HOW TO TEACH THE ARTICLE SYSTEM TO ESL STUDENTS?

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Abstract. *The article system of English is very difficult for L2 learners to understand and even for teachers to explain it, especially if there are no such elements in their L1. Teaching the articles of English seems to be a rather complicated procedure. Some theories indicate that article pedagogy should focus on learning rules and exceptions. On the other hand, other theorists believe that article pedagogy should concentrate on applying a communicative approach in the classroom. Both methods are well-founded and useful in the L2 acquisition of articles. The main aim of this paper is to introduce a variety of options for analysing article pedagogy and usage found in the literature. Based on Master's (1986) pedagogical sequence for teaching articles and Pica's (1983) recommendations for instruction, this paper will reveal common article errors in L2 students' translation and discuss how systematic instruction can strengthen accelerated learning of the article system. Students should also be made aware of the whole system of articles and not just of their individual use.*

Key words: *teaching articles, article usage, article pedagogy, errors in article use*

1. INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of English articles is indeed a problem for L2 students and they do not acquire the system automatically as they become more proficient[1]. The English article system is so complex that philosophers and linguists (Russell, 1905; Christophersen, 1939; Lyons, 1999) have difficulty in agreeing on the underlying notions designated by the different forms. Montenegrin/Serbian, unlike English, does not have a system of articles[2] and does not mark definiteness as a rule so that it must be almost impossible for students whose mother tongue does not have a corresponding system, to recognize the underlying rules and conventions in using it.

Teaching the articles of English as any ESL/EFL instructor knows, is a rather complicated procedure. Some theorists (Murphy, 1985; Eastwood, 1992) believe that teaching articles should focus on learning and memorizing rules and exceptions. On the other hand, others (Pica, 1983; Master, 1990; Berry, 1991) state that instructors should employ a communicative approach in the classroom in order to master this system.

In most cases teachers, especially non-native language teachers of English as a foreign language, try to find some help in pedagogical grammar books such as Quirk &

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[1] Master, 1987, 1: „... interestingly, the English speech of native speakers of Russian is stereotypically identified with the absence of articles."
[2] Grammars of Montenegrin/Serbian identify this category within adjectives which might have the 'definite aspect' (određeni vid) and the 'indefinite aspect' (neodređeni vid) (Stevanović, 1991).

Greenbaum (1983) and reference books such as Swan (1994) and Murphy (1985) to teach students how to use articles correctly in marking the semantic category of definiteness.

However, we believe that one problem in the current books is that they do not explain the article system in such a way that makes clear the meaning of the forms and its usage to the L2 learners of [-ART] language.

There has been some research conducted regarding the acquisition of English articles by Serbian learners (Trenkić, 2004). However, no pedagogical approach has been given so far how to elucidate this rather complex system. In this paper, we will first go through various pedagogical studies, and then describe a set of activities or a procedure which is found very effective in acquiring English articles. This paper aims also to reveal common article errors in L2 students' translation according to McEldowney's classification (1977) and our research question is whether a systematic instruction such as Master's 6-point schema (1990) can help improve students' usage of English articles. Participants are native speakers of Montenegrin who have been studying English for more than 10 years. It then reports on the results of the study and discusses the findings that lead to choosing the most effective pedagogical instruction in teaching the functional words such as English articles.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

It is not simple to establish a working basis for teaching articles, but there has been agreement that formal instruction is required to achieve a positive effect in helping L2 students acquire the English article system (Lindstromberg 1986; Berry 1991; Master 1997).

During the time of transformational-generative grammar which involved the use of defined operations or transformations to generate new sentences from the existing ones, Grannis (1972: 288) was the first to argue against this linguistic theory in explaining article use and thus he introduced a non-formal approach. One of his main objections was related to the fact that generative grammar and its two levels of representation within a sentence could not elucidate differences in meaning between the following pairs of sentences (Grannis, 1972: 288) with a restrictive relative clause.

1. a. I saw the man *whom Albert told me about.*
   b. I saw a man *whom Albert told me about.*
2. a. I saw every man *whom Albert told me about.*
   b. I saw that man *whom Albert told me about.*

For that reason Grannis (1972: 289) recommended that teachers should disregard this theoretical framework and "fall back into a basically unstructured, traditional approach to the description of English". On the other hand, assuming that English article structure "is a sequence of quantification and determination rather than a choice between specified and unspecified" Whitman (1974: 253) proposed a pedagogical sequence of six consecutive steps for teaching English articles which are based on ease of explanation and frequency of occurrence:

1. Quantity (singular/plural distinction):
This is a book vs. Those are three books.
2. Generic plural:
All apples are red > Apples are red.

3. Non-count nouns (count nouns vs. non-count nouns):
A lot of books vs. A lot of water
Many books vs. Much water
4. Determiners (Which-NP question; second mention):
Which books are green? The books on the table.
I saw a book. The book was called "Moby Dick."
5. Quantity and determiner:
One of the books on that table is blue.
6. Generic articles:
A mouse is smaller than a rat.
The mouse is smaller than the rat.
Mice are smaller than rats.

Whitman here started with the concept of quantity first because "the concept of *counting* is easier to talk about than the concept of *known groups*."

On the basis of her own experience with training teachers of English as a foreign language, McEldowney (1977: 95-112) came up with the idea of simplifying the grammar of English articles by establishing one form for one function (i.e. code marker). She suggested a four-stage teaching approach, which can be summarized into three main stages.

Stage 1: count nouns used in the sense of "any one" and "the special one."

Stage 2: uncountable nouns distinguished by "the substance in general" and "the special substance" (e.g. *mud* vs. *the black mud*).

Stage 3: generalizations conveyed through three markers (i.e. a + N; the + N; the + N +s).

Having described current approaches in article pedagogy, Berry (1991: 252-259) concluded that they "are not yet well in the matter of teaching articles" and he identified three main problems. These are:

(1) incorrect or misleading formulation,

(2) unwarranted emphasis on certain usage types, and

(3) lack of variety in formats.

To overcome these objections, Berry (1991: 252-259) presented seven principles one should bear in mind when teaching English articles, which can be summed up into three main points:

(1) use a principled descriptive account,

(2) make exercises/activities varied in terms of production, comprehension and perception, and

(3) apply some principles of presentation methodology (e.g. simplicity, appropriateness).

Pica (1983: 231) based her research on examining the kinds of article rules typically presented in ESL grammar texts and compared them with the article use of native speakers in requesting and giving directions and ordering food at restaurants. She (1983:231) concluded that "article use may have more to do with communication and communicative competence than grammar and linguistic competence".

She made the following recommendations for instruction:

1) Since articles are often not necessary in immediate environments, activities like ordering food should be practiced first "as a non-frustrating lesson for beginning students".

2) 'First mention *a* and subsequently mention *the'* are easy to teach from a pedagogical point of view but are not used as frequently as proforms in natural speech.

3) Since assessing the knowledge of the hearer is often no simple matter, students should be encouraged to always use *the* with a qualifying description rather than just a bare noun (e.g., *the nearest post office vs. the post office; the university bookstore vs. the bookstore*).

4) Dialogs should be used to provide students with relevant examples of article use and the effect of using an incorrect article should be discussed with the class to increase awareness of native usage.

5) Students should be engaged in experiences outside the classroom to foster natural acquisition.

Pica's set of instructions is generally well received, especially if spoken communicative competence is the goal, and especially for students at lower levels of proficiency.

However, with more proficient students, especially if the goal is written competence (where article errors are really noticeable and often prevail), Pica's recommendations can be very helpful but not adequate, basically because articles are presented as a list of rules and not as a complete system.

Pica (1985: 214) also tried to examine how this worked in the L2 classroom. She selected a group of Spanish speakers and divided them into three groups: tutored, untutored and mixed. Her intention was to evaluate how these groups made progress in three grammatical areas: *a* and *the*, verb + *s*, and verb + *ing*. She concluded that „for highly complex grammatical morphology such as the article *a*, instruction appeared to have little impact, as all three groups followed a similar developmental sequence, unaffected by their conditions of exposure to English L2". Berry (1991: 253) criticized Pica's conclusion because she did not provide any information about the instructional methods which were used and he argued that "if there was no effect, it might have been because of bad teaching".

Finally, Master (1990: 461-78) introduced a binary system in which article use is reduced to a meaning contrast between *identification* (marked by *the*) and *classification* (marked by *a* or *Ø*). Master's system (1990) is based on his original 6-point schema and is improved in that it focuses on helping students identify

     (1) countability,
     (2) definiteness,
     (3) modification,
     (4) specificity vs. genericity,
     (5) common noun vs. proper noun, and
     (6) idiomatic usage.

This 6-point-scheme will be used as a starting point in our research.

The studies listed here also have some limitations. The main problem, in our opinion, is that learners are not clearly aware of the general meanings which English articles (null, definite, indefinite and zero) express, nor the underlying concepts of notions ascribed to them such as *definiteness, specificity, genericity, countability* or *uncountability*, and so on, so that each case is treated as a separate case rather than as part of a whole system.

Another limitation is the fact that the treatment of proper names is left out completely, or treated only as item-learnt chunks (Berry 1991). None of the studies include suggestions to adapt a pedagogical approach to the needs of a particular student population (e.g. like Montenegrin), ignoring the idea that a good pedagogic rule should be able to answer a question that "is generated by [a learner's] interlanguage" (Swan 1994: 51).

3. METHOD AND MATERIAL

3.1. The study

The goal of this study is to find out if systematic instructions can strengthen students' acquisition of the English article system. In doing so, we may better understand the nature of L2 learners' problems with articles and thus lay the groundwork for addressing such problems.

3.2. Subjects

The participants in this study were 34 junior students who enrolled Business English at the Faculty of Foreign languages, University Mediterranean in Podgorica. As there was no entrance examination for this study programme we chose students (age 19-20; 8 boys and 26 girls) with a similar education background in English (approximately 12 years of studying in elementary, as well as in high school), similar proficiency certifications, and a similar amount of exposure to the target language (the students who have studied in one of English speaking countries were excluded from this study).

3.3. Method

The students did two translations[3] into English - two passages which are already translated into Serbian (150 words and 28 noun phrases) both taken from the novel *Baskervilski pas* (*The Hound of the Baskervilles* by Arthur Conan Doyle). The first one they did without knowing what elements they should pay attention to and without any particular instructions apart from the list of unknown words given before they started translating. The second passage contained 190 words and 34 noun phrases and it was introduced after the formal instruction which consisted of four 45 minute-classes immediately before the second translation task. This time we instructed students to focus on article choice and to rely on the Master's set of six questions before assigning the article to any noun that occurs in discourse.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Having identified all the errors made in the students' translation by the native speaker of English who was employed as a lecturer at the same Faculty, the greatest number of

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[3] A back translation is a process in which a text which has been translated into a given language is retranslated into SL. The procedure of back-translation has been used for various different purposes. It is sometimes used in contrastive linguistics as a technique for comparing specific syntactic, morphological or lexical features from two or more languages (Shuttleworth & Cowie, 2014: 14).

errors was found in using articles which we categorized according to McEldowney's (1977: 95-112) classification into three main areas:

a. Omission of *a/the/-s* (e.g. *Put book on table. He is in difficult position. He has three book. Idea is that I should get rich. He smiled for first time.*)

b. Wrong insertion of *a/the/-s* (e.g. *It was a very hard work. He lives in the Manchester. He gave me good advices. He bought a big oranges.*)

c. Confusion of *a/the/-s* (e.g. *This is a man I was telling you about* (when referring to a specific occasion). *The metres are the units of length* (in a general context). *Choose the cake from the plate* (when the choice was meant to be free).

Table 1 Translation 1 - Article errors by categories

	Omission	Wrong insertion	Confusion	Total
a/an	135	13	11	159
the	56	21	16	93
Total number of article errors by categories	191	34	27	252
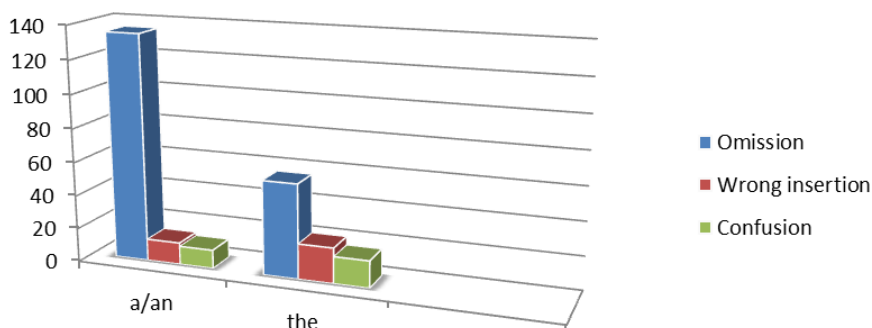
Graph 1 Translation 1 - Errors in using *a/an* and *the*

The first translation showed that our students left nouns without determiners especially when they were preceded by an adjective. This is considered as a common error and the reason why they omit articles in translation is that they seem to focus more on vocabulary – looking for a right word, phrase, collocation and grammar – tense, aspect, syntax, and so on. In this way articles somehow come last, as if they were not important enough to spend a thought. Generally speaking, the students tend more to omit them (191 omissions - the indefinite article vs. 61 omissions of the definite article) – rather than think which one they should put in front of a noun. The research revealed that they made more errors with the indefinite article so the contrast between *identification* (marked by the) and *classification* (marked by *a* or *Ø*) was not something they were most familiar with.

Before our informants continued with the second translation, all the errors made in translating the first text had been analysed in details together with the instructor. They investigated article usage and discussed various contexts where articles should have been put or omitted. Apart from it, the students underwent four classes of instruction which were based on Master's 6-point schema:

1) Is the noun countable or uncountable?
2) Is the noun indefinite or definite?
3) Is the noun postmodified or not?
4) Is the noun generic or specific?
5) Is the noun common or proper?
6) Is the noun idiomatic or not?

Answering to this set of six questions that must be asked before assigning the article to any noun that occurs in discourse, we got the following results:

Table 2 Translation 2 - Article errors by categories

	Omission	Wrong insertion	Confusion	Total
a/an	33	11	5	49
the	12	13	3	28
Total number of article errors by categories	55	24	8	87
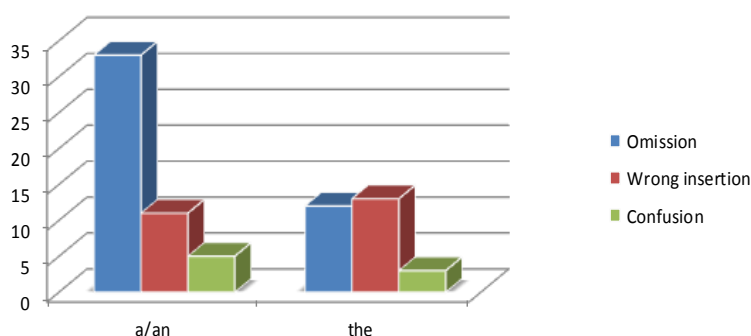
Graph 2 Translation 2 - Errors in using *a/an* and *the*

The number of omissions in the second task was much lower and it showed that Master's approach seemed to be very helpful in using articles correctly while translating. This time we witnessed that students did not leave a noun 'naked' ie. with no article. However, the number of wrong insertions in the 2nd task (24 errors with both articles) was not significantly lower in comparison to the 1st task (34) which explained that our translators probably had in mind that each noun must have its 'companion'.
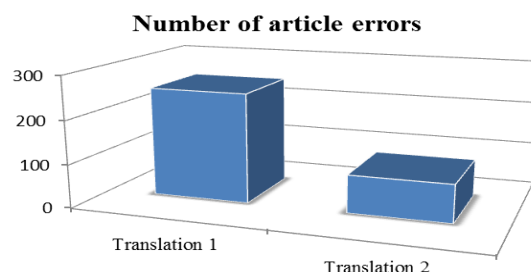
Graph 3 Task 1 and 2 – Error ratio

Having tested Master's approach we found a significant improvement in test performance, but still we feel doubt if this progress might have been made from "the focusing of students' attention on the need for articles in English rather than from any explicit method for choosing the article correctly" (1990: 465), which in our opinion might have been a direct effect after explicit instruction.

Although we found a lower number of errors (the graph 3 – translation 1: 252 errors vs. translation 2: 87), we still can claim that the articles had not engaged the students' attention, which shows the need for a pedagogical presentation of the article system. This can also be explained by a short period of instruction. It is well known that it takes at least 10 weeks of steady and regular instruction for any rule to be internalized and applied by students with at least some success. Our students only had superficial understanding of the concept and used their short-term memory when translating, which is not enough to ensure success in the application of the articles.

However, on the whole, Master's account seems to be pedagogically the most sound and effective in that it makes students think of the concepts such as *countability, classification, genericity and specificity* while applying them. It is also very important to raise students' awareness that definiteness is a semantic-pragmatic category and that English nouns must be preceded by articles unlike Montenegrin language which uses different means to mark a noun definite or indefinite.

7. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, articles can be taught as a system and some improvement can be expected if a pedagogical presentation of the article system is provided. It is also very important to teach articles in the discourse as many aspects of article usage are dependent on it. The evidence from this error analysis shows that even though there is some systematicity to the errors made by Montenegrin students, errors are found with all articles. However, these bits of evidence might provide some ideas for planning lessons in order to help students improve their performance in using English articles.

In sum, as English articles express various meanings and have various functions it is required that they be introduced gradually over a long period of time and that they cannot possibly be taught in a single lesson.

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