

## **Difficulties in teaching English Determiners. English Articles: A/ An/ The/ Ø Article**

**Vasilica Mleşniță**

B. P. Hasdeu School, Iași

### **Abstract**

This paper deals with the problem of helping learners develop accuracy in the target language in the context of a seemingly insignificant category that is determiners, specifically article. I have chosen Romanian students but this can be applied to many international students with their L1 system difficult to be compared to English. The purpose of this short study is to “touch” the source of the article errors and to find doable, effective activities that can increase students’ abilities to choose correctly between a/ an/ the or zero article. I expect not to exhaust all the questions, because it would be impossible, but to display a highly personal method that probably can act as a useful teaching tool.

**Keywords:** English determiners, semantic wheel, teaching, activities.

In 1991 Roger Berry pointed out that articles occur after each ten words; although they have a high frequency, articles remain an area of chaos due to the learners little attention for this issue. The uncertainties may have source in the old English, when articles didn’t exist. Studies say that from “one” emerged this new category of articles: a/ an/ the and zero article. Parish (1987) and Master (1997) found zero article first acquired, probably as a result of the history line or simply because it’s easier to avoid article usage. There are many studies that tried to decode the way in which L1 transfer alters the correct usage of articles in L2 or to imagine “excellent” drills that master comprehension, but achievements have been lower than it was expected. Depending on the nature of L1, difficulties may increase or vary but no matter level of L2, students keep having problems with determiners, precisely definite and indefinite articles.

The most probably articles are not the first priority in any English classroom and this is a plausible situation because few article errors may beget the whole message misunderstanding. English learners face this problem because theory provides deficient canon, in this case too many exceptions, or examples and also when it comes to practice there are multiple rules which collide ahead. Nowadays teachers pay less attention to the concept of fossilization instead of communicative competence. Obviously, the last one cannot be developed in the near presence of a “correction” system where students are stopped every time they say something wrong. No doubt that school helps students reach a higher level of education, but first we must take into account the fact that they may become frustrated and refuse to use in this case articles at all. Even when they learnt their first language they did mistakes so that the second language acquisition should not be total different from it. As far as I am concerned, I encourage them to speak in English even if they don’t have good commandment of it. I can see that they feel motivated and comfortable because their message is understood even though their English was not perfect; about articles, that is nothing to be proud of. Sometimes, for students, articles are as insignificant as their sound numbers are; they can barely hear a or the.

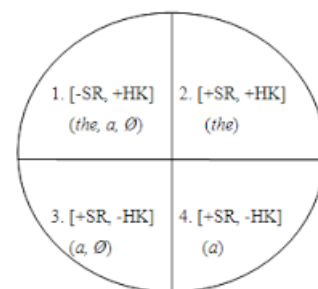
No matter our position as students or as teachers, we could notice the most confusing decision when picking between those “little things”; great accuracy in speaking and writing came along with practice and experience, that’s why we consider our students able to use the proper article. But on the other hand the question can be seen differently: Why our students cannot use properly the English article system although they have mastered every other aspect of English? The assumption gathers two categories of English learners: proficient/advanced and intermediate/pre-intermediate and signals two branches: linguistics and pedagogy.

Having this complex starting point, our path towards finding the best possible way of teaching English articles can be difficult, although not impossible.

When I think about drills that my English teacher used to correct our article errors/mistakes, writing essays is the only one. Articles, letters, essays, all these to be corrected, pointing with red missing articles or incorrect articles. When we didn’t understand why, we read articles about how to use them. My teacher hoped that we would acquire English article system inductively but this barely happened. After this failed experiment, I

would never use only this method to help my students understand articles. Essay writing promotes cohesion and coherence, so that a wider understanding of manipulation strategies that involve what is inside the text (anaphoric and cataphoric references) but also outward the text (exophoric reference). The problem is that semantic and discourse functions can easily be noticed from the context yet not from linguistic signals; when we search for links across sentences, items that are related, we tend to be superficial and find only chunks of words. Therefore working with huge paragraphs or personal creation can cause only hesitation although its purpose is great: to assess grammar, to encourage critical thinking and others.

Bickerton's semantic wheel could be the most helpful model to be used for English classes when teaching the category of articles. Once students understand typical interaction situations, English article becomes easier in terms of specific and general reference. I would use his model because students prefer schemata whenever they have to catch rules. It is well known that articles have two important areas: noun phrase and determiners. The first one can be used for specific reference or general reference. In this case, speaker, hearer and knowledge are the three elements involved in the communication process. Grammar cannot be learned by heart or filling the gaps of independent sentences, that's why short conversations between two or several participants could help students manage the English article system better. Language in use can offer the four situations when participants negotiate the known/unknown piece of information. Because I want to avoid fossilization, I would ask my students to reproduce the conversation in its correct form. Role-play generates a sort of relaxed atmosphere hence I would correct various grammar problems after acting; students are asked to write down every mistake they hear. Together, we can find why this problem occurred and how we can avoid its presence in our speech and writing papers. With the view to offer more possibilities to work with this issue, conversations with gaps surely help; students fill the gaps using *a/the/* zero article paying attention the terms recurrence. If they understand the difference between fresh information vs. aforementioned items, then they have access to the pragmatic dimension of a text with anaphoric (*the*), exophoric and cataphoric references. Undoubtedly students recognize facts from real life where each and every piece of information shared by sender and receiver has a



linguistic message endowed with cultural message or outside the experience; seeing articles as indicators of assumed shared world facilitates reading comprehension and logical choice of the article that fits well.

Other option is to give students examples with correct use of articles and they have to notice the rule and to explain why an article is used instead of other. So they will notice that for the same rule, there can be used “an” and “a”; here’s another question: why do some noun phrase have “a” and other have “an”? Teacher has to exemplify the difference between consonants and vowels and to provide examples that include also exceptions caused by pronunciation (e.g. an hour). After that, the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns is gives us the conclusion: only countable nouns accept a/an. And we are almost done when such examples occur: “A wine” (it has the meaning of a type of wine) or “the waters of Atlantic” (here water means river). Of course it is important to have various learning opportunities but our students feel insecure when unexpected situations bring new exceptions. Our attitude toward these situations can change their motivation; if they feel English is funny because exceptions make you see logically the change, then they get involved. Bringing a list with dos and don’ts for young learners minimizes a positive feedback but on the other hand, adult learners feel safe when they play on a riskless ground. But let us not talk about classic drills where first you memorize and then you apply the rules appropriately.

In order to avoid long presentations with teacher speaking most of the time, we should encourage students to speak their mind. It might be too forced to have discussions or debates on this topic as far as this represents a grammar issue, but as I have previously said, this is rather a problem of pragmatics. I propose examples first that are questioned in order to inductively understand the use of articles and then a synthesized table. Some of the students probably ask for a convention and we can give them guidance: Swan’s “Practical English usage” or Fowler’s “Modern English usage”. During some time, they will realize that learning by heart didn’t help that much because they can remember only few examples from the long list and that is fine. We teach them also values so they are continually learning how important is to rationalize.

In brief, articles always challenge theoreticians all over the world, pragmatic-linguists and teachers, but no one has reached a clear conclusion. I knew from the start that this study won’t bring any significant reference; my purpose was to reflect upon

details absolutely imperative for a perfect commandment of English. Everybody has the best arguments for a lexical issue or for a grammatical problem, but what about articles? Can you convince yourself or the others that you are “the master” of articles? The final conclusion, don’t stop until the answer is yes, learning and teaching a foreign language improve with every moment we pay attention to details.

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