

# Classification and Acquisition Studies of the English Article System with Some Pedagogical Implications

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## INTRODUCTION

### The English Article

There are three little words in the English language called "articles." These articles are described as the words *a*, *an*<sup>1</sup> and *the*. Along with their usage being difficult to explain (as if that wasn't enough), these words are the most frequent in English. According to a word frequency index compiled by Carroll, Davies and Richman (1971), *the* is the most frequent word in the English language, *a* is the fourth most frequent, and *an* is the 39th most frequent. A more recent frequency study, the COBUILD (Collins Birmingham University International Language Database) study, found that *the* still is the most frequent and *a* the fifth most frequent (Sinclair, 1991). Combined, these words occur approximately in one word in ten (Rinnert and Hansen, 1986. p.14).

An article or other determiner<sup>2</sup> is almost always used in English with a noun phrase; the exceptions being proper names and generic nouns (Cziko, 1986, pg. 880). The English article system contains two major classes: the indefinite *a* and the definite *the*. There is also what is called the "null," and "zero" articles (written as  $\emptyset$ <sup>3</sup>), which are occurrences of no articles where one would be expected. This article occupies a peculiar position in that it requires the recognition on the part of the learner that nothing, the  $\emptyset$  article, equals something (Master, 1987, pg. 112). However, the  $\emptyset$  article is also frequent. According to a study done by Master, (1993), this article ranked first in frequency amongst writings examined over five genres (Table 1). This makes it the most frequently occurring free morpheme in the English Language (Master, 1997).

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Genre	Source	∅	the	a(n)	ARTS/DETS**	Total words
Research Journal	(16) Technical articles	49.7	36.3	11.8	90.3	63,289
Science Magazine	<i>Science News</i> magazine (4 issues)	57.0	28.7	14.3	88.4	34,987
News Magazine	<i>The Tenth Man</i>	46.6	34.4	19.1	82.6	31,896
Novel	Macbeth and Julius Caesar	27.9	45.9	26.2	77.77	30,956
Plays*	(24) Samples	44.7	38.7	16.7	58.8.8	36,516
All		48.0	36.3	15.7	82.6	197,644

\* In the study, vocative forms of address, e. g., *fool*, *sirrah*, *lady*, were not counted

\*\*This is the percentage of determiners overall that were comprised of the three articles.

Table 1. Percent occurrence of the three articles in five genres (Master, 1997, pg. 221)

The basic function of the three articles, according to Master (1987), "is that they indicate that the object of which we have formed a conception is, in the case of *the* and the "zero" article, or is not, in the case of *a* and the "null" article, marked off, or defined; that is, thought of within certain physical or imaginary limits (p. 1)." The article system has been researched by linguists, philosophers and psychologists. In the tree diagrams in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983), the article is shown in the deep structures to be a determiner, attached to a noun phrase. Whether this is changed to either *a* or *the* depends upon definiteness, a psychological concept that is innate to humans (Adamson, 1989).

#### The Articles in Other Languages

There are many other languages that have articles. However, many of these languages use articles differently compared to the English article system. German, for example, has both the definite and indefinite article, but each has masculine, feminine and neuter forms: *ein* (masc.) / *eine* (fem.) / *ein* (neut.) and *der* (masc.) / *die* (fem.) / *das* (neut.) (Lattey, 1989). Many languages have no articles. These are mostly the Asian, Slavic and African languages (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983, pg. 171). But the nonexistence of articles does not mean that some concept of definiteness is not expressed in a language. Finnish, for example, uses word order to express this concept (Herranen, 1978). For an excellent overview of articles in other languages along with educational implications, please see Swan (1987).

Not only are articles missing from many languages, according to Lattey (1989), they are also missing from foreigner talk as a simplification process. She found in her study that foreigner talk omits articles 89% of the time, probably because they only indicate definiteness (pg. 92-93). German foreigner talk, she said, omits articles somewhat less (50-64%).

#### SYSTEMS OF CLASSIFICATION OF USAGE

In presenting a classification of the usage of these articles, it should be stated that traditional, structural and transformational grammarians have been unsuccessful in categorizing usage because the article used depends upon the discourse context to determine what is definite or indefinite (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983, pg. 172). Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman use this chart to explain the use of articles:

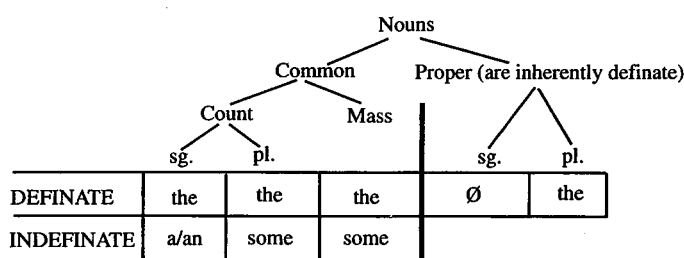


Figure 1. (from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 172)

As you can see, the nouns are first divided between proper and common, and then the common nouns are divided between count and mass. Then the count nouns are divided between singular and plural. This “count/non-count” classification seems to be the most common system used to classify articles. The word *some* is used as a plural for *a* in this classification. Rinnert and Hansen (1986) prefer to see this *some* as a quantifier. To back up this assertion, they use the sentences “She has *a* problem,” “She has ∅ problems” and “She has *some* problems” to express this use (pg. 15). They also claim that if *some* was the plural of *a*, then it would be twice as frequent as *a* or *an*, but is actually the 56th most frequent word.

#### A Three Level Classification

Zehler and Brewer (1980 and 1982) have broken the articles into three categories and many subcategories: introduction and anaphoric reference, context frame and generic.

1. In the first usage, the articles are used either to introduce a new topic into the discourse (*a*, ∅) or to refer back to an item (*the*).
2. In context frame usage— the most complicated of the three, article selection is based on knowledge of typical objects and events without a previous introduction to the referent. In this case, *the* marks the context-unique referent (“.. she rings the doorbell”), *a* the context intermediate (where there is one of only a few available like-items within a familiar context frame, e. g., “This little boy runs to their car and opens *a* door”) and context nonspecific (“This girl opens her bag of blocks and takes out *a* block”). ∅ is used in individualization (“∅ Mary is coming over”) and instances where the boundaries are vaguely defined (“He drank ∅ milk for lunch”).
3. Lastly, in the generic usage, *the* refers to universal knowledge (“*The* dog was the first animal to be domesticated”), *a* for knowledge of conceptual classes (“*A* baby drinks milk from *a* bottle”) and ∅ refers to universal knowns by indicating the class as a whole (“Birds build their nests in ∅ trees”).

#### A “Wheel” of a Classification

Bickerton developed in 1984 his “Semantic Wheel of Noun Phrase Reference,” somewhat simplifying matters, but not by much. Bickerton divides article usage as to whether there is specific reference ([+/- SR]) and assumed hearer knowledge ([+/- HK]). As can be seen in the figure of the model below, this seems to simplify matters as to what article should be used:

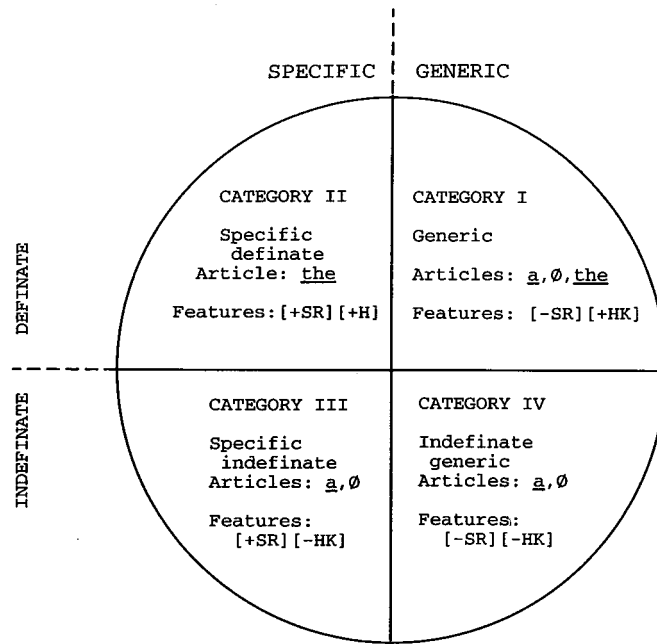


Figure 2. (from Master, 1987, pg. 37.)

A Binary Classification

Finally, Master (1990) has proposed a classification system depending upon what he calls “classification,” where either *a* or  $\emptyset$  is used, and “identification,” where *the* is used. As an example, first mention is a classification case and subsequent mention is an identification case. Below is an algorithm and a chart explaining the differences of the two systems:

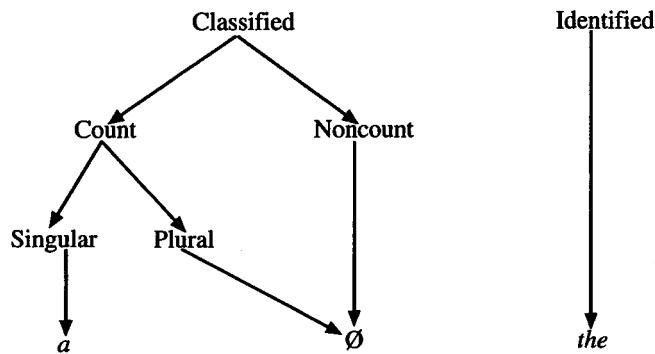


Figure 3.

Classification [ <i>a</i> , $\emptyset$ ]	Identification [ <i>the</i> ]
Count/non-count	
First mention	Subsequent mention
	ranking adjectives
	Shared knowledge
Existential <i>there</i> and <i>it</i>	Locative <i>there</i> and <i>it</i>
Defining postmodification	Limiting postmodification
Partitive <i>of</i> -phrases	Descriptive <i>of</i> -phrases
Generic $\emptyset$ and <i>a</i>	Generic <i>the</i>
Intentional vagueness	
Classified proper nouns	Identified proper nouns
Idiomatic phrases with $\emptyset$ and <i>a</i>	Idiomatic phrases with <i>the</i>

Table 2. Teaching the binary system (from Master, 1990, pg. 470-471.)

Master made this system mostly for pedagogical purposes, as he claims that teaching the article system as a binary system is helpful. However, volumes could be written in deciding if the item in question is either classified or identified and this could bog down the student in a hellish, rote-memorization experience. As with any other system, what has to be decided *before* the entrance to the algorithm or the wheel, as in Bickerton, may be the hardest part.

#### FIRST LANGUAGE ARTICLE ACQUISITION

There have been several studies conducted as to article acquisition by children who speak English as a first language. Brown's A First Language, published in 1973, is probably the most famous. In his study, Brown set the 90% threshold for morpheme acquisition that has been followed since. In studying three children, he found that article acquisition is eighth, after the acquisition of the possessive, *in*, *on*, the plural, the past irregular, the possessive, and the uncontracted copula (Master, 1987, pg. 7). However, one problem of Brown's study has been the non-inclusion of the  $\emptyset$  article. Another has been that he lumped together the articles as if they were one morpheme (Master, pg. 7).

Zehler and Brewer (1982) did a study to find out the sequence of order for the acquisition of individual articles. They studied twenty children aged 2 ; 4 to 3 ; 5 separated into two groups and found a sequence for article acquisition. They claim that the following acquisition order was demonstrated:

1. There is an initial use of *a* and  $\emptyset$  only in the early groups, with *a* predominating.  $\emptyset$  was found to occur where *the* would occur in adult language.
2. The article *the* was starting to be used by the middle group. This stage is when the use of *the* and its underlying concept is established.
3. There was an overuse of *the* in the later groups (Zehler and Brewer, pg 1273).

With this study, they disqualified Piaget's 1926 assertion that the overuse of *the* in the later groups was

because of an “egocentrism” in the child at that age (pg. 1273). They found children accurately using the *a* article in the first stage.

In a 1986 study, Cziko studied the acquisition of articles in relation to the bioprogram hypothesis. This is an hypothesis that states that language acquisition resembles creolization. According to this hypothesis (in relation to first language acquisition), the child will pass through a creole-like stage where the article system is simpler, but still systematic. He will then go through a decreolization process, where there is a loss of egocentricity. Here, the child distinguishes between specific and non-specific [+ / - SR], presupposed and non-presupposed [+ / - HK]; as in Bickerton’s model. According to Cziko, the child goes through four stages of acquisition:

1. The use of the definite for specific references and the  $\emptyset$  for non-specific referents and naming.
2. The use of the indefinite article for non-specific references, and the definite article for specific references, whether or not they are presupposed.
3. An increase in the correct use of the indefinite article for specific, non-presupposed referents, with a decrease in the correct use of the definite article for specific, presupposed referents.
4. Correct usage of the definite and indefinite articles (Cziko, 1986. pg. 878).

Two things have been found in many of the acquisition studies: one is that *the* is overgeneralized in its use soon after the child is aware of its existence, and the other is that the acquisition of articles generally takes place when the child is between two and three and one-half years of age. Perhaps the child trying to figure out this crazy article system at this time is the reason for the phrase, “The Terrible Twos.”

#### THE ACQUISITION OF THE ARTICLE SYSTEM BY SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

The acquisition of articles has been studied many times. These studies have given us much light on the subject and the process of article acquisition. One is that, just like first language learners, second language learners also overgeneralize the use of the in the early stages of learning.

##### Studies of L2 Acquisition by Children

Soon after Brown did his study of first language acquisition, studies started to be published about second language acquisition. Dulay and Burt did one the year after Brown’s study came out in 1973. Their study, also lacking examination of the  $\emptyset$  article as in Brown, found that articles were fifth out of eight in the acquisition order (1974a). Hakuta (1976) found that articles were acquired thirteenth out of seventeen morphemes by a Japanese child aged five to six in his study.

The biggest problem of the two above reports was copying Brown’s practice of packaging all the articles into a single category. This can be dangerous, as can be seen for the fact that the *the* article represents a certain psychological concept of definiteness. While adults may have higher cognitive processes, children are still trying to figure out a lot. I believe this non-inclusion of the definite article misses a lot in the interpretation of the results.

##### Studies of L2 Acquisition by Adults

Bailey, Madden and Krashen’s 1974 study found that Spanish-speaking adults acquired articles early, being the first morpheme acquired and very early compared to the Japanese students, who acquired the article almost the last; sixth out of eight. The major difference is that Japanese does not have articles while

Spanish does, although there is no one-to-one comparison with English. In this line, Andersen, in a 1977 article, claimed that the Spanish speakers acquired the English  $\emptyset$  article much quicker when that article corresponded the use of the  $\emptyset$  article in Spanish; but acquisition was later when that  $\emptyset$  article in English did not correspond to the  $\emptyset$  article usage in Spanish. According to Master (pg. 15), most of the errors made by the subjects were blamed by the researchers on developmental rather than interference errors. Krashen in his 1977 article (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991, pg. 90.) on the natural order of acquisition found that articles were second in line for acquisition.

Later, some studies were done to find the order of the acquisition of individual articles. Yamada and Matsuura (1982) set up an hierarchy of difficulty for Japanese adult students. They found that intermediate students had a difficulty order (from easiest to hardest) of the  $\rightarrow$  *a*  $\rightarrow$   $\emptyset$ . For advanced students, this order was *the*  $\rightarrow$   $\emptyset$   $\rightarrow$  *a*. I will talk later of this and other studies concerning article acquisition by L1 speakers of Japanese later.

#### Differences and Similarities of First and Second Language Article Acquisition Patterns

In a follow-up article to their ground-breaking study to their third "episode" of examining child acquisition sequence, Natural Sequences in Child Second Language Acquisition (1974a), Dulay and Burt (1974b) compared the order of article acquisition by first and second language learners using their second language study and Brown's and de Villiers first language acquisition studies. On a chart (257), they show that article acquisition is ranked lower in order for L1 learners (fourth or fifth) than it is for L2 learners (first or second). The manner in which they acquire these articles is different, according to Dulay and Burt (1974b, pg. 255) because children learning an L2 are usually older than those learning a first language and not only are further along in cognitive development, but have had experience in learning a language before.

In Adamson's study (1989), it was found that a similarity of both first and second language learners is that both groups tended to use articles before specific noun phrases. Adamson then states that similar cognitive mechanisms are involved in child first language and adult second language acquisition (pg. 44).

As for differences, it is stated in the Adamson article that second language learners have first language transfer and that the children's use of "egocentric" *the* with [+SR] and [-HK] nouns was not observed in adults. For a conclusion, it was postulated that children are "able to work with language specific categories before working on conceptual categories, but that adults can do both."

Lastly, Thomas (1989) suggested that there were these two differences in article acquisition by first and second language learners: that first language learners exhibit early and accurate control of *a* in [-SR - HK] contexts and that second language learners overgeneralize  $\emptyset$  in both *a* and *the* contexts (349). A similarity between first and second language learners claimed by Thomas was that they both overgeneralize the use of *the* in first mention contexts (349).

#### THE MASTER STUDY

The most detailed examination of article acquisition in adult second language learners I was able to locate with my meager resources was a doctoral dissertation by Master, who did a cross-linguistic longitudinal study in 1987 of acquisition of the articles in English by adult learners with L1s with and without articles. The hypotheses postulated in this study were that accuracy in article usage will reflect

overall linguistic competence and that the use of the articles will reflect strategies of interlanguage development. For subjects, he had native speakers whose language had no articles (Chinese, Japanese, Russian) and whose language did have articles (Spanish and German). The subjects were divided into interlanguage proficiency levels based on Cacino's notion that interlanguage proficiency can be revealed by negation strategies. In Master's study, there were five each at the baselang level, where negation is predominately at the *No + V* level; the low mesolang level, where negation is at the unanalyzed (i. e., not yet figured out) *don't + V* level; the mid-mesolang level, where negation is at the *Aux + Not + V* level; and at the high mesolang level, where negation is at the analyzed *don't + V* level. The level above this in interlanguage development is called the "acrolang" level. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into this topic and a greater explanation of the aspects of negation levels can be found in Larsen-Freeman and Long (1992, pg. 94-96). In the results of the study, Master was able to see similarities in accuracy in article usage amongst those with [-ART] native languages and those with [+ART] languages. For the languages without articles,  $\emptyset$  was found to be most accurate, *the* the second most accurate, and *a* the least accurate. It should be said, however, that the main reason for this is that because the difference cannot be told between the usage of  $\emptyset$  and the non-usage or omission of an article, this accuracy in acquisition was largely due by default (Master, 1997). For speakers whose native language has articles, however, he found that *the* was the most accurate and the other articles almost as accurate. From this he was able to draw the following conclusions in article acquisition:

1. That the [-ART] and the [+ART] accuracy patterns differ.
2. The [-ART] group attains 90% accuracy at the high mesolang level and the [+ART] group attains 90% accuracy at the mid-mesolang level.
3. The [-ART] acquisition sequence is  $\emptyset \rightarrow the \rightarrow a$ , which agrees to Yamada and Matsuura (1982). The [+ART] languages, however, have a slightly different acquisition order: *the* or  $\emptyset \rightarrow a$ .

Development of article usage was also studied by Master and showed a very interesting pattern. When the development in accuracy over time was plotted on a graph, it took on a funnel shape, with  $\emptyset$  article usage by [-ART] languages at almost 300% usage ( $\emptyset$ -flooding) and [-ART] *a* usage under 30% usage, forming the wide end of the funnel. And as more and more accurate article usage was attained by all speakers, the narrow end of the funnel was formed. Although the graph in Appendix 1 is what Master calls generalized usage, it shows this "funnelized" pattern of development.

Concluding, Master summarized article acquisition across the five languages present in the study. Although the acquisition pattern in the baselang level was the same across the spectrum (the L1 rules ([+ART]) and conditions ([-ART]) were adhered to), great differences were in the mesolang class of interlanguage proficiency. The pattern for each language is listed below. Listed first are those languages which have articles.

1. Spanish speakers had a drop of the usage of *the* and  $\emptyset$  with an increase of *a* usage in the low mesolang, a pattern that continued to 90% accuracy in the mid-mesolang and almost 100% accuracy at the high mesolang level. Master postulates that the Spanish definite article *el* and *la* is different from the English *the*, requiring the development of a new lexical item and may contribute to low accuracy for *the* in the low mesolang level as the speaker grapples with the definite article.



2. German speakers have a drop in accuracy and usage in *the* and *a* with higher  $\emptyset$  usage in the low mesolang level. *The* and *a* accuracy is at the 90% accuracy level with a somewhat lower accuracy level for the  $\emptyset$  article. Nearly 100% accuracy was attained in the high mesolang level. According to Master, the high usage and accuracy of *a* across the board may be due to the fact that the speaker is retaining a strong sense of the German count system.
3. For Chinese speakers, the  $\emptyset$  article is dominant in the basilang level, resulting in high accuracy of that article. In the low mesolang level speakers,  $\emptyset$  usage and accuracy decreases while *a* and *the* usage and accuracy increases. At the mid-mesolang level, while  $\emptyset$  usage decreases, its accuracy increases. *The* usage rises and accuracy levels out, while *a* usage and accuracy falls. At the high mesolang level, accuracy in  $\emptyset$  and *the* increases to almost 100% , but *a* accuracy stays at about 80% , possibly, according to Master, because the speaker is adjusting to the count aspect of English articles.
4. Japanese speakers have almost the same pattern of article acquisition as the Chinese speakers, except for an extremely high usage of *the* at the low mesolang level, to such an extent that it has garnered the appellation of "the-flooding." I will talk more of the Japanese speakers below.
5. Lastly, Russian speakers occupy some sort of mid-point between the [+ ART] and [- ART] article acquisition patterns. Although the pattern of usage and accuracy development resembles that of the [- ART] languages, *the* usage and accuracy climb less steeply and *a* usage and accuracy climb more steeply than the other [-ART] languages studies.

#### SPECIAL ASPECTS OF ARTICLE ACQUISITION BY NATIVE SPEAKERS OF JAPANESE

As I have stated before, the Japanese language contains no articles and therefore presents some special problems. According to Kimizuka (1977), "Article usage constitutes one of the greatest problems for the Japanese learner, vividly revealed in the high frequency of mistakes (because) the Japanese learner must not only learn the numerous rules for the usage with as many exceptions, but he must also practice using them by drill (pg. 78-79)." In her book based mostly on error analysis, Kimizuka listed several errors that Japanese learners commit when using the English article system. These are:

1. The wrong use of *the* for *a*;
2. Unnecessary use of *the*;
3. The wrong use of *a* for *the*;
4. Unnecessary use of *a*;
5. The use of *this, that, these, those, its* for *the*;
6. Omission of *the*;
7. Omission of *a* (pg. 79-81).

These were much the same mistakes that Herranen (1978) found with Finnish speakers.

What Kimizuka found to be the unnecessary use of *the* she attributed to the "overconsciousness of article usage (pg. 79)." This is the "the-flooding" that occurs when *the* is greatly overused. This phenomenon has become more understood with more detailed studies done by Huebner in 1983 (listed in Master, 1987) and Master in 1987. This flooding causes near 90% accuracy in the use of *the* by the Japanese subject in Master's 1987 paper, obviously to the detriment of the accuracy of the other two articles. That this flooding

doesn't occur with *a*, according to Master, is that it is being used deliberately by the learner and is part of adjustment that the Japanese learner makes to the count system in English (pg. 120). In comparison, *the*-flooding was also found in [-ART] languages to an extreme extent by Huebner in his Hmong subjects and to some extent by the Chinese subjects in Master.

Hakuta, in his 1976 study of English morpheme acquisition by a Japanese child, scored the usage of definite and indefinite articles by his subject, Uguisu, although he lumped them together in the ranking. He scores for accurate usage though, and not overall usage where he would find *the*-flooding. In a progression, he found that articles appeared early, because they were salient in English speech, but without the proper discrimination necessary for full control. He attributes the late acquisition of articles, thirteenth of seventeen in the ranking, due to the fact that there are no articles in Japanese. In his graphs, he found that *the* accuracy was earlier than *a* accuracy, which I think would be due to *the*-flooding.

Yamada and Matsuura, in their 1982 study of English article usage by Japanese young adults, none of whom had been in an English-speaking country, found that the subjects used *the* most correctly earliest for both intermediate and advanced level students at an early stage. They also found that the  $\emptyset$  article was the most difficult to use for the intermediate group and that the *a* article was the most difficult to use accurately for the advanced groups. They made the following hierarchy of difficulty of these articles for both groups (easiest to most difficult):

1. the  $\rightarrow$  *a*  $\rightarrow$   $\emptyset$  for the intermediate-level group;
2. the  $\rightarrow$   $\emptyset$   $\rightarrow$  *a* for the advanced-level group (pg. 61).

Master, in his 1987 study, charted the graphs in Appendix 2 showing the usage and accuracy of each of the articles across the interlanguage proficiency levels for Japanese learners. As you can see in the graphs, there is great fluctuation in the usage and accuracy of the  $\emptyset$  and the *the* articles, each with their own flood stages, but a gradual rise in the accuracy of the *a* article. As stated by Master (pg. 120), this *a* development is a feature independent of the maturity of the article; showing the learners gradual adjustment to the count feature of English. That the accuracy of the *a* article is only at 80% at the high mesolang level attributes the difficulties learners have in acquiring the many features and aspects of the article system.

More recently, Takahashi (1997) conducted a study with 111 students of university age in Japan using a multiple choice cloze test and a multiple choice insertion test. He conducted his study to test two hypotheses. The first was that "the presence of a modifier after a head noun would tend to make the subjects choose the definite article even if the referent is not unique in the situation relevant to the speaker and hearer (+HK) (Takahashi, 100)." The second hypothesis tested by Takahashi was "the choice of the definite article in formulaic language usage (I. e., commonly occurring sequences (e. g., *the third X, in the X*, etc.) is more accurate than in rule-governed language use (Ibid)."

He found that there was an overall tendency for the subjects to use the definite article *the* before noun phrases that were modified whether or not the NP was +HK or not for both hearer and speaker. He surmised that the "correct selection of cataphoric *the* requires understanding the *the* cannot be used when there is more than one possible referent in the situation relevant to speaker and hearer (Takahashi, 104)." His second hypothesis also supported in that definite article usage was more accurate in commonly occurring formulaic language occurrences than in uncommon, novel utterances (Ibid).

## PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In speaking, article errors rarely lead to miscomprehension and that may be the reason learners devote little time in learning the article system. But be that as it may, imperfect control of the articles may lead to mistakes in formal writing, causing the students' grade to suffer (Master, 1997). Therefore the need for class time devoted to the learning of articles is self-apparent.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman reported a survey done by R. Covitt in 1976 of ESL teachers in the Los Angeles area. These teachers reported that article usage was their "number one teaching problem (p. 171)." It seems to be intuitive to teach the easy aspects first and the more difficult later. According to Master (1987), most pedagogical approaches to teaching grammar depend on perceived hierarchy of difficulty (pg. 179), as was proposed by Herranen (1979 for Finnish. Herranen found that the hierarchy for Finnish was (from most difficult to easiest):

1. Addition of *the*
2. Omission of *the* (the Ø?)
3. Addition of *a*
4. A instead of *the*
5. Omission of *a* (the Ø?)
6. *The* instead of *a* (pg. 82).

Master (1987) reviews other researcher's suggestions to teach the article system. First is Whitman, who in 1974 suggested a sequence based quantification and determination:

1. Quantity (count nouns)
2. Generic plural
3. Noncount nouns
4. Determiners
5. Quantity and determination
6. Generic articles (from Master, 1987, pg. 180).

McEldowney (1977) suggested four stages of learning articles:

1. Classification ("any one/the special one")
2. Plurality ("any ones/the special ones")
3. Mass or substance ("the substance in general/any substance/the special substance")
4. Numbered specific and generic ("any numbered ones/ones in general") (110-111).

Master (1987) suggested this sequence:

1. Whether the article is + or - count
2. Whether the article is + or - definite
3. Whether the article is + or - generic (188).

As an overall framework, Master (1997) suggested the following for including article instruction in the curriculum:

1. At the beginning level, including articles for words introduced in class (I. e., *a banana, spaghetti*), especially when teaching the count/non-count noun system in English. He also states that focus on *the* is best avoided.

2. At the intermediate level, using the binary system to teach articles using longer text, such as that below.
3. At the advanced level, Master suggests using a lexical approach rather than a syntactic approach seems to work well. Also, he suggested that students start keeping records of their errors to discover more about their own linguistic behavior.

In presenting the articles in exercises, Rinnert and Hansen (1986) suggest that since much of the article system works on the discourse level rather than the sentence level, extended, paragraph or text-length discourse would work best to provide the context for appropriate article selection (pg 1). They suggest the following exercise (pg. 17) to provide this type of context:

"In this exercise, you must decide for yourself which articles to use, *a*, *an*,  $\emptyset$  or *the*.

\_\_\_\_\_ long time ago, there lived \_\_\_\_\_ king and queen, who said every day, 'If only we had \_\_\_\_\_ child.' But for a long time, they had none. One day, as \_\_\_\_\_ queen was bathing, \_\_\_\_\_ frog crept out of the water and said to her, 'Your wish will be fulfilled. Before \_\_\_\_\_ year is passed, you shall bring \_\_\_\_\_ daughter into the world.' \_\_\_\_\_ frog's words came true, \_\_\_\_\_ queen had \_\_\_\_\_ little girl who was so beautiful that \_\_\_\_\_ king could not contain himself for joy. He prepared \_\_\_\_\_ great feast and invited all his relation and friends ...."

This is a long text that provides a lot of context. Of course, being a cloze exercise, it contains all the boringness of the cloze. Rinnert and Hansen (1986) also suggest students write a description of a picture in an actual situation (selling a bicycle, Appendix 3) to provide more a natural context for using the articles (pg. 21).

Ur (1988) suggests these activities for practicing the articles:

1. Cut out headlines from newspapers and have them inset missing articles that would be there in a normal sentence;
2. Give the students the title of a poem that is rich in association. Then have the students give associations in a noun phrase form and write them on the board. For example, sentences that students might write for the topic "Night" would be ; "An owl calling" or "The world at rest" and etc. An impressionistic poem is left that can be made richer by letting the students add words (pg 52-53).

Barnard (1989) suggested the use of a heuristic format to teach the definite article. Through student self-realization and a few simple rules, the students make something like the model shown in Appendix 4. This model tends to have the following characteristics:

1. It is more or less spatially and semantically bilaterally symmetrical about the vertical axis.
2. Examples nearer the center tend to be easier to classify with the application of the rules.
3. Going further away from the axis leads to involve more analytical reasoning.
4. Proceeding from a node on a limb to a node on a branch involves more analytical reasoning.

This model seems to fit Master's suggestion of students making a record of their own article usage for the advanced levels. As it involves the definite article, it would not be appropriate at the beginning and lower-intermediate levels.

## CONCLUSION

I have tried in my paper to outline in a few pages a long and complicated topic. Acquiring articles is a

new experience for the foreign student whose language has no articles and who is present in the culture and thinking-style of people in English-speaking countries. Since it may be a complicated process, it is very difficult, as can be seen in the studies where 100% accuracy was not obtained (which is something native speakers cannot claim), to completely understand the articles. But their importance in the English language is very high and all efforts should be made to give the opportunities to the students to become the best article users that they can be.

#### Notes

1. I would like to use *a* in this paper to represent both this article and its allomorph *an*.
2. Determiners are these words according to Rinnert and Hansen (1986, pg. 5): *a, an, the, my, your, his, her, its, our, their, this, that, these, those, some, and, no one's*.
3. This  $\emptyset$  article has two categories. The "null" article ( $\emptyset_1$ ) occurs with proper nouns and certain generic nouns and the "zero" article ( $\emptyset_2$ ) occurs with non-count mass nouns and plural nouns (Palmer, 1939 and Chesterman, 1991)

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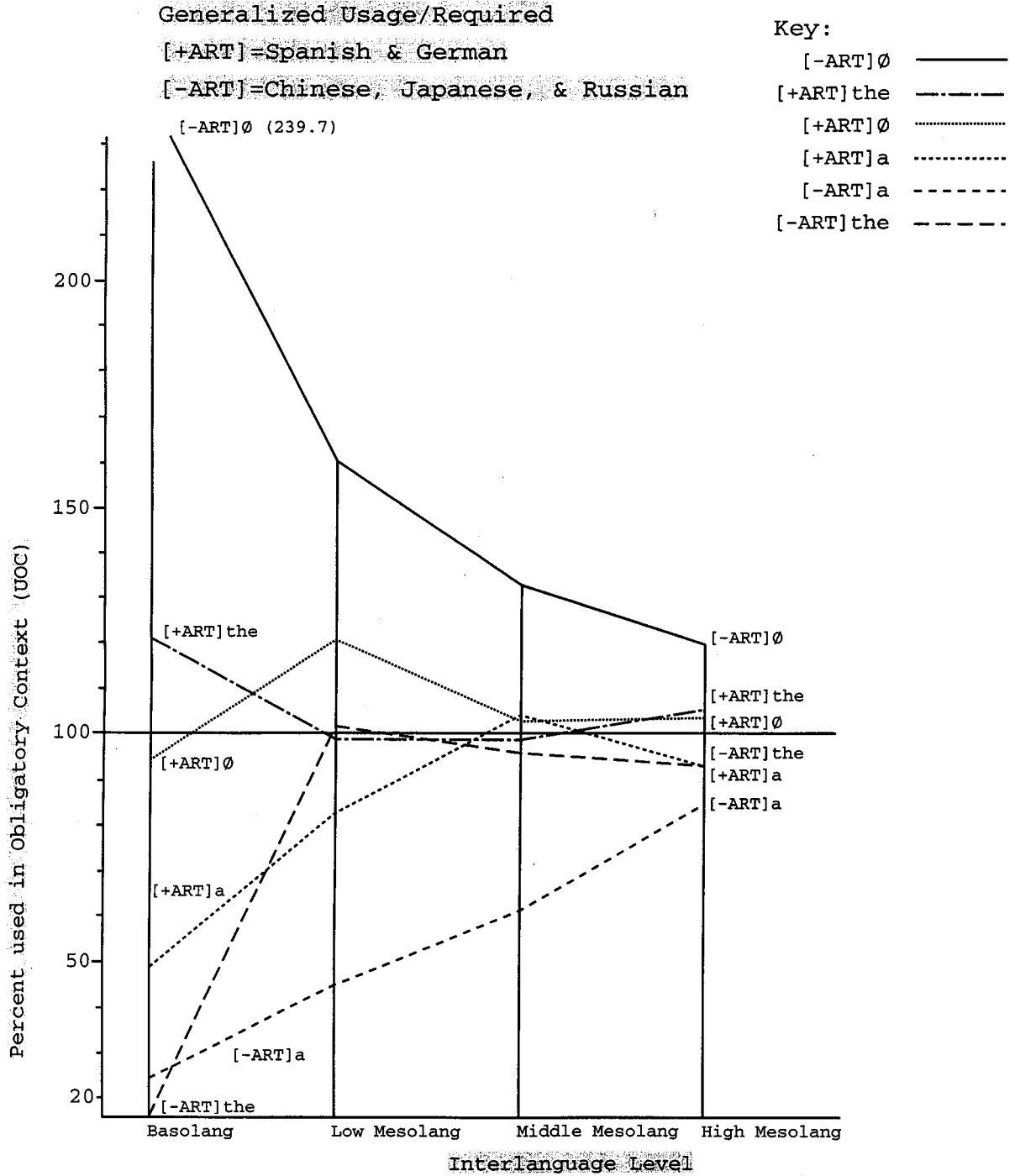
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APPENDIX 1

OVERALL ARTICLE USAGE ACROSS THE FIVE LANGUAGE GROUPS

(from Master, 1987, pg. 89)

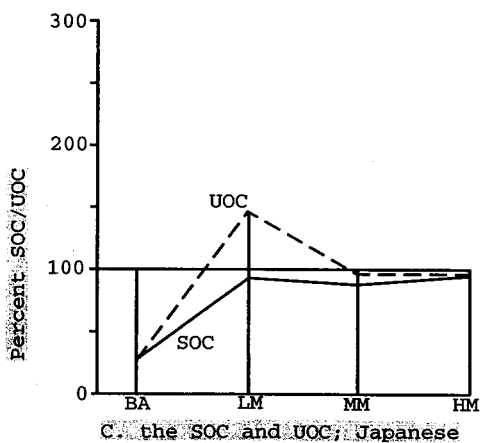
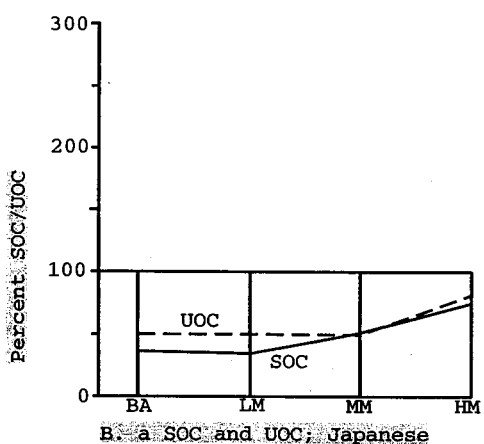
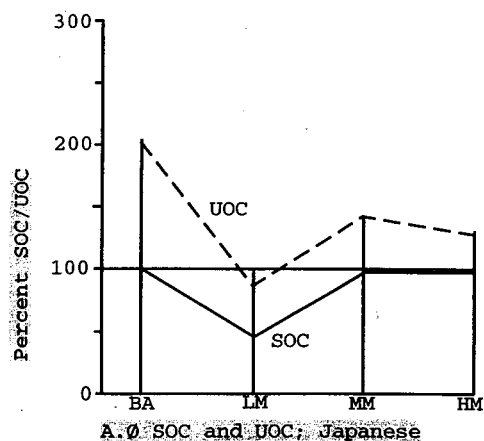




APPENDIX 2

USAGE AND ACCURACY OF ARTICLES BY JAPANESE LEARNERS

(from Master, 1987, pg. 119)



Japanese Accuracy vs. Usage (UOC)

APPENDIX 3

A TEACHING EXAMPLE

from Rinnert and Hansen, 1986, pg. 18)

Exercise 8:

You want to sell your bicycle. Use the information in the drawing to write a brief paragraph advertising the bicycle. Try to use both definite (*a, an, Ø*) and definite (*the*) articles in your description, e. g. "It has *a* new seat" or "*The* seat is new."

