

## Teaching English Articles by Learners' Proficiency Levels

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English article has been considered as one of the most difficult areas to learn among ESL/EFL students. The current paper reviews English learners' article error patterns as well as pedagogy in order to teach English articles and to minimize learning difficulties on English articles. Different pedagogy for English articles on the basis of learners' proficiency levels are suggested as each proficiency level student shows a different error tendency; beginning level language learners used the zero article with the most facility while intermediate level language learners used the definite article the most accurately. However, studies about high advanced level learners' error patterns present that these high accuracy rates among beginning level students might be a result of students' plain guessing. Considering these error patterns, pedagogy for advanced level is also suggested.

[English articles/grammar education]

### I. INTRODUCTION

In English grammar, usage of articles has been one of the most difficult areas to teach and learn (Han, 2004). The definite article and the indefinite article are the most frequent words in English, but teaching and learning the mechanism of usage are not as simple as they might look (Butler, 2002). Researchers have tried to identify the nature of learning and teaching difficulties through diverse explanations adopting semantic, syntactic, morphologic or psycholinguistic analysis. Previous research on English articles has focused on interlanguage processing and proficiency development in terms of usage of English articles (Pica, 1985; VanPatten, 1990), semantic or syntactic environments of English articles (Agnihotri, Khanna & Mukherjee, 1984; Huebner, 1979, 1983, 1985; Ionin & Wexler, 2003; Ionin, Ko & Wexler, 2004; Kharma, 1981; Snape, Leung & Ting, 2006), pedagogical implications for English articles (Master, 1990, 1995, 1997, 2002; McEldowney, 1977; Whitman, 1974) or possible causes of article errors such as L1

transfer (Huebner, 1985; Kaku, 2006; Park, 1996; Master, 1997). Among these topics, this paper focuses on error patterns of English articles and teaching suggestions for English articles.

Previous researchers have suggested how to teach English articles effectively but they did not explain pedagogy by learners' proficiency levels. Each proficiency level has different error patterns, so different pedagogy is necessary depending on learners' proficiency level (Jeon, Kahng & Sohng, 2006). Previous teaching suggestions are sorted by target learners' proficiency levels and more suggestions are made on the basis of the most advanced learners' article errors. Representative studies about error patterns of English articles are reviewed before a discussion about pedagogy for English articles. Conclusions include suggestions for how to teach English articles effectively considering learners' proficiency levels.

## **II. ERROR PATTERNS OF ENGLISH ARTICLES**

Corder (1967) and Selinker (1972) claim that second or foreign language learners' errors are not random, but governed by certain rules. Identifying the error patterns can assist researchers and teachers in the language learning field in predicting potential error patterns and language learners in reducing the recurrence of the same errors in the future (Jung, 2006). According to Agnihotri et al. (1984), language learners make fewer errors related to learned article rules; thus finding new characteristics or environments of English article errors can contribute to reduction of English article errors.

So far, researchers such as Agnihotri et al. (1984), Kharma (1981) and Master (1995) tried to identify the most problematic characteristics of article usage as well as the syntactic and morphological environments of recurring English article errors. Kharma's (1981) and Master's (1995) participants were advanced level learners and Agnihotri et al.'s (1984) participants were beginning level undergraduate students. Agnihotri et al. investigated 366 Hindi/Punjabi-speaking undergraduate students' article usage in terms of structural complexities. In order to examine whether learners' proficiency level contributes to an occurrence of a different error pattern, beginning level learners and advanced level learners' English error patterns are examined respectively.

### **1. Error Patterns of English Articles among Beginning or Low Intermediate Learners**

Agnihotri et al.'s informants studied English in junior high and high school as a mandatory subject for seven years, but their overall English proficiency level was

beginning or intermediate; they scored below 45% on average on the English of the Higher Secondary Examination, a university entrance exam which was administrated by the University of Delhi. The participants were asked to fill in 86 blanks where an article, *a*, *an*, *the* or  $\emptyset$ , is obligatory in Stephen Leacock's essay "My Financial Career" which is 592 words long: 18 contexts for *a*, 6 contexts for *an*, 32 contexts for *the*, and 30 contexts for the zero article. The results of the participants' performance on the test are in Table 1.

**TABLE 1**  
**Percentages of Inserting a, an, the and 'Ø' in the Potential Places for the Use of Articles**  
**(Agnihotri et al., 1984, p. 117)**

Participants' Article Usage	Articles in Standard American English			
	A	An	the	Ø
A	<b>27.04</b>	2.76	12.08	58.10
An	4.73	<b>42.71</b>	10.24	42.30
The	5.03	2.16	<b>36.91</b>	55.87
Ø	3.67	0.71	7.80	<b>87.61</b>

Table 1 in Agnihotri et al.'s (1984) study demonstrates that the participants used the zero article with the most facility, followed by *an*, *the* and *a*. The participants determined usage of the definite article by considering only structural cues such as the existence of a certain phrase or clause. However, the participants used the zero article more frequently even when a noun was modified by a prepositional phrase. This overflow of the zero article supports a hypothesis that the high accuracy rate of the zero article among beginning-level learners should be interpreted more carefully.

Agnihotri et al. (1984) examined environments of errors per English article in order to find causes of English article errors. First, they analyzed relationship between a noun type and an occurrence of indefinite article errors. There were 24 instances for the indefinite article; 20 indefinite articles were located in front of countable nouns and 4 cases were located in front of nouns which were usually used as uncountable nouns but were used as countable nouns at that time. However, the results of correct usage did not show differences of error rates of the indefinite article between countable nouns and uncountable nouns. The participants were inclined not to use any articles, that is, zero articles overall.

The correct percentage of the indefinite article usage and the number of adjectives between the indefinite article and a noun correlated negatively. For example, "Art + NP" (30.07%) scores better than "Art + adj. + adj. + NP" (22.40%). Furthermore, the more complex the sentence structure, the lower the percentage of correct usage of the indefinite article; declarative sentences scored the highest correct percentage of *a* (34.97%, however, 57.65% used  $\emptyset$  instead of *a*): followed by negative sentences (30.05%, however, 66.12% used  $\emptyset$  instead of *a*) and question sentences (22.67%, however, 72.13% used  $\emptyset$  instead of *a*). Even though the participants correctly used the indefinite article in declarative

sentences the most, their overall tendency was not to use any article in all types of sentences. In addition to phrase and sentence complexity, the sentence-initial position also contributed to occurrences of errors; the participants made more article errors in subject nouns rather than in object nouns.

Agnihotri et al. presented seven modified *of* phrases related to questions about the definite article. According to Huebner (1985), structural cues can mark a particular reference and have a specific meaning, but *of* phrases do not have a one-to-one relationship with definiteness. As not every noun in front of the *of* phrases requires *the*, examining usage of the definite article in modified/specified situations that only require *the* can produce biased results.

Agnihotri et al.'s (1984) research contributes to providing information about error patterns due to syntactic environments; however, a problem in this research was participants' overall low performance: *a*: 27.04%, *an*: 42.71%, *the*: 36.91%, and zero: 87.61% of correct article usage. In addition to this low performance on the cloze test, participants tended not to use any articles in mandatory contexts, which might have been the explanation for the high percentage of correct usage of the zero article. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude whether or not the correct usage of the zero article was due to plain guessing or correct knowledge. Thus, Agnihotri et al.'s claims on the article acquisition order, either  $\emptyset$ , *an*, *the* and *a* or  $\emptyset$ , *the* and *a/an* require more research.

## 2. Error Patterns of English Articles among Intermediate Learners

Kharma (1981) chose 128 informants who were advanced English users majoring in English Language and Literature in Kuwait. He chose this specific population in order to identify the most persistent error patterns in spite of the participants' major efforts to master English. Kharma asked the participants to take a cloze test consisting of 40 items in addition to writing an essay. This cloze test focused on usage of the zero article because Kharma's unpublished previous research indicated that Arab students made the most frequent errors using the zero article.

The average percentage of correct English article usage in Karma's study was 71.2% (*a*-a total of 10 items: 62.4% of correct percentage, *the*-a total of 11 items: 85.5% of correct percentage, the zero article-a total of 19 items: 67.1 %). The participants' percentage of correct use of the definite article was the highest similar to the beginning-level informants' in Parrish's (1987) and Huebner's (1979, 1985) research, but the definition of the correct usage of the definite article in the results of Kharma's research needs to be scrutinized. Similar to Agnihotri et al.'s (1984) beginning-level learners' tendency to use the zero article in contexts where either the definite or the indefinite article was required, intermediate or advance level learners are often inclined to use the definite article for every

blank where the indefinite article or the zero article is required indicating the possibility of learners' unintentional usage of the definite article without full acquisition of correct usage.

One of the interesting results in Kharma's research is the participants' different performance depending on a type of a task. The error percentage of the indefinite article in the cloze test was worse than those of the other two articles, but the informants made the fewest errors for the indefinite article in written essays. The percentages of each article errors in written essays are 50% for the definite article, 37% for the zero article and 13% for the indefinite article (Kharma, 1981, p. 341).

Kharma (1981) interprets these opposing results on two different tasks, a cloze test and written essays, in terms of learners' avoidance strategies. The participants omitted the indefinite article in the free writing task because they were not sure of the correct usage. Most errors about the definite and the zero articles in this task were usage of *the* in the contexts for the zero article in front of proper nouns or general plural nouns. Kharma explains this result with their mother tongue, Arabic; he claims that the main reason of these errors is due to L1 interference, but the researcher was not sure of the effects of other external factors such as participants' previous grammar-based instruction in Kuwait.

Zughoul (2002) also conducted research of which participants were Arabic students who attended an intensive language program in an American university. The results demonstrated that the most frequent errors of the Arabic learners were omission of the indefinite article, overuse of the definite article, omission of the definite article and overuse of the indefinite article respectively. He also compared Arabic learners' article errors to learners from other countries, and found that the error tendencies were similar.

### 3. Error Patterns of English Articles among Advanced Learners

Master (1995) conducted action research on syntactic and morphological environments of article errors in written summaries made by Chinese and Japanese M.A. students in a TESOL program at an American university for one semester. The participants submitted several journal article summaries during the semester and Master gave them written feedback concerning their article usage. Master analyzed their English article error patterns and changes in the error rates over the semester. The most frequent error was the use of the zero article instead of the definite article: (1) for ranking adjectives such as *the first* (2) for shared knowledge of uniqueness such as *the sun* and (3) for nouns that have post modifications such as "*the* book on the table."

Master (1990) finds that ranking adjectives (superlative, sequential, unique: the first, the second, the most beautiful, etc.) and shared knowledge (the moon, the sun, etc.) are always identified, so the definite article is required for those nouns. Postmodification is a type of

identification, but not all postmodification needs identification, even though it can be classified.

1. Houdini was *the* man who could open any lock (identification: the best man to open locks)-limiting postmodification
2. Houdini was *a* man who could open any lock (classification: a man who belongs to a group of people who can unlock)-defining postmodification

(Master, 1990, p. 473)

Among the postmodification, an *of* phrase needs either the indefinite article, classification, or the definite article, identification. When "the diameter of a circle" (Master, 1990, p. 473) can be inverted into a possessive, "a circle's diameter," this *of* phrase is identifying the noun, *diameter*. Therefore, this noun, *diameter*, needs the definite article. On the other hand, an *of* phrase can classify a noun when it represents a part of the noun in "a cup of coffee." This classification frequently occurs with the verb, *have*, and after existential *there* and *it*.

The participants' article errors generally decreased over the semester, but *zero-for-the* errors increased. Master (1995) interpreted this phenomenon as a facet of the participants' shared knowledge. They stopped using the definite article because the writers assumed that the readers, the classmates and the professor, knew the situations being talked about. Master related the decrease of the overall article errors to the effectiveness of his feedback on the participants' article errors on their written summaries. The participants seemed to become aware of their errors after the feedback and tried to reduce the article errors. Table 2 summarizes the participants' performance.

**TABLE 2**  
**Article Error Distribution (Master, 1995, p.189)**

Used	Required	N	%	Mean
Ø	The	771	41.52	2.82
the	Ø	507	27.30	1.93
Ø	A	369	19.87	1.38
a	Ø	80	4.31	0.31
the	A	75	4.04	0.29
a	The	55	2.96	0.20
Total Errors		1857	100.00	6.93

The total percentage of the overused zero article instead of the definite and indefinite article is 61.39 % and the total percentage of the overused definite article is 31.34 %; misuse of the zero article is more frequent than overuse of the definite article among the advanced learners. This result confirms that even advanced learners might have not fully understood usage of the zero article. Master's research also proves that the high percentage

of correct use for the zero article in previous research cannot claim that learners actually acquire it earlier than the definite and the indefinite article.

While Kharma (1981), Master (1995) or Agnihotri et al. (1984) point out syntactic environments of learners' article errors as a main cause of the errors, Geranpayeh (2000) claims that article acquisition cannot be explained by one single theory. In his research, Persian speaking learners had problems in correctly using English definite markers in the subject position. Persian speakers need to know the semantics of the definite marker to use it in the subject position while English speakers use it on the basis of syntactic environments; L1 transfer occurs mostly in the subject position choosing definite markers not in any other contexts. In this case, the subject position as well as choosing correct definite marker might contribute to occurrence of article errors. Consequently, the examination of diverse aspects of article errors can assist learners in using English articles better.

#### 4. Error Patterns of English Articles among High Advanced Learners

Previous research mainly analyzed beginning-level or intermediate learners' spoken language, so the results was able to predict neither status of advanced learners' article usage nor general patterns of the most recurring article errors. The participants in previous research usually made too many errors to generalize or to predict later acquisition. Lee (2007) examined thirteen near-native advanced level NNS language teachers' article usage in online forums of two graduate courses at an American university. Six NNS participants attended both courses, and seven NNS participants attended one of the two courses. Each course required a weekly face-to-face meeting plus participation in online discussion. In addition to the observation of online forums, the researcher conducted follow-up interviews in Spring of 2006 after the two courses ended.

All of the NNS participants in Lee's study were Ph.D. students majoring in language education in a large university in the Midwest. All NNS participants had studied English grammar or conversation for at least ten years from junior high school to college in their home countries (some countries in Asia and Europe) mostly through grammar- and lecture-based instruction, and six NNS participants had spent more than five years and the others had spent between three and five years in English speaking countries pursuing M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in second or foreign language education. These highly advanced NNS English language users' systematic errors are expected to reveal the most recurring errors (Han, 2004), indicating those features which are the most difficult to acquire among language learners.

Total occurrences of article obligatory contexts and total numbers of errors per articles were calculated in order to find article error percentages. In the online forums of the first

course, most of the nine NNS participants showed similar levels of proficiency in general even though there was a considerable gap between the participant with the lowest percentage of article errors, 1.84%, and the participant with the highest percentage of article errors, 9.65%. Table 3 presents the percentages of the error occurrences per article in each error type by all nine NNS participants in the first course. The table shows that zero-article errors occurred the most frequently because all definite and indefinite article errors occurred due to the participants' misuse of the zero-article in the contexts where either the definite or the indefinite article was required.

**TABLE 3**

**Article Error Distribution in the First Course (%) (NNS Participants, N=9) (Lee, 2007, p. 52)**

Participants' Article Usage	Articles in Standard American English		
	The	a/an	Ø
the	<b>94.60</b>	0.23	1.54
a/an	0	<b>89.54</b>	0.34
Ø	5.41	10.23	<b>98.11</b>

The NNS participants did not make a lot of *the-for-a* and *a-for-the* errors, 0.23% and 0% respectively; however, they made the most errors misusing the zero article in contexts where the indefinite article was obligatory, *zero-for-a* errors, and where the definite article was obligatory, *zero-for-the* errors, even though they made the fewest errors in obligatory contexts for the zero article. Huebner (1985) claims that language learners tend to overuse the definite article, but most participants in the first course of Lee's (2007) research did not have the overuse tendency. Table 4 presents the results of error occurrences per article error type in the second course.

**TABLE 4**

**Article Error Distribution in the Second Course (%), NNS Participants, N=10) (Lee, 2007, p. 54)**

Participants' Article Usage	Articles in Standard American English		
	The	a/an	Ø
the	<b>95.76</b>	0.60	0.96
a/an	0.09	<b>90.12</b>	0.26
Ø	4.24	9.28	<b>98.79</b>

In the second course, error tendencies for each error type were the same as those in the first course even though the error percentages per article decreased; the participants made the most errors in *zero-for-a* and *zero-for-the* types and made a few errors in the other types. Again, the ten NNS participants of the second course used the zero article the most for contexts in which either the definite or the indefinite article was obligatory, so the highest percentage of correct usage of the zero article, 98.79%, needed more examination before concluding the participants learned usage of the zero article the best.



The most frequent errors in the online forums of Lee's (2007) study occurred in the *zero-for-a*, *zero-for-the* or *the-for-zero* types. Errors in the online forums were categorized into seven error types to find generalizable error environments that contributed to the occurrences of article errors. The explanations about each error type are as follow:

(1) Error Type 1: *zero-for-the* errors occurred the most frequently in front of unique common nouns. ex) Both websites use *the* MOO technology

(2) Error Type 2: the participants made incorrect assumptions for [+specific] and incorrectly used the definite article for contexts where the zero article was required. ex)

They mostly referred to (*the*) language acquisition

(3) Error Type 3: as previous researchers (Agnihotri et al., 1984; Master, 1997) claim, the participants used the definite article incorrectly in front of an *of* phrase because they thought that the existence of the post-prepositional phrase made the noun specific. ex) All (*the*) three groups of the project are in level 1

(4) Error Type 4: however, omission of an article regardless of the existence of an *of* phrase was more common than overuse of the definite article in Error Type 3. ex) I would not worry about it in *the* case of a 20 year-old

(5) Error Type 5: the results of the interview indicated that the participants assumed that they did not need to use the definite article with plural nouns; the participants made an error by not using the definite article with a plural noun. ex) It is a place for avoiding *the* usual learning obstacles

(6) Error Type 6: the participants had a problem in using the indefinite article with an uncountable noun, but they often made an error even with countable nouns. In the later situation, the sentence-initial position or structural complexities contributed to the occurrences of errors. ex) The findings support *a* comparability between the CBLT and the PBLT

(7) Error Type 7: the participants' errors related to using plural nouns were examined; this type of errors was not directly related to article errors, but the participants tended to use plural nouns frequently to avoid using an article. Often, multiple causes or error types were involved in one error rather than a single factor. ex) Some editing software(*s*) are available

In this section, error environments of English article are reviewed. Knowledge about error patterns of English articles and characteristics or environments of the errors is essential for teachers or researchers in order to reduce learners' further errors or to conduct research about English articles. Master (1990, 1995, 1997, 2002) suggests that pedagogy in which learners can easily access is necessary in order to teach English articles better. In the next section, previous studies related to the pedagogy of English articles are discussed.

### III. SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH ARTICLES

Han (2004) as well as VanPatten (1996) explain the possible acquisition difficulty of a grammatical system which has multiple functions and a lack of perceptual saliency. Skehan (1998) also claims that morphemes that do not have explicit semantic meanings are candidates for fossilization; morphological features that have low communicative values can become pidginized or fossilized. This idea can further construct a hypothesis that focus-on-communication-only instruction without error correction or explicit grammar instruction can deepen the error frequency of this kind of morphological features. Therefore, the necessity of explicit teaching English articles is obvious to prevent possible fossilization as addressed in second language acquisition. In this section, representative previous research on the English article pedagogy is briefly reviewed.

#### 1. Teaching English Articles to Beginning or Low Intermediate Learners

Agnihotri et al. (1984), whose participants were at beginning and intermediate levels, suggest the following pedagogy based on their findings.

- (1) Teach *a* and *an* distinction: use *a* in front of a noun starting with a consonant and *an* with a vowel.
- (2) Only a noun or a noun phrase needs an article not an adjective or an adverb and teach a context for an article, in front of a noun or a noun phrase.
- (3) Single countable nouns can take the indefinite article, but specified abstract and mass nouns also need an article.
- (4) Teach the definite article related to specification; the superlative degree or the retrospective reference needs the definite article and specified nouns by modification also need the definite article.
- (5) Teach learners: (1) to insert an article in front of simpler noun phrases; (2) to use English articles for correct contexts; and (3) to use an article in front of all the qualifiers etc.

Whitman's (1974) and McEldowney's (1977) suggestions are for beginning or low intermediate learners as well, whereas Whitman's (1974), McEldowney's (1977) and Master's (1990, 1995, 1997, 2002) suggestions are more systematic than Agnihotri et al.'s (1984). Whitman (1974) argues that there is a difficulty hierarchy in learning English articles, so a specific order for teaching the articles is necessary. McEldowney (1977) also suggests step by step teaching strategies based on difficulties in article usage and crucial characteristics of the article system. Master (1990) presents a binary system to teach English articles instead of the semantic wheel based on the theory: the simpler the better to learn or teach.

First, Whitman (1974) emphasizes teaching characteristics of quantity (*a/an, one; two, three, some, many, etc.*) and of determiners (possessive *-s, the, this, etc.*). The quantity is related to the number agreement: either singular or plural. Plural nouns are general and universal which indicate "any and all" (Whitman, 1974, p.254). On the other hand, the determiner is connected to "a known group" regardless of the number agreement of nouns.

To teach English articles and to minimize learners' future errors and learning difficulties, McEldowney (1977) claims that teachers need to know the descriptive grammar of English articles, including the core meanings and functions of each article and learners' article error patterns. He suggests four crucial characteristics of the English article system: (1) generality vs. particularity; (2) specialty vs. any; (3) countability vs. uncountability; and (4) singularity vs. plurality. The following is the summary of McEldowney's (1977) suggestions and the examples are from his article (pp. 97-98).

- (1) General and particular: whether a reference is general or particular Ex) *a* bird in "The Kiwi is a New Zealand bird" is general in reference; *The* bird in "The bird on my right is a kiwi" is particular.
- (2) Special and any: *a bird* in #1 refers to any bird of a group, but *the bird* refers to a special member of the group.
- (3) Countable and uncountable: *a* or plural *-s* can occur with countable nouns while uncountable nouns do not take either of them.
- (4) Singular and plural: countable nouns can either be singular or plural.

McEldowney (1977) claims that teachers also need to teach learners' typical article error patterns as well as to teach articles based on four characteristics described above. McEldowney's general article error patterns are: (1) Omission of *a* or *the*; (2) Incorrect insertion of *a* or *the*: an article is used in a context where no article is needed ; and (3) Confusion between *a* and *the* : incorrect article use in a context where another article is necessary.

In addition to these three types of error patterns, McEldowney hypothesizes two more potential areas of difficulties: (1) code or message and (2) overlapping. As articles have multiple functions in one form, language learners of English are susceptible to make article errors. ESL/EFL learners focus on understanding meanings of sentences while they do not focus on an article because it has little communicative value. As a result, learners produce 'stem form English' such as nouns in "He took for  $\emptyset$  house in  $\emptyset$  city" (McEldowney, 1977, p.102). Another possible difficulty is from overlapping: one form plays several functions. To minimize these possible difficulties, McEldowney (1977) suggests teaching learners "a + N" as a whole unit, a chunk, to prevent an error due to its low communicative value;

teaching a noun with an article, e.g. *a chair*, instead of teaching a noun without an article, e.g. *chair*, is more effective to teach English articles.

McEldowney (1977) also suggests that instructors teach language learners the easiest area of English articles the first: teaching countable nouns before uncountable nouns. To teach difficult areas due to the overlapping, he also suggests a match between one form and one function that has the most common and compulsory usage and the highest frequency usage rate. McEldowney's (1977) suggestions contributed to identification of possible difficulty hierarchies and to development of possible pedagogy to teach the articles based on a hierarchy of ESL/EFL learners' difficulties, but these stages did not include explanations about the zero article and the "unique use" of the definite article. Another issue of this approach is teaching a mass or an abstract noun that can be used as a countable noun which needs the indefinite or the definite article, or the plural -s.

## 2. Teaching English Articles to Intermediate Learners

Among the research which attempted to establish specific pedagogy in order to teach English articles, Master's (1990, 1995, 1997, 2002) studies have predominantly influenced the article pedagogy. Master (1990) suggested a binary system to teach English articles better: [ $\pm$ classified] and [ $\pm$ identified]. As Ionin and Wexler (2003) and Ionin et al. (2004) examined, [ $\pm$ specific] and [ $\pm$ definite] could be crucial aspects of article semantics, but Master claims that pedagogical grammar can combine these two features into one, [ $\pm$ identified], that includes a larger concept than definiteness (Master, 1990, p. 466). Master (1990) combined specificity and definiteness into one semantic feature, identification, and added classification in order to characterize usage of the indefinite article and the zero article. He claims that the combination between specificity and definiteness is possible because [ $\pm$ definite] can include the meaning of [ $\pm$ specific]. For example, in the case of (b) given below, usage of the indefinite article is eventually generic because *a tick* is not an actual tick but any tick in the tick group. Master claims that the distinction between [ $\pm$ definite] and [ $\pm$ specific] is minimal enough to ignore, but he admits the necessity of teaching the subtle distinction between these two features to advanced learners.

- a.[-definite][+specific] A tick entered my ear
- b.[-definite][-specific] A tick carries disease
- c.[+definite][+specific] The computer is down today
- d.[+definite][-specific] The computer is changing our lives

(Master, 1990, p. 466)

Examples (a) and (b) above are [-identified, +classified] while (c) and (d) are [+identified, -classified] in Master's (1990) binary system. Definiteness is related to identification closely and specificity is dissolved into the identification feature. Master (1990) explains that the main purpose of this binary system is to assist students in making fewer errors; they might learn English articles better and faster with a simpler rule because there are fewer features to choose. However, this binary system cannot explain the article usage for proper nouns; usage of the definite article and the zero article for proper nouns are random. For example, name of *rivers* need the definite article while names of *parks* need the zero article (Master, 1990, p.474).

As Master (1990), McEldowney (1977) and Whitman (1974) propose, teaching articles with a simpler rule might work best for beginning or intermediate level learners, but pedagogy for advanced learners might need a different approach because they are aware of exceptions of article usage which Whitman's and McEldowney's simplified rules cannot explain. Due to lack of pedagogy for advanced learners, conventions for article pedagogy for advanced learners are still needed because they still make article errors even after learning some basic rules about English articles. In the case of the difference between specificity and definiteness, although this subtle distinction might be minimal enough to ignore for beginning or intermediate learners, it is necessary to teach it to advanced learners (Masters, 1990). To meet this shortcoming, Lee (2007) suggests possible pedagogy to teach English articles to advanced speakers of English.

### 3. Teaching English Articles to Advanced Learners

Lee's (2007) participants provided demographic information, including their previous education in their home countries and in English speaking countries, their strategies to overcome his/her overall learning difficulties and difficulties using English articles during the follow-up interview. The NNS participants individually explained general rules they tended to apply for usage of English articles. The participants' general rules for article use were almost the same. They used the indefinite article for a first-mentioned countable non-specific noun and used the definite article for a second-mentioned specific noun; the NNS participants not only used *first-mentioned* and *non-specific* as synonyms but also used *second-mentioned* and *specific* as synonyms.

The participants usually used *general* to describe characteristics of the indefinite article, and *specific* and *mentioned before* to describe characteristics of the definite article. Their definitions of *specific* were identifiable, defined or referred before. They rarely used *definite* to describe the definite article. When the researcher asked whether they heard of a definition for *definite*, they answered that they thought that meanings of *definite* and

*specific* were the same and interchangeable. Excerpts of a participant's explanations about general usage of English articles follow.

- If a noun is common noun and not specified, and it can be counted. It can be one or two, and then you can use *a*, *an* or something similar to. The next one is specified. It is mentioned for the second time, so you have to put *the*.
- If a noun cannot be counted, you know, a non-count noun, you don't put *a*, *an*, or *the*. Don't specify that. Use the zero article. That is about it.
- I think using *the* is difficult. For example, *Iowa State University*. We don't put *the* in front of *Iowa State University*, but for names of other schools, for example, you know, *The University of Wisconsin*, you put *the* in front of *University*. *Iowa State University* is a name of a university and *The University of Wisconsin* is a name of a university too but they have different rules for this same situation.

(Lee, 2007, pp. 120-121)

This participant applied [ $\pm$ specific] to distinguish between usage of the definite article and of the indefinite article and applied both countability and [ $\pm$ specific] to choose between the indefinite article and the zero article. Among English articles, she chose the definite article as the most difficult article to learn because of its many exceptions. For example, usage of the definite article was not required before a proper noun, but some proper nouns needed the definite article.

Lee's (2007) participants learned how to determine English articles by memorizing grammatical rules, but they stated that natural exposure to a target language through speaking and reading as well as appropriate feedback helped them reduce the number of article errors. There were no unified patterns among the participants' explanations of their article choices, but the more dependent they were on structural cues or syntactic environments to determine an article, the more article errors occurred.

Long (1991) differentiated *focus on forms*, memorization of grammatical rules and/or sole concentration on grammar rules, from *focus on form*, meaning-focused activity along with embedded attention to form. The participants' previous education with focus on forms did not help students to improve their English article study in Lee's (2007) research, therefore teachers of advanced learners need to provide more contexts for article rules and more meaningful input using the communicative approach rather than teaching grammar rules only.

Butler (1999) claims that the more language learners know article rules the better their performance on English articles is, but the results of Lee's research do not support the claim; a participant, who did not explain her article choices well, scored one of the lowest error percentages in the online forum and on the cloze test. Verbalizing their metalinguistic knowledge can show learning development (Butler, 1999, 2002; Kasper, 1997; Raphael et

al., 1989; Sternberg, 1998), but it did not seem to present advanced language users' article acquisition as it does for beginning or intermediate learners'. Doughty (2001) argues that focus on forms correlate to metalinguistics and focus on form correlates to "simultaneous processing of forms, meaning and use in working memory" (p. 209); as seen in Lee's (2007) study, education with focus on forms assisted the participants in reaching a certain proficiency level, but a participant who had natural exposure to the target language through communicative approaches performed better. Asking the participants' metalinguistic knowledge elicited memories constructed through instruction that focused on forms, and the results showed that this knowledge did not guarantee successful article acquisition.

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

Agnihotri et al. (1984), Whitman (1974), McEldowney (1977) and Master (1990, 1995, 1997, 2002) have suggested pedagogy on the basis of structural cues around English articles and have tried to make rules to help learners to memorize grammatical rules. Many ESL/EFL students learn strategies for usage of English articles by focusing on the forms and by memorizing grammatical rules as the researchers suggested. In Lee's (2007) study, however, the participants demonstrated how this knowledge does not transfer to practices in all cases since they all demonstrated some problems in correctly detecting specificity when depending solely on structural cues. On the other hand, a participant in Lee's (2007) study used English articles with almost no errors. She stated that practicing speaking as well as feedback on her verbal errors from native speakers of English assisted her in improving English and usage of English articles.

As a result, focus on form, which refers to meaning-based activities with embedded attention to form, is suggested instead of the participants' previous education depending solely on focus on forms and addressing individual grammar points (Long, 1991). As seen in the results of Lee's (2007) study, the participants' natural exposure and a lot of input from a target language as well as self-assessment on the basis of time-appropriate feedback from native speakers of English were more effective to acquire usage of English articles than rote memorization of grammatical rules. For further research, more detailed strategies to develop various focus on form activities will help teachers to guide students.

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**Examples in: English**

**Applicable Languages: English**

**Applicable Levels: Elementary/Secondary**

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