

# A Look at the English Article System: An Aid for the Japanese EFL Learner

——英語の冠詞システムについての一考察：日本人英語学習者の一助として——

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## Abstract

This paper looks at the English article system, and discusses some of the difficulties Japanese EFL learners have in acquiring it. These difficulties can be greatly attributed to the lack of attention the English article system receives in EFL classes in Japan. Hence, the main aims of this paper are to provide a rationale for the formal instruction of articles in EFL classes in Japan, and to assist EFL teachers to that effect by providing a pedagogical framework for them to explore.

本論は英語の冠詞システムについて考察し、日本人英語学習者が冠詞を習得する際の問題点について論じる。日本の英語の授業において、英語の冠詞システムに注意が払われてこなかったことが、これらの問題点の主因であると考えられる。それゆえ、日本の英語の授業における冠詞の教育に理論的根拠を提供し、またその趣旨の枠組みを提供することによって、英語教師の参考に供することが、本論の主たる目的である。

## Introduction

In my teaching experience, the English article system has proven difficult for the Japanese adult learner to acquire. This can be attributed to four main reasons: English articles are multi-componential in nature (they simultaneously show countability, number, and definiteness); the standard rules for article usage contain several exceptions; article usage is linked directly to pragmatic and semantic aspects; and lastly, Japanese learners do not have an article system in their L1.

The purpose of this paper is threefold: first, to examine and provide an understanding of how articles are used in English; second, to outline the learning challenges that the English article system presents the Japanese adult learner; and third, to offer some theoretical and practical suggestions that may aid teachers in the instruction of the articles.

This paper will first look at the controversy surrounding the *formal instruction of articles* and provide a rationale for their inclusion in the syllabus. Then, we will consider the key components that govern how and when we use articles in English. Specifically, we

will examine the following areas and how they affect nouns: countability and number, definiteness and indefiniteness, postmodification, specificity, proper nouns, and idiomatic phrases.

Further, this paper will consider why Japanese learners have struggled with this facet of EFL. Their struggles have been largely attributed to contrastive aspects of SLA (second language acquisition), namely, that Japanese does not have an article system. Further, we will outline some of the difficulties and tendencies that pertain to the Japanese adult learner when using articles. I will include some observations based on my professional experience teaching EFL in Japan. Generally, Japanese learners have difficulties with the pragmatic factors that affect article usage.

Lastly, this paper will offer some theoretical suggestions, along with some practical activities focusing on the pragmatic and semantic effect of article usage. These exercises are designed to 'raise consciousness' and may be used as a teaching tool for teaching the English article system.

### *Should articles be taught?*

The teaching of the article system has been given low priority in EFL teaching. Some learners and teachers alike share the view that articles in English are redundant and have little effect on communication anyway. Berry (1991, 253) challenges this contention by providing examples that illustrate just how crucial articles can be to the intelligibility of an utterance. Consider the implications of how the articles are used in the following examples:

1. A. I'm looking for **a** wife. (He wants to find a woman he can marry)  
B. I'm looking for **the** wife. (He is looking for his wife)
2. A. He's uneducated man.  
B. He's **an** educated man. (Berry 1991, 253)

It is plain to see how in cases such as these that the article used has a large impact on the meaning of the sentence.

I believe there are several other good reasons for teaching articles in the EFL classroom. First, the articles are among the most frequently used words in the English language (Sinclair, 1991, cited in Master, 1997, 221; and Carroll et al. 1971, reported in Berry, 1991, 252). Also, based on my personal experience teaching English in Japan, many learners become concerned (obsessed even) about their inability to use articles efficiently. This weakness should be addressed at some point before it contributes to the deterioration of other areas such as fluency and confidence.

### ***Can articles be taught?***

The question “can *articles* be taught” has sparked much controversy in the field of linguistics. The research to date has been inconclusive but is leaning towards the benefits of teaching *articles* in the language classroom. The study by Pica (1985, cited in Berry, 1991, 253) in which she found that instruction did not appear to affect the indefinite article, led her to the conclusion that the instruction of articles might be excluded from the syllabus. However, Berry (1989, stated in Berry, 1991, 253) argues that Pica’s study is fundamentally flawed, in that she did not consider the *quality* of teaching. Berry (1989, 1991) has indicated that if there were no effect, it might have been caused by bad teaching.

Master (1987, referenced in Master, 1997, 216; 1986a, cited in Berry, 1991, 253) has provided us with evidence that article use can indeed benefit from instruction. In a quantitative study of spoken article usage by twenty non-native speakers, Master (1987, cited in Master, 1997, 216) was able to show a natural sequence of article acquisition. Moreover, Schwartz (1993, referenced in Master, 1997, 215) argues that ‘in order to achieve native like linguistic behavior, LLK (learned linguistic knowledge) will need to be created to supplement (or even override) competence’.

Similarly, VanPatten and Cadierno (1993) support the formal instruction of the English articles. In contrast to the traditional *explanation-production* method, VanPatten and Cadierno’s (1993, 240) suggest practices that focus on “*consciousness raising*” activities such as interpreting the informational content of example sentences. VanPatten and Cadierno (1993, 240) demonstrate that instruction focusing on what they call *input processing* improves comprehension and production ‘when it is directed at how learners perceive and process input rather than when it is focused on practice via output’. Some examples of consciousness raising activities are provided in the appendix. Clearly, more exhaustive research in this area would be fruitful; however, it appears that evidence is mounting that formal instruction does indeed have a positive effect.

### **Descriptions of Modern English: How are Articles Used?**

There are generally three acknowledged articles in the English article system: the *definite article* **the**, the *indefinite article* **a**, and the *zero article* **0**. Master (1986b, 1990) proposes a hierarchical sequence of questions which must be asked about each noun when deciding which article to use in discourse:

1. Is the noun countable (singular or plural) or uncountable (singular)?
2. Is the noun indefinite or definite?
3. Is the noun postmodified or not?

4. Is the noun specific or generic?
5. Is the noun common or proper?
6. Is the noun idiomatic or nonidiomatic? (Master 1986, 204)

These questions provide us with a framework for which to analyze the components we must consider when choosing articles in various situations.

### ***Countability and Number***

Generally, a singular countable noun such as *book* has an article or other determiner with it (as in *a/the book*); whereas, plurals and uncountable nouns such as *books* and *water* respectively can be used with or without an article or determiner (University of Leicester 2000, Unit 2, 28). Plural nouns and uncountable nouns cannot usually be used with *a/an*. However, as various exceptions exist, L2 learners often have difficulty distinguishing between countable and uncountable nouns and choosing which article best suits their needs for a particular situation. Swan (1995, 65) demonstrates potential problem areas for students in the following examples:

Eg. 1. Have you got *a shampoo* for dry hair?

Eg. 2. *Three coffees* please.

Eg. 3. I need *a good sleep*. (Swan 1995, 65)

These examples show that uncountable nouns can sometimes have countable uses. Example 1 uses *a shampoo* to express “a type of ” of shampoo. Example 2 excludes the use of “cups”, which is countable. Example 3 shows how a noun can sometimes have “partly” countable uses; that is, the uncountable noun “sleep” is used with the indefinite article *a*.

### ***Definite and Indefinite Meaning***

The most frequent of the explanations of English articles usually involve distinguishing between *definite and indefinite meaning*. While articles have proven difficult for L2 learners to acquire, some general rules involving the *definiteness* of nouns can be applied. Leech and Svartvik (1994, 237) demonstrate that the definite article-*(the)* is used to express definiteness for all kinds of nouns (except proper nouns), and the indefinite article-*(a)* is used to express indefinite meaning of singular count nouns. Further, Leech and Svartvik (1994, 238) illustrate that the zero article-*(0)* is used to convey indefinite meaning of plural count nouns and of mass nouns.

Moreover, Swan (1995, 63) explains that ‘articles are used to show whether we are referring to things that are known both to the speaker/writer and the listener/reader

(definite), or that are not known to them (indefinite)'. Further, Master (1990) parallels *definite* meaning with that of *identifying* a noun, and *indefinite* meaning with that of *classifying* a noun. These explanations are illustrated in the following examples:

- Eg. 1. I went to see **the** lawyer today. (Definite - Identification)  
 Eg. 2. **A** lawyer visited my office today. (Indefinite - Classification)  
 Eg. 3. Lawyers usually make a lot of money. (Indefinite - Classification)

In example 1, **the** implies that the listener knows that the speaker is probably referring to **his** lawyer. In example 2, **a** suggests that **any** lawyer at all visited his office, not specifically his. Example 3 (with the use of the zero article) uses *lawyers* in a general sense referring to all lawyers.

### Postmodification

Postmodification can affect which article is used in a clause. According to Master (1990, 472), when we limit a noun in some way through postmodification; we are essentially identifying rather than classifying it, thus it generally takes the definite article **the**. The following examples shows this contrast:

- Eg. 1. Water is necessary. (Classification)  
 Eg. 2. Lake water is dirty. (Lake water is a *type* of water thus we are classifying)  
 Eg. 3. **The** water in that lake is dirty. (We are limiting water by identifying *which* water)

Further, Master (1990, 473) points out cases when postmodification does *not* require identification - such as in definitions (or any other postmodifying phrase whose function is to classify):

- Eg. 1. A thermometer is **an** instrument that measures temperature.  
 Eg. 2. Houdini was **the** man who could open any lock.  
 Eg. 3. Houdini was **a** man who could open any lock. (Master 1990, 473)

The sentence in example 1 defines a thermometer as a *type* of instrument, thus it functions to classify. In example 2, Master (1990, 473) singles out (identifies) Houdini as the man who was perhaps the best at his particular skill; whereas, in example 3, he places him in a group with others (classifies). So, we can see that "*limiting* postmodification" functions to identify (using the definite article) while "*defining* postmodification" serves to classify (using an indefinite article).

### ***Specific or Generic***

Generic nouns generally refer to what is general or typical of a whole class of objects (Crystal 1999, 132). This is found with count nouns as in the following examples:

- Eg. 1. *A whale* has a short life span.
- Eg. 2. *Whales* are big.
- Eg. 3. *The whale* is in danger of becoming extinct.

These examples show how generic nouns in the indefinite singular form (as in 1), in the definite plural form (as in 2), and taking the definite article (as in 3) can have essentially the same meaning. Leech and Svartvik (1994, 53), however, point out a slight difference in their explanation of the generic use of articles. They explain that “*a tiger*” (generic) refers to any member of the species, while “*the tiger*” (generic) refers to the species as a whole (Leech and Svartvik 1994, 53).

In contrast to the generic use of *the*, all other uses of *the* are *specific* as in the following examples:

- Eg. 1 *The* water is clean.
- Eg. 2 *The* whales are hungry.

The previous examples also give evidence of how *the* is always *specific* with mass nouns - *as in example 1* and with plural nouns - *as in example 2* (with the exception of a few nationality words such as “*the Swedes*” and “*the Finns*”).

There has been some confusion for L2 learners as to whether an indefinite noun can be specific. Master (1990, 466) provides the following examples:

- Eg. 1. *A tick* entered my ear. (Indefinite-specific)
- Eg. 2. *A tick* carries disease. (Indefinite-generic) (Master 1990, 466)

Master (1990, 467) explains that the specific/generic distinction indicates when a noun is “real” as opposed to when it is the “idea” of a noun. In example 1, *a tick* is “real” or an actual noun (thus it is specific); however, in example 2, *a tick* refers to anything that can fit into a class of things called ticks (thus it is generic). So, we can see that the distinctions between specific and generic noun phrases are difficult for L2 learners to acquire because they are based largely on the context of discourse.

### **Proper Nouns**

Proper nouns are acknowledged to have unique reference. They *usually* take no article in English because *definite* meaning is “built into” the noun itself. Proper nouns without an article are usually found in the following groups: personal names (such as John, Shakespeare, and Mrs. Smith), calendar items (such as Christmas day, May, and Monday) and geographical names (such as Europe, England, Lake Michigan, and Mount Everest).

However, there are several exceptions that can cause learners confusion. In some of the groups mentioned above, there are some words that take **the** and **a** as in the following examples:

Eg. 1. **The** John next door.

Eg. 2. I knew **a** John Smith.

Eg. 3. **The** Albert Hall.

Example 1 and example 2 are cases when proper nouns change into *common* nouns. Example 1 serves to *identify* which *John* they are speaking about, and example 2 classifies “all the people named *John Smith*” in the world into a single group. Cases such as example 3 are far more difficult for L2 learners because it is a true exception and there is no explanation. Cases such as these have to be memorized.

Leech and Svartvik (1994, 358) provide us with several cases when proper nouns take the definite article **the** as in the following examples: plural names (such as **the** Smiths, **the** Alps and **the** Netherlands), some geographical names (such as **the** Mississippi river, **the** Pacific Ocean and **the** Panama Canal), some institutions (such as **the** Hilton Hotel, **the** Apollo theater and **the** British museum) and newspapers (such as **the** New York Times). However, Leech and Svartvik (1994, 359) point out that the definite article is dropped after *genitives* as in “today’s New York times”, and magazines and periodicals normally have no articles (as in **Time** magazine or **TESOL Quarterly**). Thus, you can see that choosing the correct article to use with proper nouns can be a difficult task for EFL learners, and they would be well-served in memorizing each usage as they come upon it.

### **Idiomatic Expressions**

Like proper nouns, idiomatic expressions are best learned separately and exclusive of the rules mentioned above involving articles. That is, each idiomatic phrase should be *remembered* individually as a whole utterance rather than in systematic fashion as I have suggested for other aspects of article usage. I suggest this for two reasons. First, there does not seem any concrete patterns explaining how articles are used in idiomatic expressions; and second, unlike in some other cases, the inclusion or omission of articles

can cause intelligibility problems. That is, each word in an idiomatic phrase is usually necessary for the phrase to have the desired effect.

Consider the following idiomatic expression that uses the definite article *the*: “he’s the man”. In this example, the speaker wants to convey that the man he is talking about is the main man. That is, he is somehow more important than other men in a particular context. Clearly, altering the article used in this sentence (as in “he’s man” or “he’s a man”) would have a drastic impact on the meaning of the sentence. Idiomatic usage remains, for the students, one of the aspects of English that must be memorized because there is rarely a productive rule (Master 1990, 475).

### **The Japanese Learners’ Difficulties with the Articles**

#### ***A Contrastive Look at the Articles: Japanese vs. English***

Teachers and learners alike attribute the difficulties that Japanese learners experience when studying the English article system to the great disparity between the two languages. Thompson (1987, 218), Shibatani (1989, 872) and the Association for Japanese-Language Teaching (1994, 14) point out that no element of the Japanese sentence regularly shows plurality, nor does it recognize the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns. In other words, Japanese language does not use an article system as English does.

Does this affect Japanese EFL learners’ ability to acquire the English article system? Questions such as this have generated a great deal of empirical research in interlanguage theory. An earlier study done by Corder (1974, cited in Mizuno, 1999, 129) involving interlanguage error analysis confirmed that many of the errors made by L2 learners were not traceable to the L1. However, later studies (Anderson, 1983; Brown, 1980; referenced in Mizuno, 130) found that L1 can indeed have a crucial impact on the SLA process.

A quantitative study by Master (1987, cited in Master, 1997, 216) showed that English articles are acquired differently depending on whether or not they occur in the learners’ L1. Master (1997, 228) suggests that L2 learners whose L1 does not contain an article system are approximately one level behind L1 learners whose L1 contains an article system because they need to “create” the category. In other words, EFL learners without an article system in their L1 can acquire the English article system, but it will take them longer than EFL learners with an article system in their L1.

#### ***Where do Japanese Learners make their Errors?***

Mizuno (1999, 131) asserts that there are at least five types of errors that Japanese learners are likely to produce when using articles: 1) *errors in co-occurrence-juxtaposition* of articles and other determiners (such as in “His *an* umbrella is big”); 2) *word*



*order errors* - inversion of the order of articles succeeding adjectives (such as in “This is big a pen”); 3) *underextension errors* - omission of articles (as in “I want to make good impression”); 4) *overextension errors* - the use of articles where none are necessary (as in “**The** rice is a popular food in Japan”); 5) substitution errors - **a** used instead of **the** or vice versa (such as in “He was **a** best boy in our class”).

Mizuno (1999, 135) also points out that these errors vary according to their position in the sentence. According to Mizuno’s (1999) study, the errors in examples 1 and 4 above would be considered to be in the “*initial*” position of the sentence, examples 2 and 5 would be in the “*after-be*” position, and example 3 would be classified as “*somewhere else*”. Mizuno’s (1999, 137) study established that *co-occurrence errors* had the tendency to be lowest in initial position, and highest in *after-be* position. In contrast, the other four groups (see above) displayed a similar tendency, namely, to be lowest in the *after-be* position and highest in the *somewhere else* position.

In a different study, Takahashi (1997) was able to show that Japanese EFL learners ‘tend to use the definite article for modified noun phrases even if there was more than one potential entity to which the modified noun referred’. This tendency can be found in such cases as the following example: ‘freezing is **the** way of preserving food’. Takahashi’s (1997) study also found that Japanese EFL learners’ responses are significantly more accurate when the use of “**the**” was in accord with *commonly occurring sequences* (e.g. ‘**the** first thing’) than when it was not.

### ***Pedagogical Implications***

The Takahashi (1997) study mentioned above seems to have two main pedagogical implications. First, Takahashi (1997) endorses that it would be beneficial to teach the Japanese learner the conditions in which the definite article **the** can occur. Second, learners may benefit from being explicitly taught ‘that **the** can not be used when the referent is not unique in the situation relevant to speaker and hearer’ (Takahashi 1997, 104). In other words, instruction should focus on the fact that articles are used to show whether we are referring to things that are known (definite) or not known (indefinite) to the speaker and listener. Based on my experience, I feel EFL teachers in Japan should pay particular attention to this weakness because my learners often exhibit a lack of awareness concerning the contextual factors that affect article usage.

Mizuno’s (1999) study also offers some pedagogical suggestions. Mizuno’s (1999, 132) list of five types of likely errors for Japanese learners (see above) can be divided into two subgroups: mechanical errors involving the syntactic domain, and errors involving pragmatic and semantic aspects of language. Mizuno (1999, 132) identified the first two types, *co-occurrence* and *word order* errors, as mechanical errors that occur at the beginning level and sharply decrease at the intermediate level. However, Mizuno (1999, 132)

asserts that the last three types of errors, *underextension*, *overextension*, and *substitution* errors, involve the pragmatic and semantic domains and would continue to persist. Thus, Mizuno (1999) conveys that it would be wise for teachers to focus on the pragmatic and semantic elements involved in article usage. Throughout my experience teaching in Japan, pragmatic and semantic errors concerning article usage are common among my learners and often cause communication to break down (intelligibility problems); thus, I agree with Mizuno's (1999) assertion that this should be a primary focus in the instruction of the English article system.

Mizuno's (1999, 132) findings reconfirm that special attention should be given to the deictic factors affecting article usage, and also that perhaps articles are best learnt beginning at the intermediate level rather than at the beginner level. Similarly, Master (1997, 226) agrees that more cognitive methods of teaching the article system can be utilized at the intermediate level.

In my experience, I find my *intermediate* level students more respondent to EFL instruction by means of explicitly learning grammatical rules than beginner and advanced levels. Master (1997, 226) supports my observation by advising that it is probably not worthwhile to direct any sustained attention to rules of article usage to beginner levels. That is, learners at a beginner level may be likely to get easily confused by all the rules and exceptions, which pertain to using the articles. Similarly, Master (1997, 226) contends that 'at the advanced levels, rules may be neither useful nor desirable to learn'. Master (1995, referenced in Master, 1997, 227) found that 'advanced proficiency English speakers whose first language contained no article appeared to learn articles best as lexical items in context'. Further, Anderson (1980, 224) suggests that advanced L2 learners often attain a level at which rules are often forgotten because the learners have moved from declarative to procedural status in the L2 learning process.

## Conclusion

While the debate over whether English articles should be taught or not remains a heavily debated topic in the field of EFL, there seems to be several fundamental reasons in favor of teaching them. The two most prominent being that articles are among the most frequently used words in English, and that EFL learners tend to have great difficulties with them. Granted that more research involving the *articles* (including the effects of formal instruction) would be fruitful; the research to date has, in my opinion, been able to provide justification for their inclusion in the syllabus.

In the initial stages of teaching the articles, I believe it is best to focus on "consciousness raising" activities (as most of the rules involved will be learnt for the first time) and the pragmatic effects of article usage (as this is what Japanese EFL learners seem to have the most difficulty with). Students can move onto the practice

stage once they have shown that they understand the rules that govern articles. In cases such as idiomatic expressions and proper nouns, where it seems that there are as many exceptions as there are rules, it is probably better to avoid in-depth explanation. Further, as Master (1997) and Mizuno (1999) have suggested, the articles are probably best taught at intermediate levels.

In EFL classes in Japan, the teaching of the articles has been largely taught through error-correction or ignored altogether. It is evidenced, by the Japanese EFL learners' incompetence when using articles, that the methods that have been used in the past are not sufficient in improving learners acquisition of the English article system (Mizuno 1999, 128). I think it is time to try a new approach. In my opinion, if we were to acknowledge this as an area that needs special focus; this would be a major step in improving upon the teaching of what has become perhaps the most elusive aspect of English grammar in Japan.

## Appendix

### Exercises

These exercises are by no means the “answer” to teaching articles. Rather, they are just suggestions, and teachers will undoubtedly have to select, adapt, and extend them according to their students' needs. Ideally, these exercises are designed for the intermediate level EFL learner. They are intended to be used as a teaching tool to make students “consciously aware” of the different ways in which we can use articles in English. Specifically, these exercises will focus on the semantic and pragmatic factors that influence the use of articles.

The teacher should allow for the students to consider each question independently. Once the students have attempted a question, the class should discuss the various answers. The teacher should use this as an opportunity to introduce and teach a particular point pertaining to English articles. Many of the teaching points in these exercises are the same as were outlined earlier in this paper (see “Descriptions of Modern English: How are Articles Used?”) and are shown below in brackets. **N.B.** Any information included in *brackets* in the following exercise is for *teachers only* and are not to be included on a student's paper.

Exercise 1. (Countability and Number - this exercise could be omitted because students should have grasped this concept at the beginner level)

Please underline the incorrect part of the sentence and consider why it is wrong.

1. There is a lot of sands at the beach.

2. There are an apples at the supermarket.
3. He has a lot of the hair.

Exercise 2. (Definite and Indefiniteness)

*Who would you most likely put these questions to? Please choose one of the following words and write them next to the sentence they fit with: A neighbor, A stranger, A family member, A co-worker.*

1. Have you seen the dog?
2. Have you seen a dog?
3. Have you seen our dog?
4. Where is the business meeting this week?

Exercise 3.

*Where would you most likely say the sentences below? Possible locations: At home, At a soccer game, At a bookstore, At a restaurant.*

1. Switch on the radio.
2. The goalkeeper looks very tired.
3. Where are the magazines?
4. Could I have a cup of coffee please.

Exercise 4. (Postmodification)

*Read the top sentences (1. and 2.) and then choose/match the sentence (A. or B.) that best reflects the meaning each sentence (1. and 2.).*

1. David Beckham is a player who must play well for his team to win.
  2. David Beckham is the player who must play well for his team to win.
- A. David Beckham is one of the better players on his team.  
B. David Beckham is perhaps the best player on his team.

Exercise 5 (Specific or Generic)

*Read the top sentence and choose the sentence (A. or B.) that best reflects the meaning of the top sentence.*

1. The guns are heavy.
  - A. All guns are heavy.
  - B. The guns the speaker is carrying are heavy.
  
2. There's turkey in the fridge.
  - A. The fridge contains some turkey meat.
  - B. There is a single turkey in the fridge.

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