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ARTICLE USE IN ESL COMPOSITIONS: STRATEGIES FOR INSTRUCTORS

LUKE JOHNSON

ABSTRACT

The following is a study of definite article use in ESL instruction. Articles are some of the most common words in the English language and the most frequently misused by ESL students. Nonetheless, articles have not received their due coverage in ESL instruction as they are difficult to teach, often overlooked by textbooks, and considered unnecessary to fluency by some instructors and linguists. The focus of this study will be the definite article as it is the most common and, perhaps, the most challenging for ESL learners. This study will assert the importance of teaching the correct usage of the definite article in college level classes as well as effective strategies for improving student success.

1.0 Introduction

In my second year of teaching College Writing as a graduate assistant, I worked with my first ESL student whose L₁ was Nepali. Early in the semester, I asked this student if he was comfortable with taking College Writing I when an ESL course was available. He responded “I can get help from *the* Dan if I need it.” My student’s reply didn’t inspire confidence at that time, as I judged his misuse of the definite article to be an indication of fluency. This judgment came before I had completed course work in linguistics, specifically language acquisition. Five years later, I found myself correcting job search materials for issues with definite article use for a Korean colleague holding a doctoral degree in engineering.

While it may not seem like much of a revelation that ESL speakers/writers have difficulty with English articles, these stories highlight two issues. First, people often make judgements of fluency based on errors in article use (probably due to their frequency in speech and writing). In fact, Miller (2005) describes articles as one of the top three major indicators that “the writer is working in a second language” (p.80). Second, articles are a challenge for ESL learners at every level of fluency. These two issues demonstrate that ESL instructors should pay careful attention to their coverage of articles in preparing courses and materials for college level ESL students. The following discussion will focus specifically on the use of the definite article *the* as it is typically the most challenging of the articles. Miller (2005) writes “the indefinite article, *a* or *an*, is slightly less problematic for most students, since its use is restricted to singular, countable nouns” (p. 82). While the correct use of the definite article may not be a major concern in lower level ESL instruction, it will be demonstrated in the following that correct usage is important for college level ESL students. Also, the following discussion will highlight why definite article instruction has been neglected over the past several decades in addition to offering some strategies for instructors in teaching definite articles effectively.

2.0 The Significance of Articles

Miller (2005) notes that articles “rank among the five most common words in the English Language” (p.80). This fact alone should give the instruction of articles a place of prominence. Moreover, a German University’s findings that 49.39% of their students’ errors in written

English “involved the incorrect addition of *the*” (as cited in Yoo, 2009, p. 267). As articles are among the most frequently occurring words in the English language, and they are one of the most frequently misused/omitted words by ESL students, it is indisputable that more work needs to be done to teach articles effectively. Given the importance of articles, it is necessary to address why they have been overlooked by students and instructors.

3.0 Why Articles Have Been Overlooked

There are a number of reasons why articles have not received adequate attention in ESL instruction. One reason may be as simple as that ESL instructors whose primary language is English don't teach articles because they are so intuitively picked up by people whose L₁ is English (Miller, 2005). Or, instructors may simply not know how to teach articles as the rules of article usage are incredibly complex. On this topic Reynolds (2013) writes, “in language teaching and applied linguistics we rarely adopt advances from linguistics, not because they fail to meet some criterion of relevance...but simply because we are ignorant of linguistics in general.” Reynolds comments illustrate the gap between linguistics and their application in the classroom. Yet, instructors with some cursory knowledge of articles may have a different issue. It is possible that “some teachers, indeed, believe that the system is so difficult to acquire that no rules can be taught (Krech and Driver, 1996)” (as cited in Miller, 2005, p.81).

Another possible reason for the lack of instruction on articles may be the rise in popularity of the Natural Approach and other intuitive methods of ESL instruction (Kirkwood, 2007, & Yoo, 2009). Kirkwood notes that intuitive systems attempt to replicate L₁ acquisition through providing situations or tasks for ESL students to complete using the L₂. This places emphasis on successful/functional communication rather than on grammatical accuracy. Miller adds that learners may not be willing to give the time and energy required for fluency in articles if they can communicate effectively with an acceptable degree of error in article usage. In short, people can still understand the meaning of sentences that misuse/omit articles. This may lead an instructor to question whether extensive coverage of articles is necessary or even worthwhile. Some may argue that such errors may lead “to the perception that the writer of a university essay or academic paper does not have an adequate grasp of their subject” (Miller, 2005, p.81). Whether or not this is a fair assessment, the truth is that people, especially academics, are judged not only by their ideas, but their delivery of those ideas (written and spoken). Judging fluency based upon the correct use of the definite article may not be that unfair as one study by found “a positive relationship between article knowledge and proficiency level” (Sinha, 2014). The short answer to whether fluency in articles is worth the effort really depends on the level of student. As the focus of the current discussion is on college level students, fluency in the correct use of the definite article is imperative.

A third likely reason for the neglecting of instruction in articles is the lack of their inclusion in both ESL texts for students and instructors. One survey of 21 ESL texts and found that “three of the 21 books surveyed do not contain any description of the definite article” (Yoo, 2009, p.271). In that same survey, Yoo (2009) also broke down which uses of the definite article were covered by the texts. He notes that most grammars covered situational use but frequently omitted postmodification (cataphoric use). The problem with the emphasis on anaphoric use rather than cataphoric use is highlighted as Yoo notes their frequency in different registers. Employing a tool that covers “40 million words of text,” he found that the situational use is most

common in conversational registers while postmodification is most common in academic use (p.70-71). Yoo (2009) writes “cataphoric use was the most common type of definite article usage in academic prose, accounting for 40% of all instances of *the*” (p.274) Cataphoric article use, or postmodification, is described as definite article use that signals a specific identifying feature that comes later in the text. Yoo (2009) provides a sample sentence that illustrates this function: “**The fact** that you’ve known them for them for years is no excuse” (268). In this sample the definite article *the* is placed before “fact” to signal that it is a specific fact that will be named later—namely, “that you’ve know them for years.”

Yoo’s findings show that not only does the definite article receive rather poor coverage in ESL textbooks, the texts often fail to address the most common use of the definite article in academic registers. This is a serious oversight that should be considered by college level ESL instructors as they are working to teach students to write in the academic register. Yoo contends that the emphasis textbook’s have placed on situational use may be somewhat misguided since it is the most frequently used in conversational registers. As a result, ESL students will have the greatest exposure to this use of the definite article. Yoo raises some valid concerns regarding how well ESL textbooks address definite article use. And, those that do may focus on the uses of the definite article that don’t need the most attention.

4.0 Strategies for Teaching Definite Article Use

While definite article instruction is important and often overlooked, there are several studies that offer insight into teaching this difficult topic effectively. It is important for each instructor to identify which uses of the definite article are difficult for their students. One study suggests that students acquire the different non-generic uses of the definite article in a “natural order” (Sinha, 2014). Sinha writes that “structural use is the most difficult type followed by cultural use, textual use and situational use.” Each of these uses is defined in the **Context Support** portion of this study. Once an instructor has identified which level of use his/her students are at, they can then tailor exercises and activities to review the uses students have command of while targeting the use of the definite article students are struggling to acquire.

5.0 Countability

Miller (2005) argues that one of the most important aspects of teaching the definite article is countability. Countability is a reasonable starting point for determining whether an article is definite or indefinite, as illustrated below. Miller notes a survey of the five most popular learner dictionaries in 2004 showed that each dictionary described nouns as countable or uncountable (p. 81). After determining countability, the next test of the article is definiteness. Definiteness means “the object referred to is of [a shared set]” (Miller, 2005, p.82), which is very close to the definition the Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue provides in their ESL materials: “*the* signals that the noun is definite, that it refers to a particular member of a group” (OWL, 2011).

After establishing definiteness, both Miller and the OWL at Purdue move on to discuss using the definite article with non-count nouns. The OWL at Purdue states that the definite article is used with non-count nouns if it intended to refer to a specific member of the set as in their example:

“‘I love to sail over the water’ (some specific body of water) or ‘I love to sail over water’ (any water).” (The OWL, 2011)

Miller (2005) discusses the times when the definite article may be omitted as “zero article” use. It is worth noting that there is a great deal of contention as to whether or not it is worth teaching ESL students the zero article, which some argue occurs in deep structure phrases/sentences, but is dropped before the surface structure. For example, Yoo provides the example “I’m not working next week” (272). In this sentence *the* is dropped before “next week.” Yoo (2009) contends that null article use should be in “advanced-level grammars” (p. 273). His reasoning is that students with a grasp of grammar and metalanguage would understand the deletion rule that takes place between the deep structure and surface structure. However, discussing the null article in introductory ESL classes may be overwhelming, if not counterproductive.

As for Miller’s study (2005), students were tested on article use. The students were tested before receiving a lecture on article use with and without the assistance of a chart covering “countability and uncountability, as well as definiteness and non-definiteness” (p.82). The study found that students’ test scores on article fill-in the blank sentences rose from 80% to 83%. On the second test where students added articles in a paragraph without blanks to fill-in, test scores rose from 43% to 54% (p.84). Miller’s findings have important implications for ESL instructors:

Although some students were resistant to the idea of learning more grammar, especially in an area 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. (Miller, 2005, p.84)

Miller’s results suggest there are benefits to studying definite articles in greater detail, especially at more advanced levels of academic English.

6.0 Context Support

While Miller’s results are promising, her study’s first test made use of isolated sentences with blank spaces where articles were to be added. Also, the study didn’t get into the different functions of the definite article. These points are noteworthy considering Sinha (2014) identifies that ESL learners acquire the different uses of the definite article in a “natural order” and that students’ learning is significantly improved through the use of contextual materials like Miller used in Test II. These are considerations that should be taken into account for instructors of advanced ESL students.

Sinha (2014) focuses on non-generic uses of the definite article and identifies four uses of the non-generic definite article whose definitions are as follows:

1. Cultural: “a noun that is a unique and well-known referent in a speech community.”
2. Situational: “where the is used when the referent of a first-mention noun can be sensed directly or indirectly by the interlocutors, or the referent is known by the members of a local community, such as the book store in town.”
3. Structural: “where the is used with a first-mention noun that has a modifier.”

4. Textual: “where the is used with a noun that has been previously referred to or is related to a previously mentioned noun.” (Sinha, 2014)

Sinha’s study identified several details about the acquisition of definite articles that are of interest to instructors. First, she found an order of difficulty in acquiring definite article uses, which ranges from most difficult to least: structural>, cultural>, textual>, and situational. Moreover, Sinha (2014) notes the different errors in definite article use at different levels of fluency. Sinha states that beginner ESL students are apt to misuse articles most frequently, which is why some instructors may believe that ESL students apply articles at random; though, this is not the case. She found that intermediate students were prone to “the overuse of the.” She argues that this improves with fluency, but the problem then becomes overuse of the zero article—or omitting *the* when it’s needed. She found that even after providing students with context support training, the zero article was overused incorrectly as much as 55% of the time (Sinha, 2014). Sinha concludes that this is simply a difficult part of definite article use to teach even intermediate ESL students. These insights are of interest to instructors as they help identify where ESL learners are at in their fluency. The idea of a natural order of acquisition helps instructors anticipate what uses of the definite article students are likely to struggle with as well as assess those that students have acquired command of.

As for teaching the uses of the definite article, Sinha (2014) found that exercises that provide context are much more effective for students than isolated sentences. She contends “context helps learners to focus on a few NPs which are semantically connected. It helps them to get clues and naturally their performance in definite article use becomes better. Sinha (2014) tested students on all four uses of the non-generic definite article using both isolated sentences and “contextualized tasks.” The contextualized task used in the study was essentially a paragraph with blanks where the articles were meant to go. Also, the paragraph was on one topic and often repeated NPs. The results show that students tested higher on the contextual tasks in every category with the greatest improvement being textual use, which increased by 30.17% (Sinha, 2014).

7.0 Conclusion

While the teaching of definite articles has been overlooked over the last several decades, it should not continue to be. In academic registers, writers are judged critically for misuse of the definite article to the point where such mistakes may bring the author’s credibility into question. The aforementioned studies have shown that articles are among the most frequently used words in the English language, as well as the most misused by ESL learners. For these reasons, college level instructors should deliberately address the correct use of definite articles in their classes. Recent studies have offered some insight as to how this difficult topic can be effectively delivered. Miller’s work shows that as little as a lecture or two and a handout on articles can have a meaningful impact on fluency in article use (2005). Sinha (2014) shows us that the uses of the definite article vary in difficulty and are acquired in an order, and that contextualized materials are more effective in teaching students than isolated sentences. All things considered, this information should provide instructors with some methods for assessing their students’ level of fluency, diagnosing the areas they struggle with, and planning the most effective activities possible to improve fluency.

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