

The use of the English article system by Polish and Turkish students of English philology

Artur Świątek, Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland
artursw@interia.pl

Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyse and compare the use of the English article system by two groups of non-native users of English, Polish and Turkish. The available theories devoted to this aspect of English grammar prove that this system cannot be acquired ideally by non-native users, no matter what language they use.

The English article system is either non-existent or realised differently in two analysed linguistic registers. Such features of these registers cause a tremendous difficulty for both groups of subjects to sufficiently cope with the use of the English article system on a daily basis. It is expected prior to the administering of the gap-completion task that both analysed groups of subjects will find it problematic to complete the gapped passages with appropriate article. In case of Polish as L1 it realises and reacts to the deficits of article via the widespread use of demonstrative pronouns, word order, perfective and imperfective forms. In case of Turkish as L1 the deficit of articles is supplemented by highly frequent suffixation process.

The study was conducted in different groups of Polish and Turkish students to provide the relevant results. Polish groups were represented by first and third year students and Turkish groups comprised MA and first year PhD. students.

In the article the results of the gapped text completion will be analysed. They will reveal which of the available English articles is the most challenging for one or the other tested group of subjects or subsequently for both of them.

Keywords

English article system, definite article, indefinite article

The English article system and L2 learners – a theoretical background

The English article system, which comprises the indefinite article *a / an*, the definite article *the* and the zero article, is one of the most difficult structural elements for L2 learners to be acquired, causing even the most advanced non-native speakers of English to make errors. These errors occur even when other elements of the language seem to have been mastered. According to Master (2002), the difficulty results from three principal facts about the article system:

(a) articles constitute the most frequently occurring function words in English (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999), making continuous rule application difficult over an extended stretch of discourse;

(b) function words are normally unstressed and consequently are very difficult, if not impossible, for a non-native speaker of English to notice, thus affecting the availability of input in the spoken mode;

(c) the article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme, or constitutes a considerable burden for the learner, who generally looks for a one-form-one-function correspondence while learning the language until the advanced stages of acquisition.

The difficulties inherent in the foreign/second language learning processes constitute the complexity of the target system. From a language processing perspective it appears reasonable to state that function words, unlike content words, are generally overlooked by learners when processing language primarily for meaning. In the case of articles, the difficulty of meaning is determined by the novelty and abstractness of the concept (Pienemann, 1998). Learners' changing hypotheses about article usage at different stages in interlanguage development, as well as the influence of the first language (L1), complicate the task even more.

There has been an enormous amount of research carried out pertaining to the processes of L2 acquisition of English articles. Research on article acquisition in English language learning comprises two areas: pedagogy and its effectiveness on the one hand, and the process of acquisition on the other hand.

Research on articles in the historical perspective

There has been an extensive research on L2 acquisition and subsequent use of articles, although often fragmentary, concentrating on separate features of the English article system (Chaudron & Parker, 1990; Goto Butler, 2002; Jarvis, 2002; Kharma, 1981; Liu & Gleason, 2002, Mizuno, 1999; Yamada & Matsuura, 1982; Yoon, 1993). Some studies that have brought important findings (Hakuta, 1976; Huebner, 1979, 1983; Tarone, 1985), were not specifically on article acquisition, but on the

acquisition of grammatical morphemes in general. Only Master (1987), Parrish (1987), Tarone & Parrish (1988), and Thomas (1989) studied the acquisition of articles exclusively. In terms of the terminology specific to article acquisition research, the early studies focused mostly at the presence or absence of articles in obligatory contexts. It was Huebner (1983) who opened a new avenue of research on L2 article acquisition by employing Bickerton's (1981) noun classification system. Huebner did not only look at the presence or absence of articles in obligatory contexts, but he also analysed various types of noun phrases and the articles used with each semantic type, as well as the development of foreign language learners' grasp of the article system.

From these sources, some preliminary generalizations emerge concerning the development of article use by L2 learners. Master (1987) was the first to point out that articles seem to be acquired and subsequently used differently, depending on whether or not they occur in the learner's L1. The definite article *the* emerges early and *a* later in L2 acquisition (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989). *The* may be overgeneralised. Both Huebner and Master call this phenomenon '*the-flooding*', although neither of them defines the notion, except generally as a dramatic rise in usage. The researchers find *the* dominating in [+ SR, + HK], [- SR, + HK] and [+ SR, -HK], (e.g. referential indefinites and definites as well as generics) contexts. Thomas (1989), on the other hand, was of the opinion that the *zero* article overgeneralized across proficiency levels.

For the learners whose L1s lack articles [-ART], e.g. Polish, researchers (Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987) reported that *zero* dominates in all environments for articles in the early stages of L2 acquisition. Parrish (1987) proposed that the *zero* article was acquired first, followed by the definite article, and finally the indefinite article. Similarly, Master (1997) concluded that, '*the first article that seems to be acquired by [-ART] speakers is zero*' (p. 216). However, he admitted that since researchers cannot tell the difference between the *zero* article and non-use or omission of the article, '*acquisition is largely by default*' (p. 216). Master's

data showed that *zero* accuracy is close to 100% for the low-ability level participants, which then drops, and rises to nearly 100% again for the high-ability level participants. Master also reports that overuse of *zero* decreases with an increase in proficiency level, although the overuse of *zero* persists more than overuse of the other articles.

Liu and Gleason (2002) reexamined Master's data and offered a new interpretation of the overuse of the *zero* article and underuse of *a* and *the*: *'this overuse of the zero article and the underuse of the at the advanced stage would suggest that the two articles are acquired rather late'* (p. 5).

This hypothesis is supported by Young's (1996) data on the use of articles by Czech and Slovak [-ART] learners of English. Definiteness was not encoded by *the* at the early stages of acquisition. That problem persisted even more at the more advanced stages. However, at all levels of proficiency, participants encoded indefiniteness by means of the indefinite article *a*, and the pattern became more consistent as acquisition progressed.

Summing up, it must be stated that the previous investigations into the acquisition of English articles by [-ART] speakers have brought somewhat conflicting results. The early research findings (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989) suggest the integration of the definite article into the learner's interlanguage before the integration of the indefinite article. Liu and Gleason (2002) and Young (1996), however, conclude the opposite: early and accurate control of the indefinite article. Another controversy generated by the research relates to the interpretation of *zero* article overproduction. Master's (1997) and Parrish's (1987) *'acquisition by default'* position with regard to *zero* article overuse fails to account for L1 transfer effects at the initial stages of adult L2 acquisition, which is especially severe for [-ART] speakers. Thomas (1989) described a very similar phenomenon occurring in her data as *'the zero article overgeneralization, or equivalently, failure to use any article'* (p. 349).

Classification of noun phrases according to Huebner

Article research traditionally begins by identifying contexts for the appearance of articles. Huebner's (1983) classification (which itself was based on Bickerton, 1981), has been one of the most widely used models for the analysis of English noun phrase (NP) environments.

In Huebner's model, the use of English articles is determined by the semantic function of the noun phrase in discourse. In accordance with this model, English noun phrases are classified by two discourse features of referentiality – namely, whether a noun is a specific referent [+/- SR], and whether it is assumed as known to the hearer [+/- HR]. These two aspects of referentiality thus give rise to four basic noun phrase contexts that determine article use. Nouns classified as Type 1, [-SR, +HK] are generics, and are marked with *a*, *the* and *zero*. Nouns classified as Type 2, [+SR, +HK] are referential definites and are marked with *the*. Type 3, [+SR, -HK], contains first mention nouns, whose referent is identifiable to the speaker but not to the listener, e.g. nouns that the speaker is entering into the discourse for the first time. These are marked with *a* or *zero*. Type 4 nouns, classified as [-SR, -HK] are nonreferentials. This type contains nouns that are nonspecific for both the speaker and the hearer; *a* and *zero* are the relevant articles. Except for these four types, idiomatic expressions and conventional uses were classified as Type 5, based on Goto Butler (2002) and Thomas (1989).

Research purpose

The purpose of this research was to test the use of the English article system by Polish and Turkish philology students, to indicate the differences in article use as well as to analyse the results of empirical research in the tabular form. The Turkish students were requested to complete the research task during the researcher's stay at the University of Adana within Erasmus teaching programme in March this year.

Research method and study participants

60 students took part in the research. There were 30 Polish and 30 Turkish philology students, who participated in the study. All subjects had long-term experience in English (being pre-advanced and advanced students). They were 15 first year and 15 third year Polish students. They were 15 Turkish students in their final year of MA programme and 15 Turkish students in their first year of PhD programme. The method was to analyse their performance in gap-completion task and subsequently draw relevant conclusions from the conducted studies.

Data analysis

In order to understand the results, the author of the article carried out the analysis of article use: *a/an, the* and *zero* article in obligatory contexts.

In order to understand how the subjects use English articles, the author of the carried out percentage calculations of the correct answers for each semantic article type and for each level the subjects represented.

In order to indicate the developmental sequences for each semantic article type, the percentage results of the correct answers were demonstrated in the table.

Test instrument

The test instrument consisted of fifty sentences (see appendix) adapted from Butler (2002), Liu & Gleason (2002) and Master (1994). There were a total of 87 deleted obligatory uses of *a/an, the* or *zero* in 5 semantic types described above. The subjects were given the written instruction to correctly complete the test. They had to read the sentences carefully and complete them with an appropriate article.

Results

The article use by Polish learners at three different proficiency levels is shown in the tables below. It contains the results categorised in accordance with types of obligatorily used contexts.

Table 1: Tabular illustration of results –the percent of appropriately used article type

Philology students	Type 1: Generics [-SR,+HK] (a, the,0), e.g. 0 Fruit flourishes in the valley.	Type 2: Referential definite [+SR, +HK] (the), e.g. Pass me the pen.	Type 3: Referential indefinites [+SR, - HK] (a, 0), e.g. Chris approached me carrying a dog.	Type 4: Non- referentials [-SR, -HK] (a, 0), e.g. Alice is a dancer.	Type 5: Idioms (a, the,0), e.g. All of a sudden, he belched.
Polish	72%	85%	92%	87%	68%
Turkish	67%	91%	90%	95%	60%

A number of interesting facts emerge from our research. The most difficult article type to be used by both groups of subjects was Type 5 (idiomatic expressions and conventional uses) – correspondingly 68% of appropriate uses demonstrated by Polish students and 60% by their Turkish peers. The difficulty related to the use of this article type is due to the fact that the subjects lacked sufficient exposure to this type of article and many expressions and conventional uses are not sufficiently taught during their English courses.

Type 1 (generics) was the article type which caused difficulties for both groups of subjects as well. The similar percentage results (Polish students – 72%, Turkish students – 67%) related to appropriateness of the use of this type of article indicate similar problems with the comprehension of this type of article. The generic meaning of this type of

article is really challenging and intricate, which needs further exposure of the students to it.

Type 2 (referential definites) was appropriately used by the two groups of students as well. The slight difference in their performance with respect to this article type reflect good control over the use of referential definite (correspondingly 85% by Polish students and 91% of Turkish students).

Type 4 (nonreferentials) was used appropriately by most of the subjects participating in our research. Once more the results proved to be highly satisfactory, which points to a stable control of the use of this type of article (87% of appropriate uses demonstrated by Polish subjects and 95% of such uses were observed among Turkish students).

Type 3 (referential indefinites) turned out to be the easiest for both analysed groups of subjects. The percentage results prove best the accurate and stable use of this type of article (correspondingly 92% by Polish students and 90% by Turkish students).

Conclusions and implications for further research

Having analysed and discussed the outcomes of the above research, we may state that both groups of students, Polish and Turkish, demonstrated a highly impressive performance in relation to the use of the aforementioned types of articles. Both language registers are not equipped with the use of the article system on an daily basis, hence the initial assumptions and expectations of the researcher were profoundly different from the final obtained outcomes. Polish needs to compensate for lack of articles replacing their deficit by the use of Polish demonstrative pronouns, word order, perfective and imperfective forms. Turkish realise this deficit by the morphological process of suffixation. What is apparent is that both groups find it very challenging to overcome the difficulties with initial comprehension when, why and where to use articles properly, as many grammar sources and many methods of teaching point to incomplete use of articles, e.g. forgetting very frequently

about explaining the sense of Type 1 of the English article system, namely the their generic use.

As far as implications for further research are concerned, it would be preferable to increase a number of studied subjects, prepare test instrument comprising both spoken and written form. These forms would apparently expand the article use by the investigated study participants. Incorporating corpora studies to cover the use of the English article system would be advisable to expand the study instruments and obtain more reliable and logical research results.

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Contact

Artur Świątek, PhD., Assistant Professor
41-300 Dąbrowa Górnicza, ul. Stara 11c/3
Woj. Śląskie, POLAND
artursw@interia.pl

Appendix

Typology of article use (Version with inserted articles)

Type 1 [-SR, +HK]

Generic nouns (*a, the, 0*)

0 Language is **a** great invention of 0 humankind.
[Type 1] [Type 4] [Type 1]

A/the Favourite food of the jaguar is the/0 wild pig.
[excluded] [Type 1] [Type 1]

I like to read **0** books about 0 philosophy.
[Type 3] [Type 1]

A/The cat likes **0** mice.
[Type 1] [Type 4]

0 Love and 0 hate are **0** two extremes.
[Type 1] [Type 1] [Type 4]

Your claim flies in **the** face of [Type 5]
all the/0 evidence. [Type 1]

A/The Tiger is **a** fierce animal.
[Type 1] [Type 4]

A/the Paper clip comes in handy.
[Type 1]

The telephone is **a** very useful invention.
[Type 1][Type 4]

We don't know who invented **the** wheel.

[Type 1]

He used to be **a** lawyer.

[Type 1]

Type 2 [+SR, +HK]
Referential definites (*the*)
Previous mention
Specified by entailment
Specified by definition

John bought **a** car on Tuesday. On Wednesday, he crashed **the** car.

[Type 3] [Type 2]

What is **the** sex of your baby? It's **a** boy!

[Type 2]

[Type 4]

There are **0** nine planets travelling around **the** sun.

[Type 4] [Type 2]

In **the** 1960s, there were lots of protests against **the** Vietnam War.

[Type 5]

[Type 2]

We rented **a** boat last summer at **a/the** lake. Unfortunately, **the** boat hit another boat and sank.

[Type 3]

[excluded]

[Type 2]

I saw **a** strange man standing at **the** gate.

[Type 3]

[Type 2]

The French are against **the** war in Iraq.
[Type 2] [Type 2]

Last month we went to **a** wedding.
The Bride was beautiful.
[Type 3] [Type 2]

The horse I bet on is still in **0** front.
[Type 2] [Type 5]

Jane bought **a** ring and **a** necklace for her mother`s birthday. Her
mother loved **the ring**, but
[Type 3] [Type 3] [Type 2]
hated **the necklace**. [Type 2]

Sally Ride was **the first American woman** in **0** space. [Type 2]
[Type 5]

The shade on this lamp is really ugly. [Type 2]

I saw **a** man in **a/the** car across **the street**.
[Type 3] [excluded] [Type 2]

I am young; I may be beautiful, handsome, pretty and attractive
to **the opposite sex**. [Type 2]

Viewing **the facts** from your teens or twenties, **the following**
suggestions may be made.
[Type 2] [Type 2]

This will give them interest and **a** sense of pride whilst financially they will contribute more

[Type 5]

funds to the government to help the non-working population.

[Type 2]

[Type 2]

**Type 3 [+SR, -HK]
Referential indefinites (*a, 0*)
First-mention nouns**

John bought a car on Tuesday. On Wednesday, he crashed **the** car.

[Type 3]

[Type 2]

We rented a boat last summer at **a/the** lake. Unfortunately, **the** boat hit another boat and sank.

[Type 3]

[excluded]

[Type 2]

I saw a strange man standing at **the** gate.

[Type 3]

[Type 2]

I keep sending **0** messages to him. [Type3]

I like to read 0 books about **0** philosophy.

[Type 3]

[Type 1]

My computer has **a** new sound card.

[Type 3]

Last month we went to a wedding.

The Bride was beautiful.

[Type 3]

[Type 2]

I look after a little girl and a little boy on Saturdays.

[Type 3] [Type 3]

Jane bought a ring and a necklace for her mother`s birthday. Her mother loved **the** ring, but

[Type 3] [Type 3]

[Type 2] hated **the** necklace. [Type 2]

There is **an** orange in that bowl. [Type 3]

I ordered **a** bottle of wine for us. [Type 3]

I`m in **the** mood to eat a hamburger.

[Type 5] [Type 3]

I saw a man in **a/the** car across **the** street.

[Type 3] [excluded] [Type 2]

Type 4 [-SR, -HK] - a, 0

Nonreferential nouns

Attributive indefinites

Nonspecific indefinites

What is **the** sex of your baby? It`s a boy!

[Type 2] [Type 4]

0 Language is a great invention of **0** humankind.

[Type 1] [Type 4] [Type 1]

There are 0 nine planets travelling around **the** sun.
[Type 4] [Type 2]

A/The cat likes 0 mice. [Type 1] [Type 4]

I'm going to buy a new bicycle. [Type 4]

0 Love and **0** hate are 0 two extremes.
[Type 1] [Type 1] [Type 4]

A/the Tiger is a fierce animal.
[Type 1] [Type 4]

I don't have **a** car.
[Type 4]

Richard's wedding is in 0 two weeks and he is getting **0** cold feet. [Type 4] [Type 5]

This room has **a** length of 12 metres. [Type 4]

Writing 0 letters is **a** pain in **the** neck for me.
[Type 4] [Type 5] [Type 5]

I would like a cup of coffee, please. [Type 4]

The telephone is a very useful invention.
[Type 1] [Type 4]

He is as poor as **a** mouse. [Type 4]

Do you have **a** pen? [Type 4]

There may be **a** job for you. [Type 4]

You will find **a** partner to love and marry. [Type 4]

Even **a** child with little knowledge of mathematics would understand our country`s problem. [Type 4]

To become **a** nurse is **a** wonderfully rewarding career.
[Type 4] [Type 4]

**Type 5 - a, the, 0
Idioms
Other conventional uses.**

In the 1960s, there were lots of protests against **the** Vietnam War.

[Type 5] [Type 2]

He has been thrown out of 0 work, and his family is now living 0 hand to 0 mouth.

[Type 5] [Type 5] [Type 5]

All of **a** sudden, he woke up from his coma. [Type 5]

Your claim flies in the face of all **the/0** evidence.

[Type 5] [Type 1]

The horse I bet on is still in **0** front.

[Type 2] [Type 5]

Washington says that Saddam Hussein is playing another game of **0** cat and **0** mouse.

[Type 5] [Type 5]

Richard`s wedding is in **0** two weeks and he is getting **0** cold feet.

[Type 4] [Type 5]

Sally Ride was **the** first American woman in **0** space.

[Type 2] [Type 5]

Writing **0** letters is a pain in **the** neck for me. [Type 4]

[Type 5] [Type 5]

I`m in **the** mood to eat **a** hamburger.

[Type 5] [Type 3]

To sum up, we are faced in Poland, as in **the** rest of Europe with more older and less younger people. [Type 5]

This will give them interest and a sense of pride whilst financially they will contribute more [Type 5] funds to **the** government to help **the** non-working population.

[Type 2] [Type 2]