



A Guideline for English Articles System Investigating Students of the English Department Understanding of the Articles System in English

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Abstract

Articles is an important area of English language learning and teaching. This study discusses students understanding of the articles system in English through investigating and analyzing the answers of students to an exercise. A qualitative and quantitative approach of investigation was employed and the data of this study was collected from the answers of students of the English Language Department in the Faculty of Arts Aljmail to a written task about articles. The finding revealed that students lack of full understanding and enough knowledge of how English articles system works seems to be obvious. Students answers seems to be based on memorization of articles rules rather than based on understanding the context in which the article is used or required. However, in some incidents and with a number of students there are evidence of good use and correct choice of articles. Teachers should be aware of the significance of teaching this area of English language and allocate enough time and appropriate teaching methodologies to ensure better understanding and pay more attention to the context than to memorization of rules.

Introduction

The article system in English is considered to be one of the major difficulties for both learners and teachers. This part of speech is one feature of English grammar and it has great significance in the field of teaching English as a foreign and second language. Because of the frequent use of articles in English, non-native students are supposed to be in exposure to them most of the time whether in writing or listening. Fully understanding and correctly using English articles is reported to be a principal problem for learners whose mother languages do not use articles (Harb, 2014). In some cases, it can be a problem for teachers as well. Some teachers do not find it important to devote valuable classroom time to teaching learners the article system because they

believe it is a minor aspect of the language that English learners will spontaneously acquire by exposure and does not need to be taught. Some teachers believe that "instructions in the article system will have no useful longterm effect" (Master, 1997:215).

Linguistically, articles are words that are used with nouns to indicate a type of reference made by the noun. There are two main types of articles in English; definite which includes only (the) and indefinite which includes (a) and (an). In addition to those three main types, there are two other articles which are the (zero) and (null) articles. The definite article (the) is used for generic and Non-generic references. The indefinite articles (a) and (an) are used for specific and non-specific reference.

Master (2003) states that the zero article can be found often with indefinite uncountable nouns (e.g., sugar) and plural countable nouns (e.g., books). It is the favorite means of describing generic or nonspecific nouns, especially in the plural countable form. The null article is the most definite among the articles. It occurs most often with singular proper nouns, and also occurs with certain singular countable nouns.

Literature Review

A. General Guideline for Article Usage in English

It is obvious that the choice of articles does not happen randomly. Some rules and guidelines should be followed. However, these rules sometimes have exceptions, and this forces the reader or listener to rely on the context in which articles are used to enable them to understand their meaning and their use. To help the learners and the teachers of English to teach articles successfully, here are general guidelines that explain the uses of the definite reference "the" and then the indefinite references zero article, and a/an.

1. Definite Reference "the"

The common function of the article (*the*) is to identify a noun. The article (*the*) is used as a generic and non-generic reference. It is used when the speaker knows that the hearer can identify the referent. Most grammar books, which are cited in this essay, explain almost the same types of uses of the definite article "the". For example, Hawkins (1978), Quirk (1985), and Radden (2007) introduce many non-generic uses of the definite (*the*) article listed as follows:

●Anaphoric Use – Previous Mention.

This is a common type of discourse reference by which the speaker (writer) refers back to items (referents) previously mentioned in the discourse and in this case the hearer is supposed to identify which referent is intended (Radden 2007). This use is also called Given Information, as mentioned in Yule (1998).

e.g., Yesterday, I bought *a car*. *The car* is comfortable and fuel efficient.

●CataphoricUse – First Mention

This is the opposite of anaphoric (*the*) (McCarthy, 1991). In this use, (*the*) is used for the first mention. The speaker refers to a referent that is not introduced in the discourse at the moment of speaking but will be introduced immediately after that (Radden 2007).

e.g., “have you heard about the student who was found cheating in his exam?”

“No” “Ok, a student was found cheating using

●Associative Anaphoric Uses

Hawkins (1978) identifies the main features of associative anaphoric use. He explains that in this use of *the*, a previously mentioned referent gives rise to other associations that are considered part of it or closely related to it. Shared general knowledge between the speaker and the hearer is a major element in creating these associations about the referent. For example, mentioning a word like *a book* will bring with it other related objects, such as:

e.g., *The author* is well-known. *The cover* is attractive.

● Specific background knowledge

In this case, (*the*) is used with a first-mention noun when this noun is known to most people in a specific community or country. For example, people from the same town may say:

e.g., Let`s go to *the mosque*. I was in *the coffee shop*.

●Immediate Physical Situation Uses

In this use of the definite article, the referent is available in the immediate physical situation at the moment of speaking and it is visible to the speaker and the hearer (Hawkins, 1978). A sentence like this is often said while dining, as the salt is supposed to be on the table.

e.g., Could you pass me *the salt*, please?

●General Background Knowledge – Uniqueness

In this type of use, the speaker and the hearer share general background knowledge about a larger situation, either inside a country or around the

world (Quirk, 1985). For example, when talking about *the president* of a certain country and at a particular time, it will be obvious to everyone in that place which president is being referred to because there is only one president; it is unique in this situation. Also, the same happens when referring to unique objects around the world, such as *the moon*, *the earth*, and *the sun*.

• Unique Adjectives

(*The*) is required with some unique adjectives, such as *best*, *only*, and *same*. Quirk (1985:270) refers to this type as “the logical use for cases where the uniqueness of the referent is to be explained ... by appeal to the logical interpretation of certain words”.

e.g., she is *the only* overseas student.

He is *the best* singer ever.

• Use In Noun Phrases (Nps) With Explanatory Modifiers Such As Clauses, Nouns, And Prepositional Phrases

In this use, (*the*) is used with a first-mention noun which is followed by an explanatory modifier in the form of a noun, a relative clause, or a prepositional phrase.

e.g., I like *the name* Taha.

The people who were waiting are still there (Downing, 2006).

I was a bit anxious in *the last part of the lecture*.

Quirk (1978) mentions another use of the definite article as being to refer to body parts:

e.g., Mary banged herself on *the forehead*.

Murphy (2004) shows different uses of *the* with other nouns and some nationality adjectives ending in (ch, ese, sh), which means the people of that country:

e.g., *The French* are rich. *The English* are polite. *The Japanese* are intelligent.

- (*The*) is also used with names followed by the proposition *of*.

e.g., *The University of* Sheffield.

- With names of newspapers and institutions.

e.g., *The Guardian*. *The European Union*.

- With adjectives without a noun.

e.g., *The rich*, *the poor*

2. Indefinite Reference “a/an” and “zero” Article

2.1. The Uses of the a/an Article

According to Yule (1998), “a/n” is the traditional grammatical marker of countability in English. He mentioned different functions for the indefinite article discussed briefly in the next points:

- To introduce something for the first time
e.g., yesterday I bought **a car**.
- To mean one of many
e.g., **a reservation** form needs to be filled in.
- To describe things or people
e.g., This is **an interesting** story. He is **a clever** boy.
- To mention one item that represents a whole class
e.g., **A dog** is a pet animal.
- To talk about things that have not been identified yet
e.g., Would you help me in writing **a letter**?
- To introduce someone's occupation
e.g., She is **a fashion** designer.
- a/an is used to mean **one**,
e.g., I ate **an apple** this morning.

According to Radden (2007), indefinite reference has two types; specific reference and non-specific reference.

2.1.1. Specific Reference

This type refers to a specific referent that exists in the real world and the speaker's mind. It is used to introduce one representative out of a large mass.

e.g. I want to marry **an American**. He lives in Kalamazoo. **Specific Reference**

2.1.2. Non-specific Reference

This type refers to a non-specific referent that may not exist in reality but does exist in the speaker's imagination; it is an unreal referent.

The non-specific referent may be one among the reference mass of its class. Radden (2007) provides a good example of these two types:

e.g. I want to marry **an American**. He should be rich. **Non-specific Reference**

2.2. The Uses of Zero Articles

A zero article is used with uncountable nouns, plural countable nouns, with generic references, (Master 1997) and (Quirk 1985).

•Uncountable nouns:

- **Sugar** is sweet.
- **Milk** is good for health.

● **Plural countable nouns**

- Both sisters are *musicians*.
- They have become *vegetarians*. (Quirk 1985)

● **Generic reference**

- *Ladies* are beautiful.
- *Tigers* hunt at night.

● **Abstract uncountable nouns (Quirk 1985)**

- *Honesty* is a good virtue.

● **General Features**

- Birds have *feathers*.

● **With existential “there”**

- There are *holes* in your socks. (Master 1991)

B. Judging the Generic Sentence from the Non-generic and Providing Reasons

(1) a. Whales are an endangered species.

b. The whale is an endangered species.

c. *A whale is an endangered species.

Sentences (a) and (b) are acceptable generic sentences because they are preceded by the indefinite plural and the definite singular, which allow us to refer either to a large number of class elements that enables us to make generalizations about the class as a whole as in (a) or to the whole class, as in (b). In these two sentences, the verb *endangered* can be used only with a large group. However, sentence (c) cannot be accepted as generic because it is preceded by the indefinite singular article which refers to one representative of the whole class. “A/n cannot be used in attributing properties which belong to the class as a whole.” (Downing, 2006). As such, “the class predicate”, which is the verb *endangered*, cannot be used with one representative of it. One whale cannot become extinct.

(2) a. The zebra has a striped coat.

b. Zebras have striped coats.

c. A zebra has a striped coat.

These three sentences are considered to be generic. In the first sentence, “*the*” refers to a single whole class of zebras that includes a lot of individuals sharing the same feature of having striped coats. This is used to contrast one class with another: for example, *The tiger has a spotty coat*. In the second sentence, the zero+ plural count noun implies that all or the majority of the class individuals share the same

characteristic of having a striped coat. In the third sentence, one zebra represents the whole class and whatever features it has should be shared by the whole class. Thus, the representative zebra has a striped coat, so the rest of the class all have striped coats.

However, if we observe these sentences from the perspective of the attributing properties which belong to the class as a whole, we find that the first sentence seems to be non-generic. The hearer cannot imagine that *the zebra* as a whole class has “*a*” *striped coat*. The other two sentences are considered generic because in (b) it is clear that zebras as individuals, all or the majority of them, have many *individual* striped coats since both nouns have a plural agreement, *zebras*, and *coats*. In sentence (c), it is clear that each zebra has a coat. *A zebra* and *a coat* are both singular.

(3) a. Liquids have no shape.

b. A liquid has no shape.

c. The liquid has no shape.

The first two sentences are generic, while the third is not; it is definite. In (a), when the plural mass noun is preceded by the zero article to refer to all or most liquids, it makes it generic. In (b), the indefinite singular precedes the mass noun to refer to one entity that represents the whole class of liquids, so it is generic. In (c), when (*the*) precedes a mass noun, it makes it definite, so, the third sentence does not refer to the whole class of liquids, but to a definite kind of liquid, for instance, *water*.

C. General Principles for the Use of Articles in Generic References

Like non-generic references, generic references are also divided into definite references, “*the*”, and indefinite references, “*a/an*” and *zero* articles. Articles provide a generic use when they refer to a species, a race, or people of a nation. Radden (2007) states that a generic reference is used to make a generalization about a group of individual items which share similar characteristics and form a class with a specific name. The following four generic uses of the article in English are adapted from his book.

1. Indefinite Singular

This use of reference requires choosing one referent to represent the whole class to which this referent belongs. The representative of the class and the whole class must all share the same essential features.

e.g., *A giraffe has* a very long neck and long legs.

The indefinite singular has a grammatical constraint in that it cannot be used with certain types of a verb or what is called “**class predicates**”. For example, *extinct*, and *die out* make generalizations about the whole class and, therefore, should not be used with a particular member of a class because it belongs to the class as a whole. e.g., **A giraffe* is dying out.

2. Indefinite Plural

The indefinite plural generalizes large elements of a class but not the whole class. In this type of use, generalization about the whole class can be made even with a few representatives who may display the same feature or behaviour that makes people assume that this behaviour is a characteristic of a large number of the class elements to which those representatives belong.

e.g., *The majority of Libyans* are Arabs. *Libyans* are generous.

3. Definite Singular

The definite singular generic reference refers to the whole class in contrast to another one. The use of (*the*) distinguishes one species, race, or nation of people from another as in (a). Quirk (1985) mentions that the use of the definite article with human beings as a class may seem inappropriate, as in (b), although it can be used to describe the features of a particular group of people, as in (c).

e.g., (a) *The giraffe* has a blotchy coat, but the zebra has a striped one.

(b) **The lawyer* is well-paid.

(c) He spoke with the consummate assurance and charm of *the successful Harley Street surgeon*.

4. Definite Plural

The definite plural provides a generalization about a whole class by referring to a large number, but not essentially all, of its elements. It is mostly used with human classes and it permits exceptions.

e.g., *The Americans* are very religious.

Participants and Research Procedures

The participants of the study consisted of a total of 38 students studying in the English Language Department in Aljmail faculty of Arts in the the academic year 2023-2024. There were 9 students in the first year of study, 9 in the second, 11 in the third and 9 in the fourth year. The method of data collecting was closed-ended questionnaire. Students were all given an exercise in the form of a letter - from a

university student to his Professor at the university - which includes some article examples. The letter has 9 blanks where an article, whether definite(*the*) or indefinite(*a*) and (*an*), is required to be filled by the student depending on the context not only on grammar rules. They were given the same task from first to fourth year based on the fact that they all had studied the module Grammar 1,2,3 or 4 during one of their academic years. The task was done by the students and supervised by the researcher during one of the lectures in the Department of English Language in Aljmail faculty of Arts. The data were analyzed qualitatively by identifying the weaknesses and deeply considering the reasons behind them.

In addition to rules, choosing an article depends almost on the context in which they are used. Students' answers are supposed to be exactly the same as the following typical answers to ensure that they fully understand the context of these articles. Therefore, to give a clear explanation for the usage of English articles, here is a letter from a university student to his Professor at the university which includes some article examples. The letter is followed by a commentary explaining the reasons behind the choice of articles.

- A Commentary Explaining the Reasons Behind the Choice of Articles in the following Passage.

My name is Kamara Kuffour, and I am a Senegalese visiting scholar, studying at the University of Nottingham. I am writing to you regarding my library card. Yesterday, I went to (1) the library to obtain (2) the book you recommended in your lecture but I was told that I had to fill in (3) a reservation form. I have (4) a library card from (5) the University of Dakar in Senegal. (6) The enclosed document shows my home university registration number. I understand that (7) the library card provided by my home universality cannot be used here. Therefore, I would be grateful if you could provide me with (8) a letter that enables me to obtain a University of Nottingham library card. You may contact Dr Joseph Ndour, who will be happy to provide (9) the reference he usually writes for me. I am lookingforward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

In example (1), (*the*) is used relying on the situation in which it is said. From the information in the student`s letter, it is clear that the student, who is a visiting scholar at the University of Nottingham, is referring to a definite specific library which is the University of Nottingham library. In this discourse, the speaker supposes that the hearer knows which library is meant. Logically, students often go to the libraries of their

universities. However, there might be a possibility of choosing an indefinite article. Nottingham city has several libraries. If the speaker does not refer to a specific one, the University library, then the article would be (*a*) because the referent is nonspecific and indefinite. This is just a possibility, and the use of (*the*) is more appropriate than (*a*).

In (2), the speaker and the hearer share the same background knowledge about the referent, and the former talks about the same book that the latter had already recommended. Both of them know the exact book to which they are referring. Therefore, the choice of (*the*) is appropriate in this situation because the speaker presumes that the hearer will immediately recognize the referent.

One of the indefinite references uses is when referring to only one piece of a large quantity. For this reason, article number (3) is indefinite and nonspecific (*a*). The student here was asked to fill in only one reservation form from perhaps hundreds. There was no specific form that the student had to fill in; they were all the same.

In number (4), the writer chooses the indefinite (*a*) to introduce an object to the reader for the first time. The use of (*a*) helps the reader to “open a space in his mind” for the new item with which he may be unfamiliar. Another reason is that the speaker is talking about his library card as one of many cards provided to students by the University of Dakar. It is not a specific card.

Choosing the definite article (*the*) in number (5) is for at least three reasons. The first is that nouns with (*of*) usually require the article (*the*) (Murphy 2004). In other words, the referent is modified by a prepositional phrase and thus it requires (*the*). The second is that the University of Dakar is unique in the world; there is only one main university in the city of Dakar. There might be other universities, but they are not as major and unique as the University of Dakar. Similar to this is the fact that the University of Sheffield and the University of Oxford co-exist with Sheffield Hallam University and Oxford Brooks University. The use of (*the*) in this way gives the noun uniqueness in the world.

Article (*the*) is required in number (6) because *the document* is a noun modified by the adjective “*enclosed*”. It is only one specific document that is enclosed with the student’s letter. There is also another reason for using (*the*), which is attributed to the immediate physical situation. The speaker knows that when the reader is reading the letter, the enclosed document will be in front of the reader as well as the letter.

This situation makes the use of the article (*the*) necessary. The use of (*the*) in (7) is because the item or the referent was previously mentioned and this is called the anaphoric reference or second mention. In this situation, it is expected that the reader knows which particular card is being referred to. Another reason for using (*the*) in example number (7) is that the referent is modified by a relative clause. The indefinite article (*a*) is chosen in (8) because the writer does not refer to a real specific letter; "the letter" does not exist, and it is not identified yet. The speaker wants any letter that may help him in obtaining a library card. In (9), the context shows that the speaker is referring to a certain reference usually used only for him. It is a specific reference belonging to him. According to this, the article (*the*) is more appropriate here than any other article.

Results of the Study

The study examined the use of definite and indefinite articles in the English language, highlighting their specific and flexible usage based on context. The results showed that the definite article "the" is often used to refer to a shared knowledge between the speaker and the listener, whether this knowledge arises from prior reference or from an element that is generally known in the surrounding environment. On the other hand, the indefinite articles "a/an" are employed to introduce new ideas or refer to non-specific elements.

Participants of the study show understanding of the definite article (the) when referring to a specific referent. The majority of students answered either both or one of the blanks number 1 and 9 correctly. In some incorrect examples students used the indefinite article (a). Surprisingly, answers of first year students who can be considered (beginners in the department of English) to blank 1 and 9 are 100% correct, while third year students who can be considered (advanced) have six mistakes in blank number 1 and 9. Second and fourth year have only 3 mistakes in the same blanks. In blank number 2 only (8) students answered correctly. The majority of students (30) could not choose the right article.

In the blank 3 and 4, the required answer is (a) while students' answers were mostly (the). In blank 3 (a) is required to refer to only one reservation form should be filled in not more, and also to refer to a first mention object.

The majority of students of the four academic years (28 students) answered example 5 and 6 incorrectly, depending on grammar rules

memorization instead of understanding of context. The required article is the definite article (the), while students' answer is (an)the depended on the rule that says words beginning with a vowel require the article (an). They did not pay attention to the context that presents the word as a specific thing.

In blank 7, only 13 students out of 38 answered correctly. Although the context obviously requires (the), 25 students choose the wrong answer, and most of them opt the indefinite article (a). In 8 a considerable number of students, 23, answered correctly.

Discussion of Results

The results of the study suggests that students have basic knowledge of English articles. In some incidents, the majority do not even have the basic knowledge as in example 2 where only 8 students answered correctly. Also, in blank number 2 students seem to depend on grammar rules not on the context which requires (the) because the listener and the speaker share the same background knowledge about the referent. Participant used (a) may be because it is more common or they were exposed to it in an indefinite context more than in a definite context. In examples 3 and 4 studentsseems to have little previous knowledge about the use of indefinite article (a). This could be anticipated to teachers failure in teaching English articles in an appropriate way or to students failure in concentrating on this important part of speech and pay more attention to it.

Using the Definite Article "the"

The study found that the definite article "the" is primarily used to specify a reference, whether it is known or unknown, and this is the most common use in English. Through these findings, it is evident that the English learners at the Department of English language do not always rely on context to identify the reference indicated by the article "the".

Using the Indefinite Article "a/an"

The study revealed that the indefinite articles "a/an" are primarily used to introduce new or unknown ideas in a text, referring to something unspecified that could belong to a broader category. The studyconcluded that "a/an" helps generalize or introduce ideas that are not yet specific to the listener or reader, which allows for the communication of new or unknown concepts.

The studyrevealed how context influences the use of articles in English. It was observed that the article "the" is used to identify a reference that

is known or shared by both the speaker and listener, reflecting the concept of "shared knowledge" as mentioned in previous research by Hawkins (1978) and Quirk (1985). In the case of "a" and "an", these articles indicate something not yet specified, which helps in constructing simpler sentences when presenting new ideas. The differences between using definite and indefinite articles are especially evident in sentences that deal with generalities as opposed to specific cases. A key point highlighted by the study was the impact of the physical context, particularly in direct physical references, where the definite article is used when the element is assumed to be visible to both the speaker and the listener at the time of the conversation. This demonstrates the role of the physical context in determining whether "the" should be used or not. The results highlight that the use of definite and indefinite articles in English follows general rules, but there are exceptions based on linguistic and social context.

The results also point to the crucial role of context in determining the appropriate article to use. While the guidelines provide some direction, the surrounding context plays a pivotal role in deciding which article is most appropriate for the situation.

Due to the complex nature of English articles (Master, 1997) suggests introducing them step by step to English learners. For example, beginner learners shouldn't be taught the rules of articles. Instead, regular and natural exposure to spoken and written English should be more emphasized. Articles can be introduced to English learners through reading and writing skills.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended to focus on teaching the correct context for choosing the appropriate article in language instruction for non-native English speakers. Practical exercises that focus on different contexts for using "*the*," "*a/an*," and the *zero* article should be incorporated into lessons to facilitate understanding and effective application of the rules.

Conclusion

This paper provides a detailed description of articles in the English language. It sheds light on the classification of articles and clarifies some issues regarding the naming and usage of articles. The paper also offers teachers and researchers with a commentary explaining the reasons behind the choice of articles in real example sentences and a general guideline for article usage in English. It shows the differences between

definite, indefinite, anaphoric, cataphoric, generic, and non-generic uses of articles.

The article system of English is not easy to teach. It requires effective methods of teaching. Berry (1991) provides some ways that are important in teaching English articles. He suggests focusing on the importance of the articles, especially the specific uses of the definite article (*the*). He also encourages teachers to focus on the quality of the activities and exercises and this can happen by engaging the learners in the comprehension and analysis of the uses of the articles by using contrastive information to highlight the meaning intended by the speaker in different examples. Another important point he mentioned is to avoid depending heavily on rules and avoid or reduce the teaching of uncommon articles, such as the use of the article (*the*) with proper nouns.

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