

Simplifying the teaching of articles (a, an, the) to the Japanese English Language Learner

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多くの言語指導者にとって、特定の文法ポイントについて説明することは日常的な作業である。一方、学ぶ側の学生にとっては、こういった授業は往々にして矛盾が多い規則や情報の繰り返しになりかねない。本論文では、限定詞という文法グループのうち、「冠詞」の a, an, the の原則的な用法に焦点をあてる。冠詞の用法に関する規則は50以上にもものぼり、冠詞をもたない言語を母国語とする学習者にとって、その習得はかなりの難しい課題といえる。本論文の目的は、いくつかの冠詞用法の規則を一般化することにより、それ以外の用法に関する誤解や間違いが英語学習者自身の学習経験をとおして改善していくことを示すことである。

Often when learning a new language, students discover some words or word groups that have slightly different grammatical functions than is found in their respective first language (L1). Sometimes, words in the second language (L2) being studied have grammatical word groups that do not exist in the learner's L1, and sometimes, not even have a grammatical equivalency or function that can be applied to L1. An example of this for L2 English learners is the article (*a/an* and *the*), a grammatical sub-group of determiners. The article position is place before the noun head in a noun phrase (NP). For example, *my book* or *a book*. Both *my/the* are determiners with *my* being a possessive pronoun and *the* being an article.

The use of articles is made particularly difficult for some linguistic groups, such as the Japanese and the Slavic language groups (e.g. Russian or Croatian), because these languages do not utilize articles. The objective of this paper in addressing the issue of articles usage for the L2 English learner, and particularly for the Japanese L1 speaker, is two fold: first, to act as an overview of determiners and their placement within the NP with particular attention on the articles (*a, an, the*) and explaining their uses; second, to provide a function-grouping as the concept-approach/system of instruction for the teaching of articles. The objective for the organization of articles into subgroups is not to have perfect use of articles by these L2 English learners but to give them a greater level of success in article use based on building their experiences in using these words rather than memorizing fifty or more rules to article usage (Cole 2000).

Background

Learning language rules, particularly the English article system is difficult for most learners – the complexities in identifying when and where the article is used being a particularly daunting task. For the Japanese English L2 learner, most English is learnt through the memorization of phrases or functions by following the Grammar Translation (G-T) methodology of instruction. Unfortunately, the creating of a sentence is not a leading function or objective for the G-T methodology of instruction. This means that while students can use articles in a limited fashion, their ability is based on what they have memorized. This means that their use of the article, outside

of their memorized phrases, is problematic due to their lack of experience with the article's function and use. Further, even with individuals whose L2 English skills approach that of full mastery to the native level, articles still remain an irritant as they still make mistakes with their usage (personal communication with a professional translator who is a native Japanese speaker). This paper will offer an approach to learning article usage that simplifies its instruction, that while not 100% encompassing, at least allows the learner to gain a general understating of its use and function. Before outlining the general article categories, the article must first be placed into context within the rules governing the use of determiners.

Analysis of Determiner Placement

Generally, there are two types of grammatical words that are used in an NP: determiners (which include both pronouns and articles), and a modifier (adjectives to describe the noun). Adjectives, within the NP, when they are not the main focus/purpose of the sentence, come directly before the noun (Collins, 1990). If a non-adjective determiner is needed to identify the type of noun in use, then it will be placed before the adjective that is connected to the noun in the NP. The determiner identifies “what kind of noun is in the phrase... definite, indefinite, proper or common” (Crystal, 1996, p. 105).

The grammatical function of the determiner, as it is linked to the NP, falls into two functional groups. The first group is used to refer to someone or something that the speaker/writer (for future reference, the ‘speaker’ can be a speaker or writer and the ‘listener’ can be a listener or reader) assumes that the listener knows or understands what the speaker is talking about. This type of determiner is called a “specific” determiner. Other specific determiners include: *the, that, this, these, those* and possessive pronouns (Collins, 1990, p. 43). However in certain situations, the information provided does not assume that the listener knows or has prior knowledge of what the speaker is uttering making this an indefinite determiner. This second grouping of determiners is called a “general” determiner and this group includes: *a/an, all, another, any, both, each, either, enough, every, few, little, many, more, more of, most, much, neither, no, other, several, and some* (Collins, 1990, p. 52). The placement and subsequent job that these determiners play in an NP is complex and is dependant on the meaning or function of the individual determiner (e.g. counter, pronoun, article) as they relate to the NP.

To further explain how determiners function, Table 1, based on Huddleston's chart (1989) shows how different determiners are placed, within the NP head. There are three types of determiners and their functions are identified as *Types I, II, and III*. Note that the article, *the*, is placed in the position identified as a Type II determiner which is also the central position for articles around which the other determiners types are placed.

Table 1: The Three Key Structures on a Noun Phrase.

	<u>Determiners</u>			<u>Modifiers</u>	<u>Noun Head</u>
	<u>Type I</u>	<u>Type II</u>	<u>Type III</u>	<u>Adjective</u>	<u>Noun</u>
a.	both	these		good	dancers
b.	all	the	Many	good	dancers
c.	what	a few			dancers
d.		my	several		dancers
e.		a		good	dancer
f.	all	the		good	dancers

The rules concerning the placement of these determiner types within the NP are quite stringent with little overlapping in their respective position. As can be seen in Table I, Type I in the pre-determiner position, and Types II and III being placed in the post-determiner position due to their grammatical functions. In Table 1, five NPs are used to demonstrate how the three types of determiners function. For example, the NP from *b.*, in Table 1 we see that in the NP *all the many good dancers*, the words *all*, *the*, and *many* are the determiners. The Type I determiner is *all* and this determiner, along with *what* and *both*, which also have similar functions, are found in the initial pre-determiner position. Type III in this NP is *many* and can only be found in this position and like the other words in this position, cannot be used with Type II determiners. Other Type III determiners include quantifiers such as *ever*, *several*, and other like words (Huddleston, 1989). The Type II determiner, which is the determiner that Types I and III centre on, is where the articles *a/an* and *the* are located.

A Generalized Guide to Article Usage

Articles, like other members of its determiner family, are used to help the listener identify whether we are referring to things that are known (or not known) to both the speaker and the listener and if the speaker is focused on a particular or a general noun in the NP (Swan, 2005). This can be summarized as saying that the article helps the listener to identify *what one*, *which one* or *which one of something* that the speaker is talking about. This may seem relatively simple but the article's use is rather complex (Swan, 2005; Cole, 2000). Yet for all this detailed data, the average intermediate learner cannot clearly understand this grammar point's complexities and so they continually make mistakes and become frustrated with the use of this grammar point. Thus, the instructor must reduce all of this information into some basic structure of article usage that complements, enlightens and most importantly, does not confuse or overwhelm the student.

To direct the L2 English language learner on the complexities of article uses, the descriptions of articles as outlined by Swan (2005), Azar (2000), Huddleston (1998), Quirk, et al. (1985), Cole (2000), and Collins (2006), six major groupings have been identified for the L2 English student to learn. Table 2 is a brief summary of Appendix 1 and is used to explain the six article types. The objective here is to allow the L2 English learner to quickly understand article usage with a focus on where and when the article is used. Table 2 demonstrates a number of examples on how the various functions of articles can be summarized. These six generalized categories are an overview for the student to learn from and use in their efforts to improve their basic article usage.

Table 2: Examples for the 6 Key Article Structures

		<u>Article</u>	<u>Modifier</u>	<u>Noun Head</u>	
1a	I have	a		book.	
1b	I have	some		books.	
2a	I have	a		book.	
2b		the		book	is heavy.
3a	I think	a		book	is useful.
3b	I think			books	are useful.
3c	I think	the		books	are useful.
4a		the		doctor	is coming soon.
4b		the		train	stops here.
4c		the	reading	room	is big.
5	It's in	the		fridge.	
6a	We'll go by			car.	
6b	It's	the		coolest!	

The first category of articles is the *Counter* and has a fairly straightforward function. The article *a/an* refers to the quantity *one*, as we see in NP example 1a. Though the determiner *some* is sometimes used as an article to replace the indefinite article *a* such as we see in NP situation 1b, the quantity is not specified though it can be assumed to mean more than one. Here it is used to inform the listener that there is more than one book though the quantity of books is not known.

The second category of article usage, as demonstrated in Table 2, NP examples 2a and 2b, is the *Object Identification*. Here we use the article to introduce a topic, in this case a book, and we follow this introduction with more detailed information about the speaker's book. This particular situation is often overemphasized in most resources that students and instructors use (Berry, 1991). This can result, as might be expected, in the learner coming to believe that this is the only real function of an article and thus, they can completely miss the meaning of the speaker's utterance. In NP 2a, we see the speaker introduces a previously unknown NP/object or an unknown component of the NP/object. In NP 2b speaker and the listener have both been introduced to the object and the discussion now centers on the object.

The third category of article assists the speaker to make *Generalizations* about the NP or to make general statements on non-specific subjects or objects. An example of this type of article use is the focus of the NPs from examples 3a – 3c of Table 2. Here this situation shows the speaker making a general comment about something or the discussion is about something but neither the speaker nor the listener identify what exactly is being discussed (Swan, 2001). Example NP 3a, states that a particular book has been identified. NP 3b states that any and all books are useful, but which books the speaker is discussing has not been specified. NP 3c shows that the speaker is talking about a particular set of books that only he or she knows about. These are the generalized statements and with intentions for their utterance of not being specified.

The fourth type of article use is seen in NP from examples 4a – 4c and is called the *abstract NP*. These are specific nouns or NPs that both the speaker and the listener can identify. In NP example 4a, the listener easily identifies that a doctor is coming and it is the doctor they expect to see. NP example 4b demonstrates how we assume there is only one station that is being discussed, and the train that stops there is the one that is important to the speaker. In NP example 4c, both the speaker and listener know the particular room being discussed, but because they do not need to specify which room, the third listener may not know the room

being discussed and thus the room is still an abstract location to the third listener.

The fifth classification of article usage is when we use an article to identify a *unique NP*. In this situation, the noun head is considered to be the only one in existence. In NP 5 of Table 2, there is only one fridge that the speaker is thinking about when the speaker utters this sentence. The expectation here is that the listener knows what fridge the speaker is talking about. If the listener doesn't have first-hand knowledge of the speaker's fridge, the listener can easily assume that there is a single fridge and that the speaker knows exactly what and where it is. In other words, there is only one fridge that the speaker could possibly be talking about.

The sixth and last of the article groupings is found with the *Idiomatic* or *Slang* use. Often times when the article is used in one of these types of expressions, according to the logical rules provided, it shouldn't be. Whether the article is sometime used or not used depends on the idiom. In NP example 6a, the article is probably omitted so to facilitate the speed and ease in the utterance of this sentence; but it is understood by the native speaker and listener that *the car* is specific, and both the speaker and the listener know which car is being discussed. NP example 6b is a slang idiom that has been adopted by the language as a whole. The article is used here to help emphasize *coolest*. The meaning of the word *coolest* is not explained but its meaning is solely dependent on the listener and the speaker agreeing on what constitutes *coolest*. These idiomatic situations are the most problematic for the language learner but as they are idiom expressions, the only answer here is that the learner must gain experience with the idiom's use and the article's use within it.

There are, of course, a number of situations that do not fall cleanly into these six categories. The exercises that the instructor uses must also incorporate examples of article usage that fall outside the six general groupings of articles. In the following sentence, the NP *a TV* is used twice in succession: *My eldest daughter wants a TV in her room, but I don't think having a TV in her room will help her studies*. One initial impression of these two NP's could be that they seem constitute the indefinite → definite article situation. Upon closer inspection, the second NP in the independent clause that follows the conjunction *but* discusses all TVs in general as compared to the first clause where my daughter's desiring of *one* TV is probably a new idea brought into the conversation by the speaker. If this sentence were found in an exercise, it would be easy for the L2 learner to miss the particular implications of the article usage therein particularly if they have little or no experience with situations that fall outside their normal practice.

The model sentence used above is an example of how to formulate exercises that challenge the learner to creatively reason-out this type of article usage and so come to a better understanding of articles and their use in English grammar. With these six basic article groupings, the English language learner whose own L1 doesn't use articles, can identify the article's use more easily and thus feel more confident in using the article in their own spoken or written work. Appendix 2 shows a number of sentences used for discussion to help facilitate the student's understanding of article usage. Further worksheets are needed culminating with sentences mimicking the one demonstrated in the previous paragraph will aid in building the learner's experiences with article usage.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the English language learner whose L1 does not utilize articles. In explaining article usage to these students we must first explain or clarify how determiners are used before we can address the different determiner sub-groups of with the article is one. Though no system is perfect, and as is the nature of English where every rule has an exception, the explanation of articles in functional groupings as outlined

in this paper, has shown to be successful for the learner.

Articles are a difficult and complex grammar point to teach. To be successful, the teacher must first understand and interpret the basic principles guiding the use of determiners and articles. Next, teachers must be able to explain how these six principle groups of article, and their functional use within the determiner group. Finally, the learner must be given enough practice using the six general guidelines for articles. The six guiding principles expressed here are an attempt to make the instruction of articles easier to teach and easier for the learner to understand how they function and most importantly, to emphasise the need for extensive practice so to build the learner's experiences with articles.

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Appendix 1 Guide to Article Usage (a/an and the) for Intermediate Stns.

1. **Counters.** Used to introduce one of any noun.

I have *a book*. (I have one book.)

I have *some books*. (More than one book.)

The word *some* is often seen as an article and so I include it in my list however, I would suggest it is more of a determiner.

2. **Object Identification.** Indefinite → Definite

1st → 2nd mention or the Unknown → Known situation

I have *a book*. *The book* is heavy.

A book is introduced in the first sentence and then the same book is talked about in the second

sentence. This is a situation where the NP is introduced and it becomes the topic of the next sentence. Both the speaker and listener know which book is being discussed.

3. **Generalities.** Non-specific subjects/objects.

Articles used here are for making generalizations about the class something/one. We are not talking about any individual subject of that class. (It is important to note that this use is not as a counter.)

I think *a book* is useful.

Any book, it is not specified.

I think *books* are useful

Any books. The books being discussed have not been specified.

I think *the books* are useful.

A particular set of books.

4. **Abstract NP's.** Specific nouns/ NPs that both the speaker and the listener can identify.

The doctor is coming soon.

The listener can easily identify that a doctor is coming and it is the doctor they expect to see.

The train stops at *the station*.

We can only be talking about one particular station and the train that stops there.

The room is big.

The speaker and listener know the room and are talking about it but because they do not specify which room, this makes the room abstract because a third listener would not know the room which is being discussed.

5. **Unique objects.** Where there is only one possible noun / NP.

It's in *the fridge*.

There is only one that the speaker is talking about and the listener should know which fridge the speaker is talking about. If the listener doesn't know the speaker fridge, they can easily expect for there to be a fridge in the speaker's kitchen. In other words, there is only one fridge that the speaker could possibly be talking about.

6. **Idiomatic/slang usage.** Where the article is sometime used or not use depending on the idiom

We are going by *car*.

The article is left out for speed and ease of speech but the native speaker and listener both understand that *the car* is specific and both know which one is being talked about.

It's *the coolest!*

In this slang expression, the article is used here even though *coolest* is not explained. It is understood by both the speaker and the listener that *coolest* is a good thing and perhaps fashionable or in style.

Appendix 2

Identify the type of NP as it relates to the article. Discuss the reasons for your choice.

1. Would you like to see *a show*?
2. Would you like to see *the show*?
3. *The sun* is going down.
4. In *the office* a phone was ringing.
5. I was in bed when *the phone* rang.
6. It was *a gold cup*.
7. This is *a lovely flower*.
8. *The play* was *a comedy*.
9. Kate gave me this *CD*.
10. Kate gave *the CD* to me.
11. In *a movie*, there are many *actors*.
12. *The actors* have some skill but some are just pretty.
13. I think *the water* is warm enough for swimming
14. “Billy, for some reason I found *the phone* in *the fridge*. Why?”
15. “Whose phone? *The phone* is in the charger.”
16. *The weather* is nice today, isn't it?
17. We go by *ferry* to Nanaimo from Vancouver.
18. We go on *the ferry* to Nanaimo from Vancouver.