Concepts behind English article use: Investigating learner and teacher perspectives

By Monika Ekiert

Surveys of teachability and learnability rank the teaching and learning of English articles first among difficult tasks for English instructors and second language (L2) learners alike. The simplicity of the two forms, the and a, masks the functional complexity of the rules underlying article usage, rendering presentation and learning of those rules problematic. As noted by Ellis (2008), "the fuzziness and complexity of these mappings surely goes a long way to making ESL article acquisition so difficult” (p. 377). This paper, presented at NYS TESOL’s Annual Conference, aimed to provide teachers with additional understanding of this difficulty.

A small pool of available empirical research sheds some light on what students assume about articles, and what teachers typically know about the two words. Targeting metalinguistic knowledge behind article use, Butler (2002) identified a number of conceptual differences with regard to students’ consideration of the meanings behind English articles, while White (2010) found that teachers’ explanations mirrored those found in ESL textbooks. Drawing on insights that conceptual difficulty can be a source of difficulty in article acquisition, the present study investigated learners’ reasons behind article use in L2 English and juxtaposed them with the instructors’ perceptions of what aspects of English article use need to be highlighted for effective pedagogy.

The participants were 15 advanced adult ESL learners whose L1, Polish, does not make use of articles and 5 experienced, US-based college ESL instructors. The learners completed a battery of discourse-oriented written tasks and stimulated recall, while the instructors responded to a questionnaire containing excerpts with students’ article insertions. The article targets were non-idiomatic referential uses of the two words. Quantitative findings from an earlier stage of this study (Ekiert, 2010) indicated that, among the various non-idiomatic article uses, the top two most difficult were referential a (i.e., first mention uses of a as in A tired man and a donkey were travelling) and situational the (i.e., first mention cases of the as in Pass me the salt). With a one assumes the hearer’s unfamiliarity with the object being introduced into discourse, and with situational uses of the, there is an assumption of situational familiarity with the object. In contrast, tracing known objects in discourse, once the referent’s status in discourse in terms of hearer knowledge is established (as in The donkey was hungry), appeared to be relatively easier for L2 learners.

The recall data shed more light on learner difficulties. Two findings deserve special mention -- one related to the discourse orientation taken by the L2 users of articles and the other to the cues on which the learners relied when applying English articles in discourse. The hearer perspective, that is, the target-like perspective which, alongside specificity, motivates the use of articles in English, was not necessarily assumed by the study participants when using English articles. Recall comments revealed an instability of perspective taking evidenced by the shifting reference to the story characters’ points of view (as in, The dog speaks of himself or The donkey can’t see the pack on its back) interchangeable with the hard to interpret we used by the recall participants (as in, We know who this is, so you can use the definite article. When we began this story we didn’t know who this was about, but as we move along, we already know). The fluctuating perspective resulted in many erroneous article uses by the learners.

Recall data also revealed what Butler (2002) termed an “excessive introduction of extralinguistic knowledge into [the learners’] readings of the text” (p. 472). When using English articles, the participants relied on the cues based on the real content of the stimulus story (as in This character is coming back from a specific town he visited and is familiar with, traveling on a specific road that he knows he is on, and lying down under one specific tree), rather than the discursive context of the English text. In sum, the perspective
the L2 learners assumed appeared to be speaker-centered, driven by mostly content-related, pragmatic considerations.

Three main observations can be gleaned from the teacher questionnaires. First, the teachers focused on the concepts of singularity and countability (as in, ‘Man’ is a singular countable noun; The article helps us denote that there is just one man; An article is needed prior to the singular countable noun). As useful as this information is, countability is not the most reliable criterion for article application in English. This was pointed out by Chesterman (1991) who warned that it is not helpful to link article usage too directly to the issue of countability since “given an appropriate context, almost any noun can occur with any article” (p. 7). Second, instructors also focused on the concept of specificity, very idiosyncratically understood by each of them. For example, a very tired man was described as non-specific when an a was needed, however, the reference became specific by the virtue of subsequent mention, requiring the and becoming a specific reference from then on. Finally, mirroring the students’ understanding, the instructors provided an account of the fluctuating perspective (as in, This is the first time we have encountered the village or The speaker is referring to a specific pack evident to all in the story).

In conclusion, the concept of definiteness as expressed by articles in English poses a serious obstacle to L2 learners due to its non-salient characteristics as well as crosslinguistic difficulty. The specific points of difficulty explained here may need to be highlighted for more effective classroom instruction and feedback.

References


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