

The Present Study

Participant 1 (indefinite lover).

	DS	DN	IS	IN
ø	3	2	1	1
a	3	3	3	3
the	1	0	0	0
other	1	2	4	4

Note. **Highlighted cells indicate the "correct" responses.**

The Present Study

Participants 2 and 3 (native-like performers).

	DS	DN	IS	IN
ø	2	2	0	2
a	5	3	4	3
the	0	0	1	0
other	1	3	3	3

	DS	DN	IS	IN
ø	4	5	4	4
a	3	3	3	3
the	1	0	0	0
other	1	0	1	1

Note. **Highlighted cells indicate the "correct" responses.**

The Present Study

- **Comparison of the two studies:**

    - **Production and judgment data do not always seem to correspond to each other.**

    - **Production-reception asymmetry or the reproducibility problem?**

Summary

Summary

- **Specificity and definiteness**
- **Locus of the difficulty in L2 article acquisition**
- **Production data from Urano (2015)**
- **Judgment data from the present study**
  - **Successful use of definiteness**
  - **Slight influence of specificity**
  - **Great individual differences**
  - **Possible production-reception asymmetry**

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