

Identifying Common Student Article Errors and their Implications for Instruction*

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1.0 Introduction

At the Faculty of Education, I am responsible for teaching content-based English education classes to second, third, and fourth year students. As with most intermediate to upper intermediate Japanese students of English, I have noticed a high frequency of article errors in the students' homework assignments, e-mails, and speech. English has three kinds of articles, the definite article, the, the indefinite article, a, and the zero article, \emptyset . This study constitutes the first of a two stage research plan. The aim of this stage is to determine features of article usage with which students struggle. The second stage will test a pedagogical method to target these weak points.

2.0 Why Worry about Articles?

Aoki (2000: 117) writes that English articles are rarely taught systematically in Japan. There are four possible reasons for this. One, it is very difficult to hear articles in speech. In sentences such as "Where's the lamp?" and "Have you seen a dog?" said at normal speed, the articles "the" and "a" might be inaudible to the learner of English. Two, correct article usage involves semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic factors and its mastery might require a proficiency level of English close to native level. Three, quite often even when a mistake in article usage is made, the speaker's utterance is understood. An example of this is in Master (1994: 230) in which a waitress in a diner handed the cook a piece of pie and said "Make a pie hot." Although her use of the indefinite article was incorrect, the cook knew very well the waitress was referring to the piece of pie in her hand. Lastly, in many cases, an article's omission or inclusion are both acceptable (Berry: 1991, p. 252):

- 1a) *If they are unhappy they should consider divorce.*
- 1b) *If they are unhappy they should consider a divorce.*

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In summation, articles are hard to hear and extremely difficult to use correctly, in many cases their incorrect use does not interfere with the meaning of an utterance and the indefinite and definite article are sometimes interchangeable with \emptyset . Thus, upon hearing my interest in analyzing students' article errors and article pedagogy, many have asked me "Why?"

Nevertheless, the COBUILD (Collins Birmingham University International Language Database) lists the definite article, the, as the most frequent word in the English language and the indefinite article, a, as the fifth most (see Master, 1997: 221). Considering that the zero article was excluded from the list, the frequency of articles might be even higher than COBUILD indicates. Thus, an incomplete understanding of the article system can lead to a high proportion of errors in English.

Table 1. The Ten Most Frequent Words in English.

1. the	4. to	7. that	10. was
2. of	5. a	8. I	
3. and	6. in	9. it	

The article system might be one of the last grammatical features to be mastered by English learners (see Master, 1995). Quite often, for students in the upper-intermediate to advanced stages of English learning, errors in article usage are one of the most salient error types in their writing. When these students see their papers returned besieged with red pen marks crossing out, adding, or replacing articles, they might want and deserve some explanation or guidance. Many English learners Iwate University's the English Course and English sub-course fall in the category of students who are at an advanced stage of learning English and have a high proportion of article errors compared to other types. It is these kinds of students that this study is targeting.

3.0 General Article Usage

To use articles correctly, speakers of English must have knowledge of how various syntactic, pragmatic, and semantic factors affect article usage, and also know an extremely large number of collocations containing articles that are sometimes impervious to the aforementioned constraints. In the following sub-sections, each factor affecting article usage will be introduced to give the reader an idea of the complexity of article usage. These factors are also listed to remind teachers that there are multiple explanations for correct article usage.

3.1 Collocations with Articles

The following example of a collocation containing an article comes from Beaumont and Gallaway (1994: 162).

2) *What's the time?*

In the example above, although the use of 'the' has its roots in semantics as *the present time is unique*. The sequence of the words in the above sentence is fixed and thus, speakers learn to use *the* as a constituent of the above fixed expression rather than as a marker for the definite NP *time*.

3.2 Syntactic Factors in Article Use

3) *Matsui is the best baseball player in the world.*

This sentence demonstrates how syntactic factors influence article use as the definite article usually precedes a superlative¹.

3.3 Pragmatic Factors in Article Use

To demonstrate how pragmatic constraints can determine article use, I will reference Pica (1983). In her study of how articles are used in speech by English speakers, Pica asked someone on the street where the nearest drug store was. The person responded "That's right inside the terminal. (p. 226)" When Pica indicated she did not know "the terminal," the speaker said "Oh, you're not from around here." Thus, because the speaker had assumed that Pica was familiar with the area she had consciously used the expression "the terminal."

3.4 Semantic Factors in Article Usage

4) *That was the boy who broke the window.*5) *That was a boy who starred in the play, not a girl.*

The above sentences are examples of how semantic constraints can determine article use. In 4, "the boy" is both a specific and unique referent. Both the speaker and listener of the sentence know exactly which boy broke the window. In 5, "a boy" is used to classify the gender of the person who starred in the play and is thus not a unique referent.

4.0 The Study

Swan (1994: 53) wrote that effective grammar pedagogy focuses on the specific problems (real and potential) of specific learners. The goal of this study is to try to identify these problems through analyzing how students use articles in their writing.

¹ See Pica (1983) for some exceptions to this rule.

4.1 Subjects

The participants of this study were 12 junior students who were all in the teacher training program in the department of education. Of the 12 students, 11 were concentrating in English education either as a course or a sub-course. Furthermore, 8 had taken the STEP English proficiency test and passed levels ranging from pre-first level to the third level. Since the students all had similar education backgrounds in English, similar proficiency certifications, and a similar amount of exposure to the target language, it was thought that the variability in stages of language development among the students would not be as great as it would be among subjects of various ages, education backgrounds, and amount of exposure to the target language. Although an English proficiency test might have been a more accurate measure of variability in language ability, it was not logistically possible.

4.2 Method

This study analyzed the use of articles in students' English journals. The writing assignments were deemed appropriate because when writing, students must consider pragmatic (how much knowledge they share with the reader), syntactic (which articles commonly occur with which group of words), and semantic (is the referent unique?) constraints when determining the correct article to use. As the length of the journals ranged quite significantly among the participants, it was decided to randomly select a maximum of 30 obligatory contexts² for articles *the*, *a*, and \emptyset from each journal.

To categorize the obligatory contexts, this study employed the NP semantic mapping model shown in Table 2 on the following page. The model was originally designed by Huebner (1979) and modified by Parish (1987) and Tarone and Parish (1988) to examine how English learners use articles systematically before they have acquired articles. The following two semantic features of NPs serve as the foundations of the model:

- 1) [\pm information assumed to be known to the hearer] ([\pm HK])
- 2) [\pm Specific Referent] ([\pm SR]).

As there are four possible combinations of [\pm SR] and [\pm HK], the model thus breaks down into four NP Type categories. Although Tarone and Parish use these categories to classify the semantic functions of NPs, since knowing whether an NP is [\pm HK] is often dependent on discourse, one can make the argument that [\pm HK] might be just as much a pragmatic feature as a semantic. Thus, in this paper, the model is considered to list both semantic and pragmatic functions of NPs. The author also added a fifth category, UNCOMMON, to account for articles whose use appears to be primarily formulaic (e. g. expressions like *in the morning*, *bite the dust*, *play the drums*). The zero article before

² An obligatory context can be defined as a place in a sentence where a grammatical feature must be present for the sentence to be correct. (See Lightbown and Spada: 1999, p. 178)

Table 2. A Semantic/Pragmatic Model of Article Uses.

±SR	"Specific Referent": 名詞が唯一の対象を有する否か
±HR	"Known to Hearer": 書き手, 読み手がその名詞を固定できる否か
Type 1	[-SR] [+HK] ("Generics") Required Articles: the, a \emptyset <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ABEAR is a ferocious animal. • THE BEAR is a ferocious animal. • BEARS are ferocious animals. • THE NATION should do that citizens can love the nation, not force citizens to have patriotism.*
Type 2	[+SR] [+HR] Required Articles: the, demonstratives 1. A Referent Previously Mentioned <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think that knowledge makes a good citizen. But THE KNOWLEDGE must not be biased.* 2. Prior Mention of a Schematically Related Notion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tim went to a bar last week and ended up fighting THE bartender. 3. Unique Referent (i) or conventionally assumed (ii) unique referent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. THE WORD "nationality" has a bad image like wars, I think..* ii. THE POPE, THE SUN, THE PRESIDENT, THE LIBRARY
Type 3	[+SR] [-HR] Required Articles: a/an, \emptyset , quantifiers 1. First mention in which the NP is assumed to be unknown to the hearer. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AINU import USED CLOTHES from China and other countries.* 2. First mention of a [+SR] NP which follows an existential have and there and is not known to the hearer: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think there is a problem.*
Type 4	[-SR] [-HR] Required Articles: a/an, \emptyset , quantifiers A) Classifying Noun Phrases <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My young sister who is A HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT* B) Noun phrases appearing in negation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because I have not seen A CLAS about MCE ever.* C) Noun phrases in the interrogative <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you see A BIRD? 4. Noun phrases where the referent does not exist. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If were A TEACHER, I never want ot do such a thing!* • And I wanted PICTURES about Ainu.*
Type 5	Uncommon-No semantic/pragmatic explanations Required Articles: a/an, the \emptyset 1. Idiomatic Uses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He must think woman should BE HOME* • People in Greek go to bed IN THE AFTERNOON.*

*Sentence excerpted from a student's journal

proper nouns was not included. Furthermore, if a student repeatedly used the same NP, it was only recorded once. Quantifiers (many, any) and demonstratives (this, that) were also included in the analysis because they perform the same roles as indefinite and definite articles respectfully (See Parish : 1987, p. 370).

Based on the preceding model, the study sought to answer the following research questions :

1. Will students have a particular weakness or strength with any of the pragmatic/semantic types of NPs?
2. Do students show an understanding of the semantic and pragmatic constraints of article use?
3. Do students exhibit knowledge of a variety of set phrases containing articles?

5.0 Results and Discussion

Table 3. Frequency of the Different Semantic/Pragmatic Types of NPs

	Type 1 [+HR] [-SR]	Type 2 [+HR] [+SR]	Type 3 [-HR] [+SR]	Type 4 [-HR] [-SR]	Type 5
Number of Obligatory Contexts	90	104	75	32	23
Accuracy	76.5%	61.5%	78.8%	50.0%	78.3%

As Table 3 shows, Type 2 had the highest number of obligatory contexts followed by Type 1 and Type 3. Since the frequency of Type 4 and Type 5 NPs was much less than those of the other types, it was decided not to compare their accuracy of article use with those of the first 3 types. Table 4 shows a comparison of the accuracy rates between the first three types using a paired samples T-test. The paired samples T-test did not show a significant difference in the accuracy rate of articles used with the different NP types. Nevertheless, although no significant differences between the accuracy rates were found, it is noteworthy that these results were very different from those in Tarone and Parish (1988) displayed in Table 5

Table 4. Comparison of the accuracy rates of article use within each NP Type in the Present Study

	Rate of Accuracy	Comparison of Means	Difference of Means	T Value	Probability
Type 1	76.5	1 & 2	15	1.989	0.072
Type 2	61.5	2 & 3	12.05	-1.539	0.152
Type 3	78.8	1 & 3	2.7	0.28	0.778
Type 4	50.0				

In the findings shown in Table 5, Tarone and Parish analyzed the use of articles of 20 English learners (10 native Japanese speakers and 10 native Arabic speakers) on two oral tasks. While the subjects in the Tarone and Parish study were most accurate using articles with Type 1 and Type 2 NPs, the participants in this study were most accurate with Type 1 and 3 NPs. Also, in contrast to articles within the Type 3 NP category being most accurately used in this study, articles used with Type 3 NPs in the Tarone and Parish study were least accurate. Furthermore, while the significance level of the difference in means between the article usage of Type 1 and Type 2 NPs was far from the 5% level ($P=0.687$) in the Tarone and Parish study, the difference in means closest to the 5% level in the current study was that of Type 1 and 2 ($P=0.072$).

Table 5. Comparison of the accuracy rates of article use within each NP Type in Tarone and Parish (1988)

	Rate of Accuracy	Comparison of Means	Difference of Means	T Value	Probability
Type 1	87	1 & 2	2.21	0.41	0.687
Type 2	85	2 & 3	12.05	3.01	0.072
Type 3	73	1 & 3	2.7	3.47	0.003
Type 4	80				

What can explain such a difference between this study and that of Tarone and Parish? An intriguing possibility is that students' article errors might differ depending on the task they are to perform. Perhaps the type of NPs students produce in a journal might differ from those that they produce in speech and, in turn, influence the variance in accuracy rates of article usage across tasks.

Aside from Tarone and Parish, the results contradict other research in article acquisition such as Aoki (2000) and Yamada and Matsuura (1982). Citing Yamada and Matsuura, Aoki wrote that Japanese students are fast to acquire the definite article in a [+HR] [+SR] environment. Yamada and Matsuura examined the article usage of intermediate and advanced Japanese learners of English by giving them a cloze test and having them fill in the appropriate article where missing in the text. They found that the most frequent error in both the intermediate and advanced group was the use of *the* where either \emptyset or *a* should have been used. Table 6, however, indicates that in the current study there was little overuse of *the* within NP Types 3 and 4 where the application of the definite article is impossible. Furthermore, while the participants' accuracy levels of *the*, *a/an*, demonstratives, and quantifiers were high, the use of \emptyset was only appropriate 56 percent of the time. Table 7, below, shows that \emptyset overuse was the most frequent error type, occurring 77.9% of the time. Furthermore, errors in which \emptyset was used where *the* should have been used, a so called \emptyset for *the* error, accounted for 48.4 percent of the errors.

The findings of Master (1995) were similar to those of this study. Master examined the

Table 6. Participants' Use of Articles within each NP Type and Total Use of Each Article

	Type 1 [+HR] [-SR] the, a, \emptyset	Type 2 [+HR] [+SR] the, demostrative	Type 3 [-HR] [+SR] a, \emptyset , quantifier	Type 4 [-HR] [-SR] a, \emptyset , quantifier	Type 5 UNCOMMON The, a, \emptyset	Total
The						
Correct	7	52			5	64(83%)
Incorrect	4	0	6	2	1	13(17%)
Total(C+I)	11	52	6	2	6	77
A/An						
Correct	4		15	11	3	33(82%)
Incorrect	4	1	0	0	2	7(18%)
Total(C+I)	8	1	15	11	5	40
\emptyset						
Correct	57		23	5	10	95(56%)
Incorrect	14	36	7	14	2	73(44%)
Total(C+I)	71	36	30	19	12	168
Quantifier						
Correct			23			23(92%)
Incorrect		1	1			2(8%)
Total(C+I)		1	24			25
Demonstrative						
Correct		14				14(100%)
Incorrect						0
Total(C+I)		14				14

article errors of 19 ESL students in their summaries of assigned readings for a graduate course school course in second language acquisition over a period of a semester. In both the Master study and this study, underspecification errors, or the overuse of \emptyset , were the predominant errors.

What is more, in both studies, data were taken from students' writing assignments whereas, in the Yamada and Matsuura as well as Aoki studies data were taken from the results of a cloze test. Thus, it is highly possible that the type of task might influence the way students use articles. When students write, they might have a tendency to overuse \emptyset thus \emptyset for *the* can be considered a common error in students' writing.

In the remainder of this section, two major errors in this study, the \emptyset for *the* errors and \emptyset for *a* errors will be analyzed.

Table 9 shows that the majority of \emptyset for *the* errors occurred within the type 2 NP category. In many of these errors, it appears that the learners were confusing the NP with a proper noun and did not realize that the definite article was necessary to identify it as unique. The following sentences are examples of these kinds of errors committed with

Table 7. Common Error Types of among Participants in current study

Article Used	Correct Article	N	Percent of Total Errors
∅	The	46	48.4
∅	a	28	29.5
The	∅	9	9.5
A/an	∅	5	5.3
The	A	4	4.2
A/an	The	2	2.1
Quantifier	The	1	1.1

*Underspecification Errors=77.9%

Table 8. Common Error Types of among Participants in Master (1995)

Article Used	Correct Article	N	Percent of Total Errors
∅	The	771	41.52
The	∅	507	27.30
∅	a	369	19.87
A/an	∅	80	4.31
The	∅	75	4.04
A/an	the	55	2.96

*Underspecification Errors=61.39%

Table 9. ∅ for the errors within NP types

NP Type	N
1 [+HR][-SR]	9
2 [+HR][+SR]	36
5	1

Table 10. ∅ for a errors within NP Types

NP Type	N
1 [+HR][-SR]	4
3 [-HR][+SR]	6
4 [+HR][-SR]	11
5	1

Type 2 NPs by the students :

- a) **Type 2:** I think to divide name list by sex means that teacher treats boys and girls separately.*
- b) **Type 2:** And it is very hard to work on final project.*

Sentence a was a suggestion made by a student on how to promote equality of the sexes in the elementary school classroom. Students and teachers in elementary school know there is only one name list per class and that the teacher always has it. It is such a familiar object, that it could have been confused as a proper noun and thus given the zero article. In sentence b, the student was writing a comment on the class final project. Again, sentence b seems to be a case where the student also might have confused the NP, final project, with a proper noun or title.

The second most common error, *∅ for a*, was most frequent with Type 4 NPs. As the following sentences show, it was common for students to use *∅* with countable abstract nouns preceding the copula be. It is possible that with sentences like these, students did not consider the abstract noun to be countable and thus supplied the zero article.

- a) **Type 4:** Watching pictures is useful idea.*
- b) **Type 4:** There isn't clear standard of evaluation and it is subjective.*
- c) **Type 4:** The MED says that patriotism is broad goal.*

6.0 Conclusion

6.1 Will students have a particular weakness or strength with any of the pragmatic/semantic types of NPs?

Compared to previous research in article acquisition, the participants' rate of accuracy with articles in Type 2 [+HR] [+SR] NP environments was low compared to other NP types. Although there was no significant difference between the accuracy levels of each type, the most frequent error was *ø for the* which occurred with Type 2 NPs. The fact that the distribution of errors for this study was similar to those studies using similar data extraction methods, journals, and not to those using different methods, cloze tests and oral tasks, it is conceivable that the variance of article error types is related to the language task. Thus, teachers can expect the kind of article errors students make in class to vary with the kind of activity (writing, informal conversation, interview, etc.) that they are engaged in.

6.2 Do students show an understanding of the semantic and pragmatic constraints of article use?

There were very few *a for the* and *the for a* errors showing that students understood the difference between the two articles well. However, the *ø for the errors* show that students tended to mark conventionally assumed unique referents such as "name list" with the zero article. Had the students considered name list not to be unique, they probably would have marked it with the indefinite article because it is countable. Thus, the high frequency of *ø for the errors* could be an indication that students are confused as to whether to mark unique articles with *ø* or *the*. One possible explanation for this is that students might be confusing proper nouns with unique NPs.

On the other hand students high frequency of *ø for a errors* might be an indication that students struggle to determine whether an abstract noun is countable.

6.3 Do students exhibit knowledge of a variety of set phrases containing articles?

Without a protocol analysis asking students to explain their choice of articles in their writing, this question cannot be answered. For the researcher, it is too difficult by examining the students writing alone to determine whether the writer intended to use the article in an expression or processed either a sentence's syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic constraints to determine the correct article.

6.4 Implications for Teaching

Why are native speakers so good at using articles? One reason is that they know how articles are used in an abundance of fixed expressions. Thus, in many cases article use is automatic and easy. On the other hand, native speakers can also process how syntactic, pragmatic, and semantic constraints on article use when producing a novel utterance. In these cases, correct article usage is contingent on the relationship between the speaker and listener and the situation they find themselves in. For this reason, Pica (1983) wrote that article acquisition is only attained through exposure to the target language and life experiences and not through the language classroom (Pica, p. 231).

Despite the difficulties, both Master (1990, 1994, & 1995) and Muranoi (2002) have had success with deductive and inductive approaches to teaching articles. Given the importance of articles, as language teachers it is important to prepare students to use them in the real world. One way is to encourage students to become aware of how articles are used in fixed expressions as it is impossible for us to determine which article to use by thinking of the semantic, pragmatic, or syntactic properties of an NP every time we speak. A second way is to give learners a simple rule of thumb for article use for reference when they find themselves in a situation where they do not know which article to use. The article system is too complex to be explained in its entirety to the student. Thus, the next stage of this study will attempt to provide students with this simple rule of thumb so that they might someday master the complexities of article usage.

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