APPROACHES AND ACTIVITIES FOR ENGLISH ARTICLE USE

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Abstract

The article system of English can be difficult for students to understand and even for teachers to articulate. Some theorists believe that article pedagogy should focus on form. Others, most notably Pica (1983), believe that article pedagogy should focus on a communicative approach. Both approaches have valid claims. Although, there is no single or particular schema or method for teaching articles, a variety of options for conceptualizing article pedagogy and usage found in the literature will be presented. The effectiveness of teaching activities and exercises rely upon the proficiency levels, cultures, and ages of the students being taught. Learners can also be encouraged to foster their own learning of the article system by keeping a tally of their article errors, thus becoming ethnographers of their own learning process.

Keywords: *teaching articles, English grammar, article pedagogy, article use, testing grammar*

Introduction

Teaching the articles of English as any ESL/EFL instructor knows, can be a complicated procedure. Often students encounter exceptions for the given rules: why do English speakers say *the* flu but not *the* headache or *the* United Kingdom but not *the* Canada? Even when students do understand article usage, errors can still appear

after years of study. Teaching the article system of English to language learners can seem like an insurmountable task.

However, being informed about the various perspectives on both article usage and pedagogy can help instructors begin to make some sense of this complicated system. The more options instructors have for conceptualizing and presenting articles to their students, the better equipped they will be to help a wide variety of students with different levels of English proficiency and learning needs. In this paper, I will present a variety of options for conceptualizing article pedagogy and usage. My purpose here is not to argue for the advancement of one theory over another. Instead, I wish merely to raise awareness of the varied ways that exist for understanding articles and discuss their pedagogical implications.

Literature review

Two main general approaches to article pedagogy exist. On the one hand, some theorists believe that article pedagogy should focus on form. Others, most notably Pica (1983), believe that article pedagogy should focus on a communicative approach. Both approaches have valid claims.

Proponents of the communicative approach claim that most article mistakes are insignificant for communicative purposes. Even some proponents of more form-based approaches, such as Master (1994), did acknowledge article usage rarely hinders oral communication. Master gave an example of a waitress who placed a slice of pie on the order counter and told her cook to "make a pie hot". In this instance, although the waitress did not use the correct grammar, there can be no doubt of her meaning. In oral discourse, articles are usually not necessary for comprehension.

Pica (1983) also noted that the common patterns taught in English language courses are not typically demonstrated in actual discourse. In one study, participants responding to the question "Can you tell me where I can find a drugstore?" never used *the* to name that place again. Instead, the respondents used words such as *it* and *one* as well as synonyms or forms of the proper noun. Pica (1983, p.228) concluded, "patterns of article use revealed in the natural data could not be correctly or completely described by the rules of article usage presented in the instructional materials". According to such an approach, patterns of natural usage should be explicitly presented to students. Pica suggested using recordings of restaurant dialogues and other communicative situations and asking students to analyze these recordings for article usage.

A final objection of proponents of the communicative approach is the presentation of rules governing article usage. So many rules and exceptions to these rules exist, and students cannot possibly learn all of them. Pica even claimed that instruction might not influence acquisition of articles; in one study she found that explicit instruction did not facilitate acquisition of the article *a* because the grammatical structure was too difficult as stated in Master (1994). Instead, Pica and other proponents of the communicative approach believe that students will gain a mastery of articles by developing awareness of article usage in communicative contexts.

Those who favour an approach focused on form criticise communicative approaches for reliance on exposure to the use of articles in communicative contexts. Master (1994) noted that articles such as *the* and *a*, because they are not stressed in conversation, can be very difficult for non-native speakers to distinguish. This results

in the speaker either ignoring articles completely or using them randomly. Avoiding such mistakes will become even more important when the learner begins to write.

Overall, it is important to remember that such approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Indeed, the two approaches might be viewed on a continuum, with communicative methods such as the natural approach at one end of the continuum and the translation method at the opposite end. Knowing the advantages and drawbacks of each focus, though, might help instructors know where on the continuum they should situate their pedagogy for a particular context.

Just as knowledge of more general approaches to teaching articles can be useful, so can knowledge of more specific schemas or conceptualizations of the article system. Ways of viewing articles as a system vary widely. A few schemas include *some* in their treatment of articles, while others ignore *some* in its capacity as an article. Others present article usage as a complex array of choices, while some claim that article usage can be explained by one feature. Basic schemas might be applicable to present to beginning learners or as an explanation for a certain error, while more complicated schemas will be more appropriate at advanced levels.

Swan (1980) presented one such basic schema. His schema explains the possible articles for singular countable, plural countable and uncountable nouns:

	a/an	the	(0) (no article)
singular countable	a cat	the cat	---
plural countable	---	the cats	cats
uncountable	---	the water	water

Table 1

Such a schema illustrates several rules of article usage that beginning students might find useful. For example, the chart shows that singular countable nouns must

always take an article. It also shows that plural countable and uncountable nouns cannot be used with *a/an.* This schema might be helpful in explaining why the following sentence is incorrect: "Change takes a long time" (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman 1999). Of course, this schema will not explain when *a* vs *the* should be used. To explain more complicated usage rules, a more complex schema is necessary.

Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), however, did present a basic schema that provides a simple explanation of when the various articles should be used. A valuable facet of this schema is that it includes *some*; many other sources consider *some* to be a determiner.

	Definite		**Indefinite**	
Specific Reference	the tiger / the tigers	the ink	a tiger / (some) tigers	(some) ink
Generic Reference		the tiger / a tiger / tigers	ink	

Table 2

This schema shows that article usage varies depending on the type of reference. As Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) explained, the definite article is used for all noun classes for definite specific references. With indefinite specific reference, *a* is used with singular count nouns while the zero article or *some* is used with non-count or plural nouns. The schema also illustrates that *the*, *a*, and the zero article can all be used to indicate generic reference. Standwell (1997) stated that English does not

permit the use of the definite article in the plural in the generic sense. It is correct to say: *Horses are useful animals*, but not *The horses are useful animals.*

One interesting theoretical schema for viewing article usage came from Hewson (1972). He suggested that the article system has a basic contrast or binary; the difference between the indefinite and definite article is the direction of movement towards the general or the particular. In other words, *a/an*, because it is introductory and singular, signals a movement from general mention to particular mention (Mizuno 1999):

A table is a useful article of furniture. (general)

A table stands in the corner of the room. (specific)

The, because of its anaphoric quality, begins a movement from the specific to a second general or universal (Mizuno 1999):

The table stands in the corner of the room. (specific)

The table is a useful article of furniture. (general)

According to Hewson (1972, p.73), "the kinetic values of the indefinite are all oriented toward the particular and singular; those of the definite towards the general and universal". In Hewson's schema, nouns that take the zero article are "bare nouns" which present a "limitless, formless, continuate entity". While Hewson's schema undoubtedly would be rather confusing for English learners, his concept of articles as binaries is an important one that forms the basis for later, more pedagogically-based schemas.

Hawkins (1978) proposed a "location" theory for article usage. When the definite article is used, Hawkins claims, a hearer must be able to identify "either an immediate situation, one of a fair number of larger situations, or else one of a vast

number of sets of associated objects." The hearer must be able to "identify some set and locate the referent in it". In contrast, the indefinite article introduces a referent to a hearer or refers to a subset (not all) of the potential referents. Hawkins' schema is too difficult to directly teach to English learners. His schema simply provides the language teacher another possible tool for understanding articles.

According to Mizuno (1999), learners or acquirers of English occupy a particular point in space and a particular point in time. Examples of this contrast between (0) and *the* are as follows:

There is a dog in the front of the car.

There is a dog in (0) front of the car.

As Master (1990) noted, Whitman does not include the generic uses of *a/an* and *the* in his schema because this usage is not common and best taught to more advanced learners.

As does Hewson, Master (1990) proposed a binary schema for viewing article usage. His schema, a classification-identification system, is more pedagogical than that of Hewson, but like Hewson, Master collapsed other distinctions into a binary. According to Master, the linguistic features of article usage include definiteness, specificity, count and number. Number, he claimed, is just a subset of count. The two main characteristics, definiteness and specificity can be seen in the following examples:

A. [-definite][+specific] *A tick entered my car.*

B. [-definite][-specific] *A tick carries disease.*

C. [+definite][+specific] *The computer is down today.*

D. [+definite][-specific] *The computer is changing our lives.*

Master proposed that these two features can be combined into a single feature, which he calls identification; a noun can either be identified (+identification) or classified (-identification). The distinction between sentences A and B then becomes less important. In both cases, "something that can be classified as a tick" is the subject (Master 1990). In sentences C and D, the computer is being identified as opposed to classified. In other words, 'if a noun phrase is given (i.e., thematic, it is identified; if it is new (i.e., rhematic), it is classified' (Master 1990).

In such a system, a noun marked for identification would automatically use *the*, whether count or non-count, plural or singular, while a noun that lacked identification would either use *a* or the zero article, depending on whether it was singular, plural or non-count. In another paper, Master (1996) explained this difference: articles classify nouns (using a/an or the zero article) to indicate that a noun is a member of a group of similar items or they identify the noun (using *the*) to demonstrate that the noun has been marked somehow.

In a later paper, Master (1994) also proposed another potential schema for viewing articles. He suggested that article usage has six major aspects which can be put in the form of a series of choices, or distinctions, that students can make:

1. Countable-uncountable and singular-plural distinctions:

There is a tree in my garden.

There are followers in my garden.

There is grass in my garden.

2. Indefinite *a(n)*, [0] vs. definite *the*

There is a tree in my garden. The tree is losing its leaves.

There are flowers in my garden. The flowers are blooming.

3. Premodefied-postmodefied distinction:

A mangy old cat came into the room.

The cat which lives down the street came into the room.

4. Specific-generic distinction:

I received a book for my birthday.

A book makes a great gift.

5. Common noun-proper noun distinction:

A doctor came to see me.

Dr. Smith came to see me.

6. Idiomatic phrase-nonidiomatic phrase distinction

He is always on edge.

He lives on the edge of town.

Master demonstrated that students who have been taught from this systematic schema use articles significantly more correctly than students who have not had such exposure. In two experiments at UCLA, students in classes where this schema was taught increased their ability to correctly use articles over students who were not given any systematic instruction on article usage. Master states that this instruction was "a means of accelerating that acquisition by making students aware of and increasing their conscious control of the way the article system works" (Master 1994, p.247).

All of these schemas represent viable ways of conceptualizing the same system. Schema choice will depend on perspective and purpose. A theoretical description of article usage will of course view articles differently than a pedagogical framework. Whether theoretical or pedagogical, each way of viewing articles can be

valuable to the language teacher in a particular context. The next section will present a sample of teaching activities based on particular approaches and schemas.

Pedagogical applications

One popular exercise commonly used in approaches that focus on form is a cloze passage. In cloze passages, the articles have been removed from a paragraph or series of paragraphs and students must fill in the appropriate articles. A possible way to add a communicative element to such a passage is to use a description of a culturally specific story or event, as in the following passage suggested by Kolln (2003).

> Dorothy was little girl who lived on farm in Kansas. Tornado struck farm and carried her over rainbow to land of Munchkins. Soon afterwards she met scarecrow who wanted brain, tin man who wanted heart, and lion who wanted courage. One way to Emerald City four friends met wicked witch who cast spell on them in the field of flowers. Which wanted magic shoes that Dorothy was wearing. When they reached city, as you recall, they met wizard. Story has happy ending. (Kolln 2003, pp.166-167)

With this passage, article usage will vary from speaker to speaker, especially between speakers of different cultures. For example, those speakers familiar with the story might use the phrases "the rainbow" or "the scarecrow" because they assume the referents are known to their hearers as cultural norms. Other students might use "a rainbow" or "a scarecrow". Such an activity can give students practice in article usage (focus on form), but can further illustrates that article usage depends on the cultural and the communicative context, not just rules.

Another activity that might help students focus on more basic schemas for article usage was suggested by Azar (1999). To help students practice placing the correct articles with the correct nouns, as well as the use of *a/an* and *some* to introduce

specific, indefinite nouns, Azar introduced the game "My Grandfather's Store". In this game, each student begins by using the phrase "I went to my grandfather's store and bought…." The first student begins with an item starting with "A"; the second student must incorporate the first student's choice and then add an item beginning with "B". This pattern continues until all the students have participated. The fifth student's sentence, for example, might look something like this: "I went to my grandfather's store and bought *an* apple, *some* bubble gum, *a* candy bar, *some* dried fruit, and *an* elephant ear". This activity would help students incorporate the basic schemas suggested by Swan (1980) and Quirk and Greenbaum (1973).

A simple worksheet can also be a useful activity in developing students' understanding of article usage. Master (1996) provided a sample exercise that asks students to indicate whether nouns are classified or identified. Students simply need to circle the appropriate choice for each underlined noun phrase:

There was once <u>a little boy</u> who had <u>a red wagon.</u>

(class)(ident)   (class)(ident)

This exercise also works well because Master uses a single passage so that students can see article usage in a larger context. Such an exercise is an example of an application of Master's (1990) binary classification/identification schema.

A study by Master (2002) suggested that language teachers should present canonical information (given information first, new information last); the group that was taught using the information structure framework did better than the groups that received traditional instruction and no instruction of article use.

These examples illustrate that all teaching activities are based on a particular schema for conceptualizing article usage. Instructors need to be aware of the

underlying theoretical and pedagogical assumptions of the activities they choose. With this awareness, instructors can choose the activities and exercises that suit their students and help them to be proficient in the second language.

Conclusion

As with all areas of English grammar, several ways of conceptualizing article usage exist. No one way is necessarily more correct than another; all of the methods presented here are valid schemas for viewing articles. Whether a particular schema is appropriate for presentation to students, however, depends on the context of the specific teaching situations. Similarly, the effectiveness of teaching activities and exercises will rely upon the proficiency levels, cultures, and ages of the students being taught.

At the beginning levels of instruction, rules of article usage are less useful to the learner than extensive exposure to natural language. The article *a* (or *an)* will not be fully controlled and acquired until much later.

At the intermediate level, once learners have good control of basic structures and vocabulary, they may be ready to turn their attention to the more peripheral aspects of grammar, which include the article system. Since many aspects of article usage are dependent on discourse, the articles should always be taught with reading and writing skills, especially as an editing skill.

At the advanced level, when rules of grammar have become automatic and thus difficult to consciously correct, a focus on meaning appears to be an effective pedagogical technique. In tandem with reading and writing development, the articles should be focused on only as they occur in specific contexts with specific vocabulary,

especially the contrast between the zero article (0) and *the*. Learners can be encouraged to foster their own learning of the article system by keeping a tally of their article errors, thus becoming ethnographers of their own learning process.

In sum, the complex multi-componential nature of English articles requires that they be introduced gradually over a long period of time and that they cannot possibly be taught in a single lesson.

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