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NOTES ON THE THEORETICAL BASIS FOR TEACHING STRUCTURAL UNITS

by

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In a recently published series of English textbooks for junior middle schools, there is, among many other noticeably new features, a unique way of introducing some of its vocabulary items. The count nouns are always listed with an indefinite article *a* or *an*, instead of having them in company of the plural suffix; the latter having been the practice of many other textbooks. This might seem an innovation to most English teachers and many of them would probably look at it with curiosity and wonder how to incorporate this particular feature into their classroom activity while the rest of them doubtless would just pass it over and think, if ever, that the purport of such an arrangement is merely to arrest the eye.

A closer look at this arrangement, however, will certainly reveal that it is by no means a sheer innovation out of the compiler's vanity, but rather an indication of the adoption of a new technique to teach a basically significant form in the total structure of English, ingeniously designed by the textbook writer out of his profound understanding of the language. For it does not only attempt to inculcate a contrastive feature between the mother tongue of the learner and the target language—for the Chinese language, as manifested in its various dialects, lacks a similar syntactic device to mark whether a noun is a count or non-count one.⁽¹⁾ But it tries as well to teach a structural unit, the items of which are almost always inseparable. It is true that this structural unit, important as it is, is slightly touched upon in most traditional grammars by means of such statements as: 'a' or 'an' is called the *Indefinite* [*Article*], because it does not particularise a noun, but generalises it.' and 'As a general rule, a *Common* noun in the *Singular* number

(1) In Mandarin Chinese, for instance, a count noun is marked by its inability to co-occur with an intensifier-like morpheme immediately in front of a verbal element designating possession. (See Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*, Chinese Edition translated by William S.-Y. Wang and H. T. Lu, pp. 4-5.)