

Most of ESL students have trouble with the articles

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The English article system presents many problems for non-native speakers of English, particularly when they do not have an equivalent structure in their first language. Different approaches to the teaching of articles have attempted to overcome this problem. By encouraging students to address the notion of countability and to identify specific uses of articles in English, the ESL teacher in this study was able to improve students' understanding of this difficult area and guide them to a more accurate usage of the English article system.

Articles, countability, definiteness, non-native speakers, teaching ESL

INTRODUCTION

In almost any piece of writing submitted by a non-native speaker of English, three things will often indicate that the writer is working in a second language: the choice of tense and aspect, the subject and verb agreements, and the use of articles (*the, a, an*). While verb problems can largely be overcome and the mistakes in agreements eliminated by careful proofreading, the problems with articles frequently remain. Since articles rank among the five most common words in the English language (Sinclair, 1991, cited in Master, 2002, p.332), errors in this area are highly noticeable to native speakers.

Given that Australian universities are experiencing an influx of international students who speak English as a second or even third language, it is imperative for academic advisors who specialise in TESL to understand the major language difficulties of these students. Since many of our international students come from Asian countries, this means that their most frequent language problem is in the area of articles. This study was prompted by the desire to address the language needs of Chinese L1 speakers, who formed the largest number of students in an ESL topic taught at a South Australian university in the second semester of 2004. It is an exploratory study, which aims to target a major language area that does not exist in Chinese (namely, the use of articles), and to develop an appropriate teaching method, central to which is the notion of countability. It is anticipated that this paper will inform both my own teaching and that of my centre, and will have implications for teachers of English to international students.

ENGLISH ARTICLES

The importance of using articles correctly

Articles in English are one of the key indicators of native speaker competence, and the ease with which native speakers use articles can lead them to ignore the complexities of the system and often be unaware of their importance to English syntax (Lipski, 1978, p.13). Hewson (1972, p.132) has called the English article system a “psychomechanism”, through which native speakers use articles correctly but unconsciously. Since errors in the use of articles generally do not impede communication, many learners may feel that the effort involved in learning the system correctly is not proportionate to the benefits accrued (Master, 1997, p.216). For academic writing, however, a

greater level of accuracy is required, and the correct article becomes an indication not only of mastery of the language but of exactness in thought and expression. As Master (1997, p.216) indicates, “imperfect control [of the use of articles] may . . . suggest imperfect knowledge”, leading to the perception that the writer of a university essay or academic paper does not have an adequate grasp of their subject.

According to Hewson (1972, p.131), “the definite and the indefinite article are among the ten most frequent words of English discourse”. Sinclair (1991, in Master, 2002, p.332) lists *the* as the most frequent word and *a* as the fifth most frequent. This frequency means that these two small words have a wide-ranging effect on speech styles and expression, and that proficiency in this system will provide non-native speakers with a perceptibly increased level of accuracy.

It has been suggested (Yamada and Matsuura, 1982, in Butler, 2002, p.452) that learners “use articles almost randomly”. Some teachers, indeed, believe that the system is so difficult to acquire that no rules can be taught (Krech and Driver, 1996). Master (1997, p.216), however, suggests that “formal instruction does have a positive effect”, and many teachers do indeed attempt to give rules for the use of articles. Swales and Feak (1994), for example, give a detailed review of article uses for non-native speakers of English engaged in academic writing. Such rules are nonetheless hard to formulate.

The English article system

One of the key factors in teaching articles is the notion of countability (Butler, 2002, p.475). In English, nouns may be divided into the categories of “countable” and “uncountable” (also called “count” and “noncount”). Countable nouns are those which may take a plural form (such as “tables” or “children”), while uncountable nouns (such as “mud” or “information”) cannot be made plural. It is important for students to realise that countability is a grammatical category and not a practical one. “Money”, for example, is countable when it is in a wallet but is not usually countable as a noun, although the form “moneys” is found in a business sense. This variability of forms constitutes a difficulty for the learner, especially with the increasing use of traditionally uncountable nouns, such as “knowledge” or “behaviour”, in the plural within many academic disciplines. Another difficulty is that some English nouns, such as “experience”, may be either countable or uncountable, according to their meaning. (We could contrast, for example, someone’s “experiences” while on holiday in China with the amount of “experience” they have had in using a difficult computer program.) A third difficulty for many non-native speakers of English is that some nouns may be made plural in their own languages but not in English. (*Informations*, for example, is correct in French.) Yet again, there is an increasing tendency for native speakers to make a noun countable by using it in a classificatory sense (Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973, p.61), omitting a container, so that they speak of “three coffees and two waters” instead of “three cups of coffee and two bottles of water”. While countability is fundamental, therefore, it is not an easy concept to quantify.

Identifying countability, then, is problematic for the learner. Yoon (1993, in Master, 1997, p.218) points out that Japanese speakers, for example, find it difficult to determine how native speakers of English regard nouns that may be countable or uncountable according to context. Indeed, Allen (1980, in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.274) has suggested that there are eight different “levels of countability”. Most grammar books, however, present a more clear-cut distinction. Monolingual English dictionaries designed for native speakers do not provide information on countability, since so many variations are possible (Master, 2002, p.334). A learners’ dictionary of English, on the other hand, will give the countable or uncountable status of a noun and, usually, an example of its usage. In 2004, the five major English learners’ dictionaries all included the identification of a noun as countable or uncountable. This categorisation is not, however, without its problems (Landau, 1984, p.90). Nevertheless, a learners’ dictionary is a good

place for language students to start, and more students (and their teachers) should be aware of the value of English learners' dictionaries to enhance language skills.

Once a noun has been identified as countable or uncountable, the user must then decide whether an article is necessary. This means that the next criterion to determine is definiteness. Although other languages may contain definiteness, this may not be conveyed by the use of articles, as it is in English. Chinese, for example, although it does not have articles, has a notion of definiteness associated with a topic (Ramsey, 1987, p.66). Hawkins (1978, p.130) states that the definite article "tells the hearer . . . that the object referred to is a member of [a 'shared set'] and instructs him to find the right set and relate the referent to it". For the learner, this means that definiteness can be simply defined as "presumed known to the listener" (Bickerton, 1981, p.147). Liu and Gleason's study (2002, p.16) indicates that students may initially overuse the definite article, even following instruction on its use, but that this will eventually be remedied. Liu and Gleason (2002) state that the use of *the* may be generic or non-generic, and suggest that the non-generic uses are the most difficult for language learners, particularly in relation to what they term "cultural use" (p.5).

The indefinite article, *a* or *an*, is slightly less problematic for most students, since its use is restricted to singular, countable nouns. According to Bickerton (1981, p.147), "'indefinite' really means presumed unknown to the listener". It is thus used with nouns which have not been mentioned before, and with generic nouns. It may also be used with uncountable nouns (Master, 1997, p.225) for a "boundary-creating effect", as in "a high-grade steel" (a kind of steel which is of good quality). The problem for ESL students lies in identifying whether or not a noun is countable (Master, 1997, p.218) and whether it is being used in a countable or uncountable sense.

The zero article may also cause difficulties. Master (1997, p.221), for example, divides the zero article into two: the zero article and the null article. Zero articles are used before uncountables and plurals, such as "sand" ("There was sand everywhere") and "pebbles" ("Pebbles are found on beaches"). Null articles are used before singular countables ("Counting of the votes began later") and proper nouns. Since the null article is often used in scientific writing (as in "Use of this method implied...") it can present an additional problem to students. For the purposes of this study, "zero article" refers to both Master's "zero" article and "null" article, and is used to describe the situation in which a definite or indefinite article is not used.

In some situations, either a definite or an indefinite article may be possible. Definitions fit into this category. Hewson (1972, p.73) gives the following examples: "A table is a useful article of furniture" and "The table is a useful article of furniture". The first sentence he describes as "a typical representative example" and the second as "universal and general". A definite or indefinite article may also be used in the pattern Article + Noun + of, where the indefinite article is used for the first mention of something which is a singular occurrence or part of a whole, as in "a result of this" or "a grain of rice", but the definite article is used in most other occurrences of this pattern.

In the study which follows, a simple chart was presented to assist students to consider categories of countability and uncountability, as well as definiteness and non-definiteness (see Figure 1). The term "zero article" was used to cover all situations in which a definite or indefinite article is not used.

THE STUDY

Subjects

All the participants were in their first or second year of study at an Australian university and had already received several years of English instruction, either in their home country or at a language school in Australia. Two were postgraduates and the remainder were undergraduates. The research was conducted at the end of the second semester, meaning that all the students had been in

Australia for at least three months and had been required to write assignments in English during that time. Although language proficiency was not recorded in this study, a minimum overall IELTS score of 6 is a prerequisite for study at this university. All students were members of an ESL class at the university and had already received instruction in academic writing skills, vocabulary and grammar for three months prior to this research. Male and female participants were almost equally represented (M=23, F=18), and the students were mostly aged in their early twenties. Of the 41 participants, 31 were from a Chinese speaking background. The other participants had the following L1 background: Amharic (1), Arabic (2), Japanese (3), Khmer (1), Portuguese (1), Swedish (1) and Tagalog (1).

Method

The exercises in this study were designed to encourage students to formulate their own rules governing English article use. Although one student complained that he would rather be taught the rules than work them out for himself, others indicated that thinking through the possibilities had helped them to understand the use better. The results confirmed this. Because of the small sample size, the results are not conclusive, but they are indicative of an improvement in the students' use of articles. The exercise was conducted in the final class, and this timing may account for the relatively small improvement the students showed, since all the students were tired and many were resistant to further grammar teaching. Given the time constraints imposed on the course, however, it had not been possible to provide this session earlier.

The students were given two exercises to complete at the beginning of the session (see Appendix 1). The first exercise (Text 1) contained fifteen gaps that had to be filled either with a definite article, an indefinite article or no article at all. The gaps were separated by a minimum of two words and a maximum of 22 words. The second exercise (Text 2) comprised a short paragraph from which ten articles had been removed, at a maximum interval of 15 words and a minimum interval of two words. No gaps were shown, but students had to correctly identify the gaps and insert articles where appropriate. Both texts were taken from passages in *Making the Grade* (Hay, Bochner, and Dungey, 2002), a book of academic skills advice for university students, and were thus representative of a generic form of English that was not specific to any one discipline. The readability level of the texts was calculated at grade 10.3 on the Flesch-Kincaid scale. This was judged to be appropriate to university level students, and the students themselves indicated that the texts were of a suitable level when they gave an average of 4.09 on a scale from one to seven in answer to the question "Was the material too hard?". Although the first exercise was in a format familiar to all the students, the second exercise proved much more difficult. Thus, although 31 students completed the first exercise, only 23 completed the second exercise.

After the exercises had been completed, a lesson was conducted on the English article system. Students were first asked to explain the notions of countability and uncountability in regard to nouns. This proved unproblematic, with students correctly identifying the countable properties of words such as "table" and "chair" and the uncountable nature of words such as "information". They were then asked to identify what was meant by the concept of "definiteness". This was obviously harder, with students giving examples (such as "something which has been mentioned before"), but finding it difficult to put such an elusive notion into words. We finally arrived at the somewhat elastic description of "something which is known to both the hearer and the speaker". Having established the two concepts of countability and definiteness, the students were introduced to the "Choosing the right article" chart (see Figure 1) to help them decide whether or not a noun needed an article. It was reiterated that a singular, countable noun must have an article, if it is not preceded by another word such as a demonstrative or a possessive adjective.

Having become familiar with the articles chart, the students were then given a passage about the River Murray, in which the articles had been highlighted in bold font (see Appendix 2). Almost all

the articles in the first two paragraphs were definite articles; the third paragraph contained mostly indefinite articles; and the fourth paragraph contained examples of zero articles marked by an underlined space. Students had to be reminded that this fourth paragraph had no need for articles, since several of them tried to fill in the gaps, due, probably, to sheer force of habit. With the passage, the students were given a table to complete in order to identify the different uses of the articles in the passage (see Figure 1). The table was divided into three sections: the definite article, the indefinite article and the zero article. For the definite and zero articles, examples were taken from the passage and students were required to identify particular uses. For the indefinite article section, the uses were given and students were asked to find examples from the passage (see Appendix 3). The students worked in pairs to complete this part of the study.

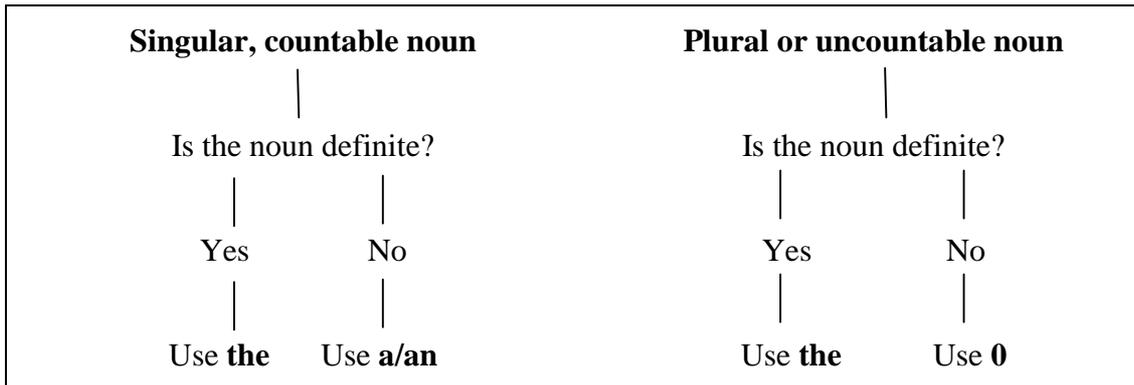


Figure 1: Choosing the right article

After 20 minutes, the results were discussed. A Student Learning Centre handout I had earlier compiled, with more complete information, was then given to the students, as well as an explanation about the uses of articles in definitions. Finally, the students were asked to complete the original exercise (Texts 1 and 2) again, on a separate sheet of paper, using the information they had just gained. The two exercises were then collected by a third party, and the participants were invited to complete a questionnaire on the effectiveness of the session. Correct answers to the exercises were then distributed (see Appendix 4).

FINDINGS

Although some students were resistant to the idea of learning more grammar, especially in an area in which they already felt themselves to be reasonably proficient, the exercises highlighted the fact that, even for advanced students of English, improvement in this area is possible. Owing to the small number of participants, findings are not conclusive, but they are indicative of the fact that this is an area of English which needs addressing and in which a difference can be made.

Both texts showed an improvement in accuracy. The correct answers for the gap-fill exercise, Text 1, rose from 80 per cent to 83 per cent. Text 2 accuracy rose from 43 per cent to 54 per cent. The results for Text 2 indicate that students had not only identified the correct article, but had correctly identified where an article was needed. In other words, they had established that a singular countable noun requires an article, and had then chosen that article correctly. This is an important result in that, while students are used to completing gap-fill exercises and can often identify the right article when prompted, it is harder for them to judge when an article is necessary if a gap is not indicated, so that their own writing is frequently lacking in articles. If they are able to identify the place for an article, they are at least half way towards correct usage.

In the first attempt at Text 2, students had made a total of 116 article insertions, 99 of which were correct. In the second attempt, 146 insertions were made, of which 121 were correct. Although

mistakes were made, it was generally not the placing of the article but the choice of article that was at fault. The only error made consistently in Text 2 was the insertion of *a* before the phrase “brief in-text references”. This was not corrected on the second attempt by any of the students. Moreover, four students who had not inserted an article here before the teaching session had inserted one after the lesson. This may have been due to careless reading of the noun phrase.

The changes made in the two texts after the lesson are indicative of a greater awareness of countability. Of the correct changes made, the most evident was the insertion of an article where none had been placed before. Thirty-five corrections were made from zero to *the*, 33 before singular countable nouns and two before plural countable nouns. Twelve corrections were made from zero to *a*. The total of 47 changes from zero to an article before a countable noun indicates that students had correctly reassessed the nouns for countability. Of the incorrect changes, the highest number was nine changes from *the* to zero. Two of these were made before “library’s resources” (Text 1), indicating that students had identified “resources” rather than “library” as the noun which needed a determiner. Another two were made at the end of Text 2, before the word “information”, showing that “information” was incorrectly thought to be uncountable and non-definite. On the whole, however, the insertion of articles suggests that students had effectively understood and applied the notion of countability.

Were a further similar study to be undertaken, it is suggested that more texts of both Types 1 and 2 be used. Student feedback indicated that more examples similar to those in the River Murray passage be given, and that the lesson be lengthened and perhaps taught over two sessions to allow consolidation of the information gained.

Limitations

Limitations to this study include the fact that this was the last session of the semester. Students were hurrying to complete assignments before their deadlines and were preparing for their exams. In addition, the small numbers in the samples do not provide enough data for wider generalisation.

Recommendations

This exercise was carried out in a single session, but it is suggested that a longitudinal study would show the lasting benefit of this method of teaching. Research involving different age groups would be fruitful, as would a comparison of the number of years students have spent in an English speaking country prior to doing the exercise. The use of several texts would allow a greater comparison of findings, and assessment of the readability levels of the texts would be helpful. In addition, information about the subject each student is studying would permit a comparison between the skills used, or possibly acquired, within specific disciplines.

CONCLUSION

From this study, it is apparent that the most effective element in the lesson was the reinforcement of the notion of countability. With greater use of learners’ dictionaries, students could more correctly identify when nouns are used countably or uncountably. The evidence presented here suggests that learners do not use articles “randomly”, as suggested by Yamada and Matsuura (1982, in Butler, 2002, p.452), but that they choose articles according to whether or not the noun is countable. The concept of definiteness is, however, more problematic. Nevertheless, it is possible, as Master (1997, p.216) claims, for teachers to make a positive contribution to learners’ knowledge in this important area.

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APPENDIX 1

Text 1: Please complete the following exercise, using a/the/0 where appropriate.

(a) _____ library catalogue is (b) _____ key to (c) _____ library's resources. It gives you (d) _____ information about materials held in (e) _____ library, and (f) _____ details you need to locate them. All (g) _____ Australian and New Zealand university libraries have online or computerised catalogues. Most libraries have their catalogue terminals scattered throughout (h) _____ building. This is (i) _____ distinct advantage over the old card catalogues, which could only be in one location. Moreover, in many cases you can connect to (j) _____ computer catalogue from home if you have (k) _____ personal computer and (l) _____ modem. However, (m) _____ card catalogue is not quite extinct; some academic libraries still retain one for details of older material. (n) _____ oldest books may be on (o) _____ separate record.

Adapted from Hay, I. Bochner, D. and Dungey, C. (1997) *Making the Grade*. Sydney: Oxford University Press. p.35

/15

Text 2 Can you add articles where necessary in the following text?

Harvard referencing system has two essential components: brief in-text references noted throughout your work and comprehensive list of references at end of work. In-text reference gives date it was published, family name of author and page where information can be found.

Adapted from Hay, I. Bochner, D. and Dungey, C. (1997) *Making the Grade*. Sydney: Oxford University Press. p.155

/10

APPENDIX 2

I went to a lecture yesterday. **The** lecture was very interesting. It told us about **the** problems of **the** Murray, which is **the** longest river in Australia. **The** Murray is becoming very dry. According to **the** Friends of the Murray, we in **the** West have plenty of water, but we waste it on our European-style gardens. People in **the** Philippines and **the** Maldives do not have this problem, but the **British** in particular have always liked their rose gardens, which demand a lot of water. People who live near **the** Equator, and **the** rich in northern countries, like **the** Queen of England, have plenty of water and do not have problems with their gardens. Native plants are not so thirsty. **The** Sturt desert pea, which is **the** floral emblem of South Australia, grows in dry conditions.

In **the** 1990s **the** problems with the Murray became **the** principal focus of **the** group known as **the** Friends of the Murray. They distributed thousands of questionnaires, to see what people thought about **the** water problems. Most of **the** questionnaires were returned, but none of **the** answers showed that people were prepared to modify their gardens. Because **the** dollar was strong against **the** pound at **the** end of **the** 1990s, people felt that they had sufficient money to pay for **the** water needed to maintain their gardens.

People would sometimes water their gardens twice **a** day, using hundreds of litres of water **an** hour. The River Murray is not **an** inexhaustible resource. **A** litre of water may not cost **a** householder much, but thousands of litres all together make **a** big difference to the river. I am not **a** water engineer, but it is easy to understand that people cannot continue to use water at this rate.

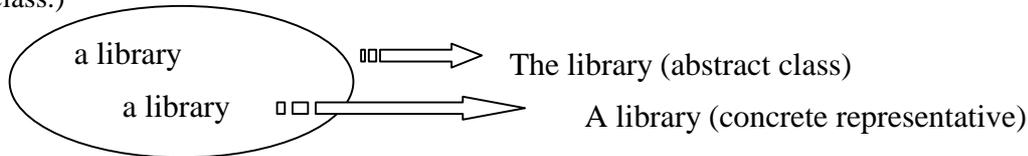
The mouth of the River Murray is becoming full of ___ mud. This ___ mud is bad for ___ water life and causes ___ difficulties for ___ water dwellers. ___ Fish that become exposed to these ___ conditions may die. ___ Australians must become aware of their ___ water usage and decrease it before it is too late. ___ Most researchers agree on this ___ point.

APPENDIX 3

	Use	Examples
The Definite Article	something already mentioned	the lecture; the problems with the Murray; the group known as...; the water problems the problems of; the floral emblem of; the end of the Murray; the Philippines; the Maldives the longest the Friends of the Murray the West; the British; the rich the Equator; the Queen of England
	an emblem, class or category	the Sturt desert pea the 1990s the principal most of the questionnaires; none of the answers the dollar; the pound the water needed to maintain their gardens
The Indefinite Article	a measurement or rate the first mention of a singular noun a singular measurement someone's job	
Zero Article		mud; water life; fish this mud; these conditions; their water usage; most researchers; this point Difficulties; water dwellers; Australians

Definitions can take a definite or an indefinite article:

The library is a place where you can find books. (Here, *library* means the entire class of places called *libraries*, not a specific library.) **A** library is a place where you can find books. (Here, *library* represents a class.)



APPENDIX 4: ANSWERS

Text 1

Your answers to this exercise will vary according to whether you have interpreted the passage as referring to a non-specific library (any library anywhere) or a specific library (such as the one you are in).

- a) **the** singular, countable noun; definite and unique; a category
a singular, countable noun; not definite (any catalogue is important)
- b) **the** singular, countable noun; definite and unique
a singular, countable noun; not definite (one of several keys)
- c) **a** singular, countable noun; not definite (we do not know which library, and it does not matter)
the singular, countable noun; the entire class of libraries
- d) **0** singular, uncountable noun; not definite
- e) **the** singular, countable noun; already referred to in the passage
a singular, countable noun; not definite (any library)
- f) **the** plural, countable noun; defined in the phrase (ie which details? The details you need...)
g) **0** plural, countable noun; not definite or specific
the plural, countable noun; (the libraries in Australia and NZ)
- h) **the** singular, countable noun; definite (refers to one library building)
a singular, countable noun; indefinite (the library may have several buildings, but it is not important which one is referred to here)
- i) **a** singular, countable noun; not definite, not mentioned before
the singular, countable noun; (the advantage is distinct, and therefore unique)
- j) **the** singular, countable noun; already referred to in the passage
a singular, countable noun; (any catalogue)
- k) **a** singular, countable noun; not definite (could be any kind of PC)
- l) **a** singular, countable noun; not definite (could be any kind of modem)
- m) **the** singular, countable noun; acting as a whole category
- n) **the** singular, countable noun; definite; superlative
- o) **a** singular, countable noun; not definite, not mentioned before

Text 2

The Harvard referencing system has two essential components: brief in-text references noted throughout your work and **a** comprehensive list of references at **the** end of **the** work. **The** in-text reference gives **the** date it was published, **the** family name of **the** author and **the** page where **the** information can be found.