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English Articles and Japanese Students

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Abstract

English articles are difficult for second language learners to understand. This is especially true for learners whose first language does not have a form of articles. In this case, it is important to begin with the basics of what articles are and how they should be used. The aim of this essay is to explain the basics of English articles, how the topic relates to Japanese students, and describe how to acquire the necessary skills to use articles.

Keywords

Article acquisition, article pedagogy, definiteness, specificity, Japanese students

Introduction

Through my twelve years of teaching, there have been plenty of grammatical issues that I have worked on with students. Now that I work in Japan, I see the biggest problem that my students face is knowing when, where, and how to use articles (a[n] and the). I will begin by describing English articles. Then I will focus on why native Japanese speakers have problems using articles. At the end of this essay, I will discuss how these issues may be overcome.

Articles

Articles are rare in most languages around the world (Dryer, 1989; De Mulder & Carlier, 2011; Berry, 2012). In the English language, articles are determiners which are used to express specificity, shared knowledge, or other important factors that relate to the noun phrase (NP). Young (1996) goes into great detail about articles. One important point that he makes is that “it seems that the article system in English is a reflex of a universal system of semantic and discourse marking that exists in order for speakers and hearers to sort out reference and to achieve topic continuity in connected discourse” (Young, 1996, page 142).

The use of English articles can become a burden to students who are studying English as a second language (ESL). The majority of the time, articles are said without emphasis and for that reason are not likely to be picked up by second language (L2) learners (Vujic, 2015). Even if ESL students have a form of articles in their first language (L1), the use may change because of word order (Dryer, 1992). Through the COBUILD list of the most often used words (Sinclair, 1991), we can see that *the* is at number one, and *a* is the fifth most frequently used (Master, 1997). This shows their importance to the English language. To understand articles better, we need to look at them as two separate kinds: definite and indefinite, ultimately leading us to something called ‘the zero article (\emptyset)’.

Definite Article

The is the definite article. It is the only article that can be placed before any kind of noun: countable (singular and plural), uncountable, and abstract (Ogawa, 2008). *The* is often used in the context of talking about something that both the speaker and the listener know about, understand, or have already mentioned. *The* can be used in a generic way, but for the most part, it is used in a non-generic way (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). When *the* is used in the generic way before a plural noun, it is

used to talk about a group or a collection of something. An example of this is if we talk about *the students*. In this case, it would be a group of students, possibly all the students in a school or class. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) describe the uses of the definite article *the* as “general cultural, immediate situational, perceptual situational, local (general knowledge), and local (specific knowledge)” (page 279). I will give examples of each:

General: The sky is beautiful today.

Immediate: The class has already started.

Perceptual: Please grab the phone for me.

Local (general knowledge): The house always feels cold this time of year.

Local (specific knowledge): In Leisure City, Florida, there is a limestone structure called the Coral Castle.

This gives us some good examples of how and why we use the definite article *the*. Hawkins (1978) is often cited as giving us the definitive list of how the definite article is used in English. Liu and Gleason (2002) used that list to help break down the non-generic uses of *the* to four easy to understand categories: “cultural, situation, structural, and textual” (page 12). These four are very similar to the five uses previously mentioned. Some examples of cultural uses would be with certain diseases or places. In the situational use, we can think of something there is only one of, like a pet or a stadium. For example, where is *the stadium*? The structural use is when there is a modifier before the noun, such as, *the phonetic alphabet* (Liu & Gleason, 2002). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) explain that the textual use can be broken down into three classes: “anaphoric, deductive anaphoric, and cataphoric” (page 280). I will give examples of each:

Anaphoric: I saw a wonderful movie at the theater. When the movie comes out on DVD, I want to buy it.

According to Robertson’s data (2000), this category is most often used. It is when *the* is used before something already mentioned. The first mention of the

movie is marked by *a*. After this initial reference, it is understood that when the movie is stated again, it is the same movie that is being talked about.

Deductive anaphoric: I went to a party yesterday; *the* food was great.

In this example, the listener did not go to the party or see the food, but it is understood that the food being spoken about was at the party. Again, in this example, the first declaration is marked by *a*. Anything related to the party will be preceded by *the*.

Cataphoric: *The* door was already unlocked by the time he arrived home.

In this case, we can know *the door* refers to the door of his home. We use *the* because it is describing something that will be explained after it is initially mentioned.

These examples clearly show how and when to use *the*. There are a variety of ways the definite article is used in English. It is important for L2 students to review and practice using *the* to increase their understanding of articles.

Indefinite Article

A(n) is the indefinite article. There is no difference between *a* and *an*. It is commonly used with singular countable nouns. If the first sound of the noun is that of a vowel, we must use *an*; alternatively, if the sound is of a consonant, we must use *a* (Alexander, 1998). Master (1997) points out that the indefinite *a(n)* can be used with uncountable general nouns in a particular context, specifically if it is describing a category of that noun. When the noun being spoken about is not immediately identified as something that both the speaker and listener understand, *a(n)* will be used (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990). This could mean that in a discussion about a topic, the first time the subject is mentioned, it should follow the indefinite article; however, after the initial mention, the definite article should be used as the speaker and listener are

now certain of what is being discussed. For example, “Today, we will take a look at *a* short video. *The* video is about two minutes long.” If we look back at the history of *a* (*n*), we can see that it comes from the number ‘one’ (Herslund, 2008 page 34). This is why we can replace *a* (*n*) with ‘one’ to add emphasis when it comes before an adjective.

That is *an* interesting painting.

That is *one* interesting painting!

The indefinite article is also used to introduce a nonspecific NP.

I would like *a* new car.

In this example, the type of car is not important. Any car might match this person’s desire. However, in the next sentence, the speaker might be more specific about the car he/she is looking for.

Many researchers point out how the indefinite article began as a qualifier then the vagueness of the word expanded (Herslund, 2008; Berry, 2012; Ducrot and Todorov, 1981). There is a lack of specific information given to the receiver when *a* (*n*) is used. The specificity of the word is almost none. Besides its use as a quantifier, there is no extra information that is given with the use of this article. Nevertheless, if the indefinite article was removed from the lexicon, there would be a myriad of questions left unanswered. If we use the example of asking someone to go to a movie, it could be quite confusing if there is no article. An example would look like this: Would you like to go to movie? Through this example, the importance of *a* (*n*) becomes clear.

Zero Article

Berezowski (2009), goes into great detail about the zero article (\emptyset). This term originally came about trying to describe when *the* or *a* (*n*) are not necessary before an NP. The lack of necessity for an article became known as the zero article. He expresses that “it is presumed to be both definite and indefinite at the same time” (Berezowski, 2009, page 2). In this sense, the zero article becomes a phantom that we cannot see or clearly express a definition for. Moreover, it is not only an additional source of

confusion for students to understand and for teachers to explain but can also be an obstruction to the motivation that is essential to the learning process. Master (1997) points out that \emptyset is the first article that students of an L2 appear to learn. Because of their lack of understanding articles, they are more likely to not use an article. Therefore, we can treat this as a false positive. Berezowski (2009, pages 12-23) explains that there is no basis to put forward the idea of there being a zero article; however, if we look at how it is said to be used, we must look at “1) indefinite countable singular and plurals, 2) proper names, 3) predicate nominals, 4) vocatives, 5) nominals modified by numerals, 6) prepositional phrases, 7) bare binominals, and 8) covert countables”. I will briefly give examples of each of these:

- 1) Berezowski (2009, page 12) uses the example of looking for \emptyset life or risking \emptyset lives.
- 2) \emptyset Lisa Brown was born in \emptyset Miami.
- 3) One of the examples Berezowski (2009, page 15) uses was presidents of the United States. For example, Bill Clinton was \emptyset president in the 1990s.
- 4) \emptyset Students, try your best.
- 5) You can wait in \emptyset room 7.
- 6) We should go there by \emptyset train.
- 7) This conversation should be had \emptyset person to \emptyset person.
- 8) \emptyset Spring is my favorite time of year.
 \emptyset Dinner should be served around five o'clock.

According to Master (1997), Palmer (1939) may have been the first to suggest that there are two types of zero articles; “one (\emptyset_1) that occurs with non-count and plural nouns (e.g. *milk*, *eggs*) and the other (\emptyset_2) that occurs with certain singular count and proper nouns (e.g. *lunch*, *London*)” (Master, 1997, page 8). The second form of zero article (\emptyset_2) can be referred to as the null article. According to Chesterman (1991), the null article (\emptyset_2) is more definite than the definite article *the*; contrarily, the zero article (\emptyset_1) is the most indefinite (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999). These ideas

about the zero article are hard for L2 students to grasp; therefore, it may be best to not teach the idea of \emptyset until students are completely proficient with the definite and indefinite articles.

Japanese Students

There are no articles in the Japanese language. This is the main reason why Japanese students studying English as a second language (ESL) struggle with the understanding of when and how they should use the definite, indefinite, and zero articles. Many language learners and educators find English articles to be the most complicated point in learning English as an L2. There are so many points to cover to basic understanding and communication; consequently, article usage often gets pushed aside in order for the students to have a better comprehension of overall English understanding. In his study, Muranoi (2000) explains two issues that Japanese learners have with the English article system: “(1) lack of an article system in Japanese; (2) low saliency of articles” (page 638). L2 students of any language usually try to translate between their L1 and L2. If there is a lack of a concept in their L1, such as articles, it is clear why they are not able to easily master the idea of that point in their L2. As stated above, we know that *the* is the most commonly used word in the English language though it is not emphasized when speaking and may be lost on L2 students. Through the work of Robertson (2000), we can see that the biggest issue L2 English learners that come from an L1 that does not have articles have is that of omission. He goes on to explain how even when articles are used, it is unpredictable which article will be used (Robertson, 2000). Bryant (1984), points out that the majority of errors that Japanese students studying English as an L2 have has to do with their L1. Two of the points he makes are about omission of articles and the fact that there is no difference between singular and plural nouns. This makes the choice of using an article or not, even more difficult for Japanese students of English. Before the process of choosing the correct article can begin, L2 English learners need to decide if an article is necessary and

appropriate.

Overcoming Difficulties

Takehashi (2016) studied the process of Japanese L2 intermediate level English learners choosing which article to use. Through this study Takehashi (2016) reasoned that more importance should be shown to figuring out if the noun is general when teaching which article to use. He also cites Swan (1994) in this study by reminding L2 educators to keep grammar lessons simple. When grammar becomes over complicated, motivation levels have a high potential to decrease. If teachers can keep the basic understanding of a topic like the choosing of English articles to a few easy to understand rules, the students' comprehension level will most certainly increase (Takehashi, 2016).

Through the work of Robertson (2000), we can see that the basic rules of article usage are not obvious to L2 students. Pedagogy needs to be focused on offering these learners an easy way to choose when and how to use English articles. This can be done by starting with the basics of countable and uncountable nouns. There is no easy way to get from basic to advanced in terms of understanding. As with all learning, there needs to be a gradual process. If teachers try to rush students through the rules, there is a possibility of students giving up on English articles altogether because of the fact that omission or misusing articles most certainly will not inhibit communication. Master (1990) explains that simplifying the teaching of English articles should be the focus of ESL educators. He explains that *a* and *ø* can be taught as classification and *the* as identification. Through his paper, he discusses the work of Whitman (1974). In this paper, Whitman (1974) goes through what he believes articles are. For example, he does not see *a* and *the* as the same category. This is a unique look at articles which leads to his pedagogical approach. His perspective can be useful for L2 teachers who are trying to introduce articles to students who have an L1 which does not contain articles. He breaks down how articles should be taught to students. The first three steps

to teaching articles are: “quantity, generic plural, and non-count nouns” (Whitman, 1974, page 258-259). He starts with quantity because all languages have a form of counting things. This leads to the generic plural by removing the word *all* from a phrase describing all of something (*all cars* becomes *cars*). After that, he suggests teaching non-count nouns. Basically, this is a structured and simplified way to teach count and non-count nouns. It creates a natural progression. As students continue to grow in their understanding, he suggests teaching more difficult concepts in this order: “determiners, quantity and determiner, and generic articles” (Whitman, 1974, page 259-261).

With each teacher, how they teach articles will differ; the change may be slight or vast. The way articles are taught is not as important as the fact that they are being taught. There are educators that would rather not get into the difficulty of teaching a concept that many L2 students see as impossible. It may seem like there are other issues of importance, but the English article system is one of the most important. The simple fact of how often they are used gives us an understanding of their importance. This should be in the forefront of an educator’s approach. Even if the whole process of article acquisition is too complicated, at least the first few steps Whitman (1974) displays can be followed with ease.

Conclusion

English articles come naturally to L1 speakers of English and are used effortlessly. This can make it more difficult for educators to teach and for L2 students to learn the concept of how and when to use articles. *The* is not only the word that is most often used in the English language, it can also be used as a determiner preceding all kinds of nouns. On the other hand, *a* is the fifth most used word and gives us better understanding to an NP. The zero article is when an article is not necessary and seems to be the easiest for students studying English as an L2 because it is easier to choose nothing rather than trying to choose the correct article. As L2 students increase their

understanding of English, the zero article often becomes the most difficult of the three. In Japan, there is a lack of articles, which makes the process of learning and using articles that much more difficult. With all students studying English as an L2, articles need to be taught as a gradual process. If each English language educator takes on the responsibility of introducing basic article concepts, the probability of students gradually understanding more about articles will increase. Therefore, it should be added to pedagogy moving forward which could lead to the idea of “impossible article acquisition” dissipating.

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