Pedagogical Principles for Teaching the English Articles

Toshiaki TAKAHASHI
Yamaguchi University

Abstract

Based on previous research, the present study proposes six pedagogical principles for teaching the English articles at high school: 1) the idiomatic or conventional use of the articles should be learnt as such because there is no point in exploring an underlying rule, 2) the teaching of the generic use of the articles should be delayed until a later stage of language acquisition because it is very rare and difficult to understand, 3) whether the referent is context-unique is the best criterion for the use of the definite article and the learner should be given instruction in applying this criterion in selecting the appropriate article, 4) instruction in the countable / uncountable distinction should be given by starting with typical examples, 5) instruction in the countable / uncountable distinction should be taught by making the use of dual nouns to give the student a feel of the difference between the countable and uncountable forms of a word, 6) The student should be taught to use a dictionary to learn the countability of new vocabulary on an item by item basis.

1. The Aims of the Present Study

Teaching the English articles is one of the most difficult tasks for Japanese EFL teachers. Although there are an increasing number of reference books dealing with the English articles (e.g. Shobo, 1996; Ishida, 2002; Higuchi, 2003), the rules described are not necessarily simple nor is the order of article instruction sequenced on the basis of previous research.

In addition, considering the time available for teaching grammatical rules at high school and the cognitive load on the student, we need to simplify the rules for article selection (so as to make the task of teaching the English articles manageable) and present it in the most appropriate order. Although Master (1994) spent a total of 6 hours (scattered over a period of 9 weeks) teaching the English articles, it will not be realistic to spend this amount of time solely on teaching the English articles at high school in Japan. This is especially so when we are not in any case certain of the effect of such an instructional program on the use of the English articles (cf. Master, 1990, p. 465).
My assumption here is that there are basic distinctions that enable us to choose the English articles correctly and we do not need to learn numerous rules in doing so. Thus the aim of the present study presents a limited number of principles for teaching the English articles and proposes a sequence for teaching the English articles. In other words, the present study proposes pedagogic “rules” (or principles) for teaching the English articles.

The present study is geared towards Japanese teachers of English at senior high school (not at junior high school) because junior high school students are relatively accurate in the use of English articles owing to their dependence on memorized chunks (e.g. There is a X, This is a X). On the other hand, their counterparts at high school tend to be more rule-based, as would be evident from an increasing number of overgeneralization errors (cf. Parish, 1987). Since high school students already have “partial mastery of the form”, they are considered to be “ready” for explicit instruction in the use of the English articles (cf. Williams and Evans, 1998, p. 151).

According to Swan (1994), “pedagogic language rules” must meet the six criteria (truth, demarcation, clarity, simplicity, conceptual parsimony, relevance). The first criterion (“truth”) means that pedagogical rules must maintain descriptive truth. The second one (“demarcation”) means that the limit of a rule application should be clear to the learner. The third to fifth criteria (“clarity”, “simplicity”, “conceptual parsimony”) mean that pedagogical rules should be clear, simple and non-technical. The final criterion means that the rules must make sense to the learner.

For example, the following suggestion by Master (2002, p. 340) clearly violates the first criterion and therefore it is not considered to be an appropriate principle for teaching the English articles.

Since the canonical structure is obeyed in roughly two thirds of the total noun phrase.... In other words, students can be shown initially that noun phrases occurring to the left of the verb are marked with the definite article ....

Among these 6, the demarcation criterion is particularly important (Swan, 1994, p. 47). To take one example: the term “attributive” (i.e. non-referential / non-specific) is used for describing the use of the definite article in a situation in which one uses an expression such as “the killer” not for a specific individual but for whoever did the killing (Brown, 1983, p. 211). However, the term “attributive” (i.e. non-referential / non-specific) applies both to the use of the indefinite article and that of the definite article (e.g. the indefinite noun phrase in “Mark, who is a killer, is your enemy.” is attributive. Thus the term provides no basis for predicting which articles to be used and therefore it does not satisfy the demarcation criterion.

2. Principle 1: The idiomatic or conventional uses of the articles should be learnt as such,
without the prescription of rules

Parrish (1987) illustrated in her longitudinal study of a Japanese learner that the subject moved from correct article use based on memorized chunks to erroneous use of articles caused by the overgeneralization of acquired rules to idiomatic use. This indicates that learners of English are initially dependent on their knowledge of idiomatic expressions and memorized chunks (e.g. There is a X, I saw a X).

Although the dependence on the knowledge of memorized chunks may lead to the production of mistakes (e.g. I saw the ...), the dependence on the knowledge of idiomatic expressions (e.g. take a bath) will always lead to accurate and efficient use of the English articles. Therefore, the memorization of idiomatic expressions is not to be discouraged.

Similarly, as Berry (1991, p. 254) suggests, the use of the with proper nouns (e.g. The Times, the Suez Canal, etc.) is largely a matter of convention. Therefore 'there is no point in seeking an underlying rule and these items should be learnt as they are' (See also Master, 1997).

3. Principle 2: Delay teaching the generic use until a later stage of language acquisition

The generic use of the English articles (e.g. A cat is an animal) refers either to a representative of the whole class (in the case of the indefinite article and the zero article plus a plural countable noun) or the whole class (in the case of the definite article).

McEldowney (1978) proposed a scheme of teaching the English articles in which the notions of "any" (= indefinite), "special" (= definite), and "general" (= generic) are central. In his scheme, the English article use is first categorized into "general" and "particular" and the latter is further subdivided into two categories (i.e. "any" and "special").

Although this scheme may not be compatible with descriptive truth, separating the generic use of the English articles from the other types of the article use seems to be a very good idea.

As Quirk et al. point out (1985, p. 265), generic reference ("The tiger can be a dangerous animal") is much rarer, compared to specific reference. Similarly, Liu and Gleason (2002, pp. 5-6) note that "except in the scientific register, the generic use of the has been found to be very rare." In addition, the understanding of the generic use is very difficult. As Whitman (1974, pp. 258-261) recommends, teaching the generic use should be delayed considerably in a teaching program.

4. Principle 3: First decide whether the definite article should be used
Quirk et al (1985) regard the indefinite article “as the unmarked partner, being used (with countable nouns) when the conditions for using the definite article do not pertain (1985, p. 274).” In the same way, the zero article is used with plural countable nouns and uncountable nouns when the conditions for the definite article do not pertain. As Berry (1991, p. 255) points out, this simplification will “allow us to concentrate on the (particularly its specific uses).”

Master (1990) proposes that the English article system may be taught as a binary division between classification (a and 0) (e.g., Houdini was a man who could open any lock) and identification (the) (e.g., Houdini was the man who could open any lock). This is in line with the idea proposed by Quirk et al (1985).

Furthermore, previous research (Yamada and Matsuura, 1982; Takahashi, 1996) using an article cloze-type test shows that the accuracy level of the three types of articles (the, a/an, 0) is highest in the use of the definite article, then in the use of the indefinite article, followed by the use of the zero article. Furthermore, Parish (1987) obtained a similar result in her longitudinal study of a Japanese learner of ESL. Thus concentrating first on the use of the definite article is in line with the findings of previous research.

4. 1. When the definite article should be used?

Previous research indicates that the definite article is used 1) when the noun is modified, 2) when the referent is definite, 3) when the referent is identifiable, 4) when the referent is both specific (+SR) and known to the hearer (+HK), 5) when the referent is context unique (cf. inclusiveness).

However, as Master (1994, p. 238) points out, “pre- and post-modification doesn't always trigger 'the' and therefore, the first criterion cannot be regarded as a necessary condition for using the definite article. Similarly, as Close (1992, p.44) points out, “the mere insertion of an adjective is not enough” to justify the use of the definite article (e.g. French history).

The definite / indefinite distinction is often used to account for the way the articles are used (See Ando, 1983, pp. 286-290 for example). However, the concept of the definiteness is very difficult to define: Lyons (1999) devotes a whole book to the discussion of the definiteness and the concept of definiteness is still ambiguous. We are not certain whether it means that the referent is identifiable in the shared knowledge of speaker and hearer or it means that the referent is one and only one which satisfy the description used, or it means the referent is both identifiable and unique (See Lyons, 1999 for detailed discussion of the concept of definiteness). This ambiguity seems to constitute the violation of the demarcation criterion by Swan (1994).

There are also problems with the third criteria. For example, when a news reporter says “There was no sign of the killer.”, “the killer” does not mean “the one specific person who committed a murder”(Yule, 1995) since the news reporter did not know who was responsible for
the crime. Here the use of the definite article means that the thing or person called "killer" must exist, and not that the killer is identifiable or known to the hearer. In the same way, native speakers of English may ask the question, "Have you read the paper this morning?" even in cities which publish more than one newspaper (Pica, 1983, p. 224). The use of the definite article in those examples is difficult to explain by the criterion of whether the referent is identifiable.

The forth criterion means that the definite article is only used when the referent is both specific (+SR) and known to the hearer (HK). The idea of using the distinction [+SR][-SR] and [+HK][-HK] originated in Brown (1973) and was later applied in various other studies (Heubner, 1979 & 1983; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989). Almost identical to this is the idea proposed by Todd and Hancock (1986) in which the idea of using the features [+definite][-definite] and [+HK][-HK] was proposed. Swan (1994, p. 49) considered the simplification by Todd and Hancock (1986) as an excellent example in which a trade-off between truth and simplicity is carefully thought out. I believe that the same applies to the simplification by Heubner(1979, 1983), Parrish (1987) and Thomas (1989).

The forth criterion seems capable of accounting for why the definite article cannot be used for the sentence "I saw a funny-looking dog." Even if the dog seems particular for the speaker, it is not known to the hearer. Therefore the use of the definite article can be seen to be inappropriate. However, as Swan (1994, p. 49) points out, the term definite is not explained, and the term known to the hearer is used as "something of a catch-all term." The same is true of the [±SR] distinction. As Master (1990, p. 467) argues, it is sometimes difficult, even for a native speaker of English, to make the [±SR] distinction. Therefore, it will be hard for Japanese ESL learners to know clearly what are the limits on the application of this condition (i.e. the violation of the demarcation criterion). Furthermore, the definite article can be used when the referent is unique in the context. For example, if there was only one doctor on duty, it is correct to say "He was the doctor on duty that evening" (Close, 1992, p. 44) even if the referent is not known to the hearer.

The fifth criterion means the definite article is used when the referent is context unique. As Zehler and Brewer (1982, p.1269) explains, the context unique referent is either "a simple context unique (only one possible referent)" or "a determinative unique (several referents available, but modification makes the choice specific)" (e.g. "The woman with a blue hat is leaving soon." ). The context unique criteria is very simple and satisfies the demarcation criterion. It may be relatively simple for Japanese ESL learners to decide whether the referent is context unique.

In the following examples, the definite article should be used in (1) because there is only one city hall (context unique). However, in (2) there are more than one restaurant. Therefore, the use of the definite article is inappropriate.

(1) A: Could you tell me the way to the city hall?
    B: Sure. Go along this street for three blocks and ... 
(2) A: Let's go to a restaurant this evening.
B: That's a good idea. Which restaurant shall we go to?

The criterion of contextual uniqueness can account for these examples very well, but it does not seem to explain the use of the definite article in “I’ve washed the dishes” (Lyons, 1999, pp. 11-12). Here “the dishes” is almost identical in meaning to all the dishes and the use of the seems to signal inclusiveness (all the referents satisfying the description). Does this mean the signals uniqueness with singular noun phrases and inclusiveness with plural and mass noun phrases? Since inclusiveness with singular noun phrases is the same as uniqueness, uniqueness can be assimilated to inclusiveness as suggested by Lyons (1999). However, the use of the term inclusiveness will impair clarity, simplicity and conceptual parsimony (Swan, 1994). Therefore, it would be pedagogically useful to explain that the signals uniqueness with singular noun phrases and inclusiveness (= “all”) with plural and mass noun phrases.

Yet, there is another problem with the fifth criterion. In the following examples, contrary to what grammatical accounts would predict, the definite article is used. As Zehler and Brewer (1982) explain, the definite article is used when “(a) the referent is one of a few like-items available; (b) the specification of the item is not particularly relevant for discourse continuity; and (c) the item is an intrinsic, highly predictable, element of the discourse context frame”.

(3) This little boy runs to their car and opens the door.
(4) John got hit on the leg by a bat
(5) Mary got into the car and sat down on the seat
(Quoted from Zehler and Brewer, 1982, pp. 1269-1274).

The definite article is normally used when the referent is context unique. As Birner and Wald (1994) explain, in order to use the definite article when the referent is not unique in the context, the referent “must be both undifferentiated and not relevantly differentiable in context (p. 93)”. Like the generic use of the English article, we should considerably delay teaching examples like these. Except for special examples like the above, the fifth criterion seems to work well.

In summary, the last criterion is considered the most appropriate. It is clear, simple, not technical. Provided the teacher avoids teaching the exceptional cases described above, the limits of rule application (‘demarcation’) are also clear.

4. 2. Context uniqueness and the level of difficulty

Halliday and Hasan (1976, p. 33) divides the use of the definite article into the four major categories, each of which is subdivided into two: (1) the exophoric use (which is subdivided into 1) situational use (= the referent is unique in the situation) and 2) the homophoric use (= only one
referent exists or all), (2) endophoric use (which is subdivided into 1) anaphoric reference (= the referent is determined by the preceding text) and 2) the cataphoric reference (= the referent is specifically modified).

Does the level of difficulty in selecting the English articles vary according to types of contextual uniqueness? The answer seems to be in the affirmative. Based on the results of the cloze test and the article insertion test given to 99 Japanese university students, Takahashi (1996) examined the hierarchies of difficulty among (1) exophoric, (2) anaphoric and (3) cataphoric article use and found that the first two are equally accurate and significantly higher than the last.

Quirk et al (1985) divided the use of the definite article into eight categories: (1) immediate situation, (2) larger situation, (3) anaphoric reference — direct ("second mention"), (4) anaphoric reference — indirect ("associative anaphora"), (5) cataphoric reference, (6) sporadic reference ("institutional reference") My sister goes to the theatre every month. (7) logical use, (8) relevance to body parts (See Hawkins, 1978 for a similar way of categorization).

Komiya (1988) conducted an experiment, based on the categories by Quirk et al (1985) and obtained the results below. Thus the level of difficulty in the use of the definite article seems to reflect the degree of demarcation. That is to say, the greater difficulty the learner has in knowing the limits of rule application, the less accurate the use of the definite article is likely to become.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Advanced</th>
<th>Intermediate</th>
<th>Lower Intermediate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>① Immediate situation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>② Larger situation</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>88.6%</td>
<td>84.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>③ Anaphoric reference — direct (&quot;second mention&quot;)</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>④ Anaphoric reference — indirect (&quot;associative anaphora&quot;)</td>
<td>83.4%</td>
<td>80.7%</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⑤ Cataphoric reference</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>68.2%</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⑥ Sporadic reference (&quot;institutional reference&quot;)</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⑦ Representative and generic use</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>14.8%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⑧ Logical use</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
<td>82.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>⑨ Relevance to body parts</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>52.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Principle 4: Start with instruction in typical examples of the count /uncountable distinction

As mentioned earlier, when the conditions for using the definite article do not pertain (Quirk et al, 1985, p. 274), the indefinite article is used with singular countable nouns. In the same way, the zero article is used with plural countable nouns and uncountable nouns when the conditions for the definite article do not pertain. Therefore, the next important step in selecting the articles is
to decide whether the noun is countable.

The countable / uncountable distinction is not easy. As Lock (1996, p. 23) points out, “it is hard for a learner of English to see why certain nouns should be mass rather than count, or vice versa” (e.g., furnitures, informations, homeworks, etc.)(See Yoon, 1993 for the relationship between Japanese learners’ perception of countability and the use of the indefinite article)

From the learner’s point of view, the distinction may seem quite arbitrary. However, as Lock (1996, p. 24) points out, “most nouns are clearly either count or mass in the contexts in which they are most frequently used”, it should be important to teach the countable / uncountable distinction using typical examples.

Typical countable nouns have a distinct border or boundary. Therefore, when the speaker refers to “unbounded” substance or when the person is not talking about an individual entity, it becomes uncountable Uncountable nouns typically refer to “limitless, formless, continue(=continuous) entity (Hewson, 1972, p. 94). There have been many attempts to understand why certain nouns are countable and others are not (See Oda, 1982 for the relationship between individuality and countability, and see Ishida, 2002 for the six types of boundedness).

6. Principle 5: The use of dual nouns for teaching
the count /uncountable distinction

Although much of what we know about countability does not predict whether a certain noun is countable, it is certainly applied to understand why a certain noun is countable. For example, the uncountable form (e.g. stone (a material)), as Master (1994, p. 241) observes, is more general in concept than the countable one (e.g., a stone (an object)). Understanding the observed tendency help the students understand what difference in meaning the countable / uncountable distinction will make. Master (1994, p. 239) proposed the use of dual nouns (e.g., 0 iron versus an iron, 0 football versus a football) because they represent very different entities in the two forms (i.e., a metal versus an appliance, a sport versus a piece of equipment, human kind versus a male human), thus helping the student to understand the effect of the existence of the indefinite article. Takahashi (2000) carried out an experiment to measure the accuracy in the judgment of countability by Japanese EFL learners, in which the subjects were asked to judge whether the use (or non-use) of the indefinite article matched each picture presented on the computer screen. This was conducted as an experiment but it can be easily changed into a drill for making the student aware of the difference between the two linguistic forms.

7. Principle 6: The use of a dictionary to learn noun countability

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As described earlier, it is important to remember typical examples of countable / uncountable nouns. Except for them, the basic principle is to check noun countability by using a dictionary and the countable / uncountable distinction must be learned on an item by item basis, together with repeated exposure to examples. For instance, in the following example, the learner needs to know that the word “experience” has a general sense and a specific sense and the word in a specific sense is used as countable, and the same word in a general sense is used as uncountable.

[名] ①[U] 経験、体験 （←an をつけず、複数形にしない）
She learned it from [through] experience.
彼女は経験からそれを学んだ．
He has much experience in teaching English.
②[C] 経験[体験]したこと．
I had many pleasant experiences during my trip.
私は旅行中たくさんの楽しい経験をした.
（『ハウディ英和・和英辞典（第2版）』（講談社）（2002），p. 212 ）

8. Conclusion

The pedagogical principles described above are simple and easy to apply. Since the judgment as to whether the referent is context unique is easy to make, it satisfies the demarcation criterion. Furthermore, since the principles are based on previous research concerning the teaching of English articles, they maintain descriptive truth in spite of simplification.

References

Liu, D., & Gleason, J. L. (2002). Acquisition of the article the by non-native speakers of


