
Teaching the Elementary uses of the Articles

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The tiny word *a* and *the* easily go unnoticed by those who are already competent in English, especially since these words are usually a part of the unstressed portion of a phrase. Their correct use has become an unconscious and automatic speech habit, so much so that seldom can anyone describe the intricate constraints governing them. These two little words are present in almost every sentence of English.

When faced with so many other errors to correct, might an English teacher's concern for this complex feature be disproportionate? A quick survey of compositions will show that even the best students make errors in the use of articles. Obviously, a number of these errors are to be expected and perhaps are inevitable due to the irregularities of English usage. On the other hand, the misuse or non-use of articles quite commonly accounts for up to *a quarter or more* of the mistakes made in a composition. Certainly, then, time set aside specifically for the study of articles is justified.

However, the development of a corrective programme for articles is confounded by a lack of coverage in commonly used "comprehensive" text and reference books. Take for example, this solitary explanation found in a handbook for use in American schools:¹

The definite article *the* and the indefinite articles *a* and *an* are usually classed as adjectives. They indicate that a noun or a noun substitute is to follow.

Such a description based on assumed knowledge is scarcely adequate even for a native speaker trying to decide whether to use an article or not. Furthermore, such notional definitions have been challenged by recent linguistic research which shows first of all that articles are features of nouns², and second, that in this functional slot occupied by articles, demonstratives and zero, several grammatical systems intersect.³ One of these systems, which places constraints on the choice of *the* or *a*, deals not only with the following noun-phrase, but also with the reference structure of the whole discourse.

A full analysis of the semantic system of the articles is a task best left to the linguists, and is necessary neither for students nor their teachers. What would be useful as a teaching aid is a guide for remedial work to those elementary uses which can be expressed in easily grasped simple rules and lists, and which lend themselves to quick mastery through classroom demonstration. Fortunately, an attempt has been made in two fairly practical and comprehensive sources.

The first of these is a teacher's manual and tape recordings designed for reviewing the use of the articles, R.A. Close, *Unit 18 - Determiners: Articles of the English Language Units series*. While the materials and explanations are excellent, they rely heavily on a rather haphazard assimilation by oral practice approach. The normal problems associated with rapid aural perception and imitation obscure the grammatical information intended, making this material less suitable as a first presentation of the topic. By no means is aural-oral work discounted here; it should form an integral part of language learning and oral proficiency in the use of articles definitely should be one of the main objectives. However, a less demanding and more concise initial presentation is recommended.

Drills found in the second source, G.A. Pittman, *The Use of the Article*, seem to better fill this order. In this book are sixty-seven units designed for oral presentation, each with specific grammatical objectives drilled in one or more simple situations using pictures or classroom articles. The comprehensiveness of this textbook tends to be a disadvantage though, because the teacher is confronted with a bewildering array of topics covering unit/mass nouns, abstractions, the use of some and any, and zero forms, to name just a few.

If all of the drills in these two sources are done carefully and sequentially, the student will no doubt become fairly adept at using articles in most situations. However, seldom can a teacher afford to devote so much time in this fashion to a single topic at the expense of others, and seldom can the learner tolerate such a lengthy and monotonous task. An improvement on this

approach would be to judiciously select a few portions of this material and intersperse them among lessons dealing with other topics, subsequently teaching the omitted categories by routine correction of errors.

At some point, almost every teacher would like to announce to the students that absolutely no more errors of a certain type will be tolerated and threaten severe penalties in the event of a relapse. This kind of sweeping threat is both untenable and unfair in the case of articles because learning their correct use is a continuing process, as in the case of many other persistently recurring errors. What is possible is to teach fixed usages one by one and then allow no more errors in each of those areas. For example, the primary rule of *a* is that it is used before single countable objects and not before multiple or uncountable objects. Once this has been practised with drills such as Units 1-4 in Pittman and A2-A4 in Close, anomalous sequences like *a blue eyes, 'or' *a dirty water' should be eliminated.

The teacher should remember that it is not always obvious to the learner which things are countable and which are not. For example, 'pebble' and 'acorn' are countable but 'gravel' and 'corn' are not. R.K. Tongue⁶ notes that in Singapore and Malaysia, the following are commonly found in the plural, violating their uncountability:

chalk, luggage, fruit, toast, work, scenery,
information, slang, jargon, underwear, equipment,
clothing, knowledge, matter.

Other collective nouns which often present problems are:

baggage, postage, mail, gear, stationery jewellery,
machinery, apparatus, sports, mathematics, news,
advice, information, athletics, poetry, knowledge,
production, population, people.

Distinguishing abstract nouns which have both a singular and a plural form with distinct meanings should be considered an advanced skill, and should be separated from the teaching of the basic uses in the beginning. Some examples of these are:

light, pain, effort, use, hope sympathy, idea, risk,
pleasure.

Drills for these special uses are found in Pittman beginning on page 90 and should be postponed until mastery of basics.

After the initial presentation it would be good for the student to proceed to some invariable usages which he can be sure about, such as (with the number of the Pittman unit following):

a lot of (10)	a spoonful of (26)
a couple of (29)	a tankful of (28)
a few (12)	a truckload of
a great deal of (12)	a pound of
a pair (25)	a gallon of
a little (27)	a grain of (24)

It costs a dollar an ounce. (43)
He wants to be a doctor. (44)
It is called a circle. (23)

Similarly with the definite article *the*, the fundamental rule should be exemplified and drilled first, in its three forms: *the* is used

- When a thing is the only one evident.
'We are standing on the floor.' (8)
'He wants the red book.' (17)
- When a thing is the only one existing.
'She works in the shop on the corner.' (34)
'What's the name of the man who wrote the textbook we are using?' (44)
- When a thing is the only one already mentioned.
'A man lived in a house. The man was old.
The house was very big.' (33, 38)

The teacher should be aware that the definite article is used in this slot when the locational system is evident, unimportant or assumed known. Otherwise, a demonstrative is used, for example, 'He wants this/that red book.'

Invariable uses of the definite article are numerous, and can even be explained as instances of one of the three forms already mentioned:

the other (7) one
same (50)
only
next (22)
remaining
first second last (18)
right, wrong way (47)

the best one	the north (19)
worst	south
biggest (49)	east
most expensive	west
worst	left (18)
	right

the bigger (48)	top (20, 21)
better (two objects)	bottom
more beautiful	side

Works Cited

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- ² Jacobs, R. and Rosenbaum, P. (1972). *English Transformational Grammar*. London: Ginn. p. 85
- ³ Gleason, H. (1965). *Linguistics and English Grammar*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston. p. 347-8.
- ⁴ Close, R.A. (1970). *Unit 18 - Determiners: Articles, English Language Units*. London: Longman.
- ⁵ Pittman, G.A. (1969). *The Use of the Article*. London: Longmans, Green.
- ⁶ Tongue, R.K. (1974). *The English of Singapore Malaysia*. Singapore: Eastern U. p. 43.

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the sun	centre	
moon	middle	
earth	inside	
world	interior	
weather	front	
	all of	the
the University	many	
Faculty	most	
Department	each	
city	some	
port	any	
town	few	
village		
	the name	Company
		Corporation
the Name (islands) (57, 58)		Building
(mountains)	the President (of) (60)	
lakes	Prime Minister	
straits	Queen	
(river)	Prince	
valley	Count	
(sea)	Mayor	
(ocean)	Chairman	
peninsula		
	the United	
The Commonwealth of	Philippines	
..... Commonwealth	Netherlands	
..... Empire	Congo	
the Union of	Sudan	
Republic	Balkans	
Kingdom		
Federation		
	the Vatican	
	Kremlin	
the Middle East	National Museum	
Far East	Leaning Tower of	
Northwest	Pisa	

Near East

Although the lists presented above seem formidable, they usually have one or two features which can be used to categorise them. One or two of the lists should be presented at a time, with additions or deletions as necessary. By doing this, the students will have a command of many examples in which they can be sure articles are used, before they proceed to the contrastive cases when an article may or may not be found. Even though assimilation through frequent repetition, practice, and correction is ideal, some elementary uses such as the above can be more efficiently learned (or relearned) through their explicit demonstration. What is suggested is a small dose of an old remedy — rote learning — combined with other techniques. A little bit of memory work at intervals is compensated for by the added confidence gained by the students in the long run.