

A Short Article on Articles

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1 Introduction

This paper describes an attempt by the two authors to affect the interlanguage development of a learner. Specifically, this paper attempts to show how a learner's interlanguage development can be affected through the use of Focus on Form (FonF). Much research exists demonstrating the effectiveness of FonF as a method (Ellis 2009, Ashwell 2005), and this paper describes an attempt to replicate the successes of this previous research. More specifically, this paper describes how the authors interviewed a learner, identified a form whose correct usage had not yet been acquired, and then created a FonF-based syllabus to use with the learner. It was the hope of the authors that the syllabus they created would therefore cause the learner to acquire the correct usage of the form.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Focus on Form

Focus on Form (FonF) refers to the overt and explicit instruction of grammatical forms. This grammatical instruction, however, occurs during meaningful communication (Long 1991, in Ashwell 2005: 56). FonF, however, should not be confused with “focus on forms” (FonFS) which refers to traditional, synthetic, grammar focused instruction (Ashwell 2005: 58). Long also contrasts FonF with the “strong”, content-based, immersion approach, which he terms “focus on meaning” (FonM) (Ashwell 2005: 59). FonF “represents an attempt to blend form-focused and meaning-focused instruction together, as both have a

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role to fulfill” (Ashwell 2005: 60). FonF, therefore, utilizes the strengths of both FonFS and FonM without succumbing to their drawbacks, and it is for this reason that the authors decided to adopt FonF as the basis of their syllabus.

Long believed that attention should be given to form incidentally and briefly, “when students experience problems with comprehension or production” (Long 1997, in Ashwell 2005: 61). However, the authors were interested in seeing if they could initially identify a grammatical form the learner had problems producing, and then use that form to design a short ten-lesson syllabus. In this manner the authors could directly address an underdeveloped area of the learner’s interlanguage, and the learner would be developmentally ready to receive this intervention.

2.2 Definite and Indefinite Articles

The authors decided to concentrate on their learner’s use of articles, specifically the definite and indefinite articles when used for referring to first and second mention (the rationale behind the choice of articles and the manner in which this form was identified as an underdeveloped area are discussed in Section 3.2).

A review of the previous research on article instruction, especially article instruction in the Japanese ESL context, yields mixed results. Many of the papers on the topic predict certain problem areas that will arise as a result of L1 transfer and interference. “At every level of language,” cautions Nick Ellis, “there is evidence of L1 influence, both negative and positive. Although it is no longer considered the clear and direct influence proposed in the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, its significance in the language learning process seems incontrovertible” (2007: 91).

Kimizuka (1977, in Willis 1992: 91) predicted that Japanese learners would have problems acquiring articles and that they would overuse them because of “overconsciousness of article usage”. The results of a study by Willis suggest that “the learners’ use of the zero article is

overgeneralized, particularly in contexts that require the indefinite or definite articles. This seems to support the prediction made through contrastive analysis that articles will be omitted by Japanese learners (1992: 95–96). Parrish (1987 in Willis 1993: 91) showed that the definite article was acquired before the indefinite article, and like Willis (1992), found that the zero determiner was overgeneralized to definite and indefinite article contexts. She concluded that although her subject's use of articles was not always target-like, it was to a great extent systematic (1987 in Willis 1993: 91). An additional question posed by the authors of this paper asks which results of the previous Japanese ESL article research would be supported by this study.

In regards to article instruction outside of the Japanese ESL context, Master suggests that article instruction is beneficial if it is based on a systematic presentation of the material; when the material is presented in a hierarchy of manageable segments with continuous building on what has been taught before (1994: 248). For this reason the authors decided to focus on the indefinite and definite article for first and second mention only. Brender lists fifty-two different and specific uses of definite and indefinite articles. Attempting to teach all, or even part, of the list, would surely overload the learner during the course of the ten lessons (Brender 1989).

Brender also reports a spill-over effect. “When students focus on articles,” he states, “they also need to look more closely at such problematic areas as subject/verb agreement, noun number, the correct use of possessive nouns and pronouns (Brender 1989: iii). The authors hoped that by focusing on articles, other underdeveloped areas of the learner's interlanguage would be brought to her consciousness (Schmidt & Frota 1986).

3 Methodology

3.1 Participant

M, the participant in this study, was a Japanese female aged 23. Her previous English-study experience included two years of instruction at

the junior high school level, three years at the high school level, and two years at the junior college level. As has been widely noted, the focus of English instruction at the junior high- and high school level in Japan is predominately grammar translation (Bamford 1993). M, therefore, did not encounter any type of “communicative” English language teaching until junior college.

One of the authors of this paper was an instructor at the junior college that M attended, and taught M in first- and second-year reading, writing, and speaking courses. In these and other courses at the college, M was exposed to such communicative methods and methodologies as task-based learning, extensive reading, process writing, and pair-taping.

M graduated from her junior college four years prior to the start of this study. In the interim she had no occasion to use English in her daily life and stopped learning it. She did, however, maintain a desire to continue her English study, as one of her long-term goals was to study abroad in an English speaking country. Approximately one month before this experiment began, M contacted one of the authors, her former instructor. She had applied to enter a six-month study abroad program in Vancouver, Canada, where the author had previously lived. M contacted the author to ask for advice on living in Vancouver and studying English. When the author suggested that she take part in the experiment, she readily agreed.

3.2 Procedure

After establishing contact with the participant, a schedule of lessons was set. The learner and the two authors met every week for one hour at Temple University Japan. The lessons were conducted in a study room equipped with a large table, chairs, and a whiteboard, and lesson was recorded with digital audio recording equipment. These recordings were produced with the participant’s knowledge and permission. The activities used in the lesson were a combination of *Consciousness-Raising* (C-R) activities (Willis and Willis 1998) and language learning *tasks* (Ellis 2003). As a study-at-home component the

learner was assigned homework.

After the first lesson, a transcription was made using *Conversational Analysis* (CA). An *Obligatory Occasion Analysis* (OOA) was performed on the transcript in order to identify any specific area of the L2 lexicogrammar which the learner had difficulty using. This area would then become the target of focus during the following lessons.

While at her junior college, the learner had enrolled in a speaking course that utilized a pair-taping system (Kluge & Taylor 1998). Two of the taped conversations that the learner produced with a classmate were still in one of the authors' possession. Consequently, these recordings were also transcribed using CA and submitted to an OOA. As the learner had been actively studying English at the time, the authors were able to analyze a larger amount of the learner's linguistic production from these tapes than from the recording made during the first lesson of the experiment.

Through a comparison of the two older transcripts from her junior college, and the transcription from the first lesson, the authors were able to note that the learner had problems producing determiners and plurals. The authors therefore decided to make the English language article system the focus of the following lessons, specifically the use of direct and indirect articles for first and second mention. (For a full list of the specific grammatical forms being targeted, and the forms considered correct and incorrect please refer to Appendix 1.)

A tentative nine-lesson syllabus was planned. Over the course of the next nine lessons the authors would record and transcribe 20 minutes of each lesson, and then submit these transcriptions to additional OOAs to see what gains the learner had made in her interlanguage article system.

3.3 Research Questions

This study focuses on the following two research questions:

1) How effective would a FonF syllabus (utilizing C-R and Task Based Learning activities) be at aiding the learner in acquiring direct and indirect articles?

2) Which previous results on Japanese ESL article acquisition would be supported by this study?

3.4 Materials

The materials used were a combination of C-R worksheets and language learning tasks. Both sets of materials were designed by one of the authors. Some of the materials were pre-existing, others were created specifically for this experiment.

The C-R worksheets were designed to allow the participant to induce grammatical patterns from a series of examples. The learner would examine a set of grammatically correct and incorrect example sentences, note the differences between the two, and then use this information to identify the correct and incorrect sentences in a second set. After identifying the incorrect sentences, the learner would then correct them.

The series of tasks were comprised of:

1) *Comic Strips*: several comic strips were used as an information gap activity. The strips were cut into separate panels, and then given to the learner, who would place them in order and then relate the story. The strips were taken from the popular series “Garfield”. As the protagonist of the series was a cat, the use of language and speech balloons was kept to a minimum, facilitating comprehension and story production. Language forms associated with the stories in the strips were also kept to common, “everyday” examples. The authors hypothesized that the repeated appearance of objects in the strips would elicit the production of definite and indefinite articles for first and second mention.

2) *Boardgames*: these games were used as a conversational opinion exchange activities. Each square on the board would contain a question or prompt designed to elicit a certain grammatical form. Upon landing on a square, the player (researcher or participant) would either use the form to answer the question, or use the form to make a question from the prompt. Both players would then discuss the topic together. Again,

the authors hypothesized that the common, everyday topics appearing in the boardgames would elicit the use of articles.

3) *Story Lessons*: these activities resembled the comic strips described above, but were comprised of several worksheets. These worksheets were photocopied from a book entitled “Very Easy True Stories” (Heyer 1998) however they were manipulated by the authors to influence the learner’s comprehension and production of articles. First, the learner would match vocabulary items from a list to a set of pictures related to the story. Then the learner would describe what is happening in the title-page picture for each story. Next, one of the authors would read the story to the learner. The learner would then answer a set of comprehension questions related to the story. The authors hypothesized that these first four steps would “prime” the learner for the next step by implicitly providing examples of correct article usage. Finally, the learner would look at a set of pictures relating the same story in comic book format. The authors had erased all instances of first and second mention definite and indefinite articles, and the learner had to supply them. Afterwards, the authors would explicitly answer any questions the learner had about first and second mention articles. If the need arose, the authors would also provide an explicit explanation in Japanese.

In addition, the learner was also given a graded reader to take home and read after some of the lessons. The following week, she would have to give an oral summary of the story, as well as her impressions on the book. The authors posited that these graded readers would also provide her with input containing a large amount of articles used for first and subsequent mention. The learner had previously read graded readers as part of an extensive reading class at her university, so she was already familiar with this type of activity.

For several years now there has been great debate over the superiority of implicit to explicit learning, and vice versa (see Ellis 2008 for numerous examples). The authors hypothesized that they could increase the effectiveness of their FonF syllabus through a two-pronged approach, by providing the learner with both explicit and implicit input

as detailed in the different types of activities above.

3.5 The Syllabus

The syllabus was divided into ten, one-hour sessions, across a period of roughly eleven weeks. The syllabus was not preplanned, but evolved through a process of trial-and-error over the eleven week period. The one activity common to all ten lessons was the opening free conversation session, which not only provided the learner with an opportunity to “warm-up”, but also provided all the participants an opportunity to interact socially. A summary of the entire syllabus can be found in Appendix 2.

4 Data Analysis

Nine of the ten recorded sessions were transcribed (a tenth session was not transcribed due to a problem with the recording device). Ten minutes of each transcription came from the “free conversation” session, and an additional ten minutes from the lesson activities. This distinction was made in order to analyze how the learner performed in a more relaxed setting versus her performance during focused instruction.

4.1 Article Usage in the Analyses

Due to the vast array of possible occurrences of the need for an article the following guidelines were established by the authors as to which incidents of usage to “count” and which would not be used in the analysis:

- a) Referents which made use of definite, indefinite, and zero articles would be used
- b) Referents preceded by a number counter would be omitted
- c) Possessives would not be included
- d) Proper nouns would not be included
- e) Zero articles would be included in the analysis and categorized separately from definite and indefinite articles however, no

distinction was made between a zero article and a null article for the participant and so the two categories were kept as one and coded as simply “zero.”

4.2 The Obligatory Occasion Analysis

Three Obligatory Occasion Analyses (OOA) were run with the collected data. The first OOA, found in Table 1 below, provides an overall picture of the learner’s performance throughout the sessions. According to this analysis, the learner used the definite article correctly 68% of the time, whereas the indefinite was only used correctly 37% of the time. The zero article occasions had the highest rate of correct usage, at 95%.

The authors were also interested in knowing whether or not there was a difference in performance over the course of the language sessions. Therefore two more OOAs were conducted, one for the first session and one for the final session. The results of these two OOAs can be found in Table 2 below.

As Table 2 shows there was an overall increase in correct usage over time. Table 2 also shows that the amount of occasions increased

Table 1 Obligatory Occasion Analysis of All Sessions

	Total Occasions	Correct	Percent
Definite	363	247	68%
Indefinite	220	82	37%
Zero	103	98	95%

Table 2 Obligatory Occasion Analysis Comparison of Session 1 and Session 10

	Total Occasions	Correct	Percent
Session 1	40	23	57.50%
Session 10	91	58	63.70%

over the course of lessons, which can be attributed to the focus by the authors on creating situations in which the learner would have ample opportunities to use articles.

4.3 The Frequency Analysis

In order to get a clearer picture of how the subject was actually performing over the course of the lessons, a *Frequency Analysis* (FA) was run for the definite, indefinite, and zero article. To conduct the analysis the transcriptions were divided into three groups of three lessons each. The results are shown below in Table 3.

When there was an occasion which required the use of the definite article, the learner was able to supply the correct form 70% of the time beginning in the second session. This high rate continued through until the end of the sessions. For the indefinite article the learner began with a 15% accuracy rate which steadily climbed to 59% by the end of the lessons. Correct use of the zero article, however, actually declined over the course of the lessons, going from 100% down to 89%.

Table 3 Frequency Analysis of Definite, Indefinite, and Zero Articles

DEFINITE	Total Occasions	Definite	Percent	Indefinite	Percent	Zero	Percent
First	61	36	59%	2	3%	23	38%
Second	167	117	70%	2	1%	48	29%
Third	135	94	70%	1	1%	40	30%
INDEFINITE							
First	72	8	11%	11	15%	52	72%
Second	74	8	11%	27	36%	42	57%
Third	74	3	4%	44	59%	26	35%
ZERO							
First	33	0	0%	0	0%	33	100%
Second	42	1	2%	1	2%	40	95%
Third	28	2	7%	1	4%	25	89%

The advantage of the FA was that it also showed what was happening when the learner performed incorrectly. As the Table 4 below shows, when the learner chose not to use the definite article in those situations, it was the zero article which was the preferred alternative choice. In fact the use of the indefinite article in a definite article occasion decreased from 3% to 1% over the course of the sessions.

4.4 The Target-Like Use Analysis

As Rod Ellis cautions, learning a feature means knowing *not* only when to, but also when not to use that feature in the target language (Ellis 2008: pg. 68). While the OOA's and FA told much about what the learner was doing they did not indicate whether overgeneralization was occurring. In order to determine that, the authors conducted a Target-Like Use analysis (TLU). The purpose of the TLU was to show

Table 4 Frequency Analysis of Definite Articles

DEFINITE	Total Occasions	Definite	Percent	Indefinite	Percent	Zero	Percent
First	61	36	59%	2	3%	23	38%
Second	167	117	70%	2	1%	48	29%
Third	135	94	70%	1	1%	40	30%
INDEFINITE							
First	72	8	11%	11	15%	52	72%
Second	74	8	11%	27	36%	42	57%
Third	74	3	4%	44	59%	26	35%
ZERO							
First	33	0	0%	0	0%	33	100%
Second	42	1	2%	1	2%	40	95%
Third	28	2	7%	1	4%	25	89%

Table 5 Target-Like Use Analysis

	Total OO	Also Used	Correct	Percent
Definite	367	22	247	63%
Indefinite	220	7	82	36%
Zero	103	179	98	35%

how accurately the learner was using the form by dividing the number of correct supplants of the form, by the total occasions plus the additional occasions when that form was used.

The TLU analysis conducted (see Table 4) showed a much different picture than the OOA's. The first OOA reported similar percents of correct use for the definite and indefinite article compared with the TLU analysis (definite article: 68%, indefinite article: 37%). According to this same analysis the zero article was used correctly 95% of the time. The TLU however showed that the zero article was actually the most inaccurately used of the three articles, with only a 35% target-like usage rate.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the data analysis revealed the following findings in regards to the research questions posed in Section 3.3:

1) *How effective would a FonF syllabus (utilizing C-R and Task Based Learning activities) be at aiding the learner in acquiring correct direct and indirect article usage?*

The answer would seem to be "somewhat effective". Again correct indefinite article usage improved from 15% to 59% in between the first and last periods of the study, and correct definite article usage rose from 59% to 70%. There was also a decline in zero article usage for both the definite and indefinite occurrences. However the target-like use analysis showed heavy overgeneralization of zero article usage; indefinite article usage was poor; and definite article usage was only satisfactory.

2) *Which previous results on Japanese ESL article acquisition would be*

supported by this study?

Willis' 1992 finding that learners overused the zero article seemed to be upheld by this study, as were Parish's two 1987 findings that the definite article would be more fully acquired before the indefinite, and that article use, though often incorrect, would remain systematic.

In the last three lessons of the syllabus the authors abandoned the "comic strip" tasks in favor of the "story lesson" tasks because of their pedagogical superiority. It would be interesting to see how a different learner starting with roughly the same internalized article system would fare with a syllabus that employed only "story lesson" tasks, and if this learner's correct article usage could be pushed even higher.

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Keywords

English Article System, Definite and Indefinite Articles, Focus on Form, Obligatory Occasion Analysis, Frequency Analysis, L2 Interlanguage Development

Appendix 1 Correct and Incorrect Instances of Article Usage

Asterixes (*) denote ungrammatical sentences.

INDEFINITE:

The authors wished to examine the learner's use of the indefinite article for **non-specific, first mention**.

INDEFINITE SINGULAR:

I read a book.

*I read book.

*I read the book. (if first mention)

INDEFINITE PLURAL:

I bought some flowers. (the nuance is toward "quantity")

I bought flowers. (the nuance is toward "type")

*I bought a flowers.

*I bought flower.

*I bought the flowers. (if first mention)

INDEFINITE UNCOUNTABLE:

I drank some water. (the nuance is toward "quantity")

I drank water. (the nuance is toward "type")

*I drank a water.

*I drank waters.

*I drank the water. (if first mention)

DEFINITE:

The authors wished to examine the learner's use of the definite article for **specific, subsequent mention**, either through *anaphoric* use (e.g. "There is *a* pillow on the sofa. *The* pillow is red.") or through *deductive anaphoric* use (e.g. "My car is broken. *The* engine won't start.")

DEFINITE SINGULAR:

There is a pillow on the sofa.

The pillow is red.

*A pillow is red.

*Pillow is red.

DEFINITE PLURAL:

There are some cookies on the table.

The cookies are fresh.

*A cookies are fresh.

*Cookies are fresh.

DEFINITE UNCOUNTABLE:

There is some cheese on the table.

The cheese is delicious.

*A cheese is delicious.

*Cheese is delicious.

	NOUNS			
	COMMON			PROPER
	singular	plural	uncountable	
DEFINITE	the	the	the	—
INDEFINITE	a	some/0	some/0	

Appendix 2 The Syllabus

LESSON 1	JAN 17, 2009	LESSON 2	JAN 31
1) GAME question forms		1) COMIC STRIP 2) WORKSHEET countable & uncountable nouns 3) WORKSHEET preferences 4) GAME preferences 5) HWK retell the comic strip story	
LESSON 3	FEB 7	LESSON 4	FEB 14
1) WORKSHEET 2) DRILL CARDS countable & uncountable nouns 3) GAME preferences 4) HWK retell the comic strip story		1) COMIC STRIP 2) WORKSHEET frequency adverbs 3) GAME frequency adverbs 4) HWK read a graded reader	
LESSON 5	FEB 21	LESSON 6	FEB 28
1) recount the graded reader 2) COMIC STRIP 3) WORKSHEET first and second mention 4) HWK read a graded reader		1) recount the graded reader 2) WORKSHEET first and second mention 3) INFO GAP first and second mention 4) HWK read a graded reader	
LESSON 7	MAR 7	LESSON 8	MAR 14
1) recount the graded reader 2) WORKSHEET participles 3) GAME participles 4) HWK read a graded reader		1) recount the graded reader 2) STORY LESSON first and second mention 3) HWK read a graded reader	
LESSON 9	MAR 21	LESSON 10	MAR 28
1) recount the graded reader 2) STORY LESSON anaphoric reference 3) HWK read a graded reader		1) recount the graded reader 2) STORY LESSON deduced anaphoric reference 3) HWK read a graded reader	