

Identifying Common Student Article Errors and their Implications for Instruction*

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(2003 年 10 月 30 日受理)

1.0 Introduction

At the Faculty of Education, I am responsible for teaching content-based English education classes to second, third, and fourth year students. As with most intermediate to upper intermediate Japanese students of English, I have noticed a high frequency of article errors in the students' homework assignments, e-mails, and speech. English has three kinds of articles, the definite article, the, the indefinite article, a, and the zero article, \emptyset . This study constitutes the first of a two stage research plan. The aim of this stage is to determine features of article usage with which students struggle. The second stage will test a pedagogical method to target these weak points.

2.0 Why Worry about Articles?

Aoki (2000: 117) writes that English articles are rarely taught systematically in Japan. There are four possible reasons for this. One, it is very difficult to hear articles in speech. In sentences such as "Where's the lamp?" and "Have you seen a dog?" said at normal speed, the articles "the" and "a" might be inaudible to the learner of English. Two, correct article usage involves semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic factors and its mastery might require a proficiency level of English close to native level. Three, quite often even when a mistake in article usage is made, the speaker's utterance is understood. An example of this is in Master (1994: 230) in which a waitress in a diner handed the cook a piece of pie and said "Make a pie hot." Although her use of the indefinite article was incorrect, the cook knew very well the waitress was referring to the piece of pie in her hand. Lastly, in many cases, an article's omission or inclusion are both acceptable (Berry: 1991, p. 252):

- 1a) *If they are unhappy they should consider divorce.*
- 1b) *If they are unhappy they should consider a divorce.*

* Based on a Presentation given by the author at the 29th Annual All Japan English Education Conference at the Miyagi University of Education on August 9, 2003.

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