

English Articles Revisited

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Introduction

Articles are prototypical markers of the semantic, logical, and pragmatic categories of definiteness and indefiniteness (Lyons 1999, p. 48). Definiteness and indefiniteness are considered to be language universals (Guillaume, 1919; Christophersen, 1939; Kramsky, 1972; Silić, 2000). However, in some languages they are not grammaticalized. This is very obvious in Slavic languages, in which, according to Mathesius (in Kramsky, 1972, p. 17) these categories are marginalized. Kaluza (1963) was among the first who pointed out the problem of teaching the English article to speakers of Slavic in general. According to a study by Zergollern-Miletić (2008), most speakers of Croatian, a Slavic language, are not aware of the existence of the categories definiteness and indefiniteness in their language, and do not recognize markers of these categories in Croatian. According to the author, this lack of awareness increases the problem of acquiring the system of the English articles by Croatian learners. This view is in line with the notion of the importance of language awareness (Hawkins 1994).

The problem of acquiring the English articles by non-native speakers is considered to be one of the major problems in L2 English. A great deal of literature has been dedicated to that problem (Grannis, 1972; Huebner, 1983; Master, 1990; Tarone & Parrish, 1989; Trenkić, 2000; Humphrey, 2007; Zergollern-Miletić, 2008). It has been accepted by scholars that the lowest stage of language acquisition is marked by omission, whereas substitution errors appear at an advanced stage. Substitution primarily implies overusing the

definite article. Some authors suggest (Trenkić, 2002, for example), that using ‘the’ is a ‘safe or safer bet’ than using the indefinite article.

The study

This article presents the analysis of the results of a study conducted among university students of English. The study focuses on the students’ perception of their own problems in understanding and using the article system in English, and their ideas about enhancing their understanding and better use of it. It also tests their perception of the problems Croatian L2 English learners face in general.

The study is based on students’ answers to the following questions:

- ☪ Do you think you have problems using the English articles? If yes, when, where and how exactly?
- ☪ What are generally, in your opinion, the most common difficulties in using articles encountered by Croatian learners of English? Give examples.
- ☪ What do you think could enhance your understanding and better use of the English articles?

The respondents were two groups of students. The first is a group of 30 fourth-year students at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. They belong to the last “pre-Bologna” cohort (academic year 2007/2008), studying to be teachers of English or translators. According to their proficiency, those students were divided into three groups. This division was based on their third-year results on language exams, and two translations into English that they had done during their fourth year. Ten students were classified as high proficiency, ten as average, and ten as lower proficiency students. In the four years of studies of English these students had courses covering various fields of linguistics. In addition, in the first three years they had practical language courses, and in the last two they had translation courses. In Translation from English into Croatian, they gained some insight into the problem of definiteness and indefiniteness and the ways these two categories are expressed in English and Croatian.

The second group comprises 26 first-year students of English at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb (future primary school teachers of English – the cohort of 2009/2010). Before enrolling at the university, they had learned English for nine years on average. The questionnaire was given to

them in mid-April, the second term of studies, in the course Communicational Grammar 2, five weeks after they started work on the articles. That work comprised a theoretical approach, as well as a number of exercises. According to their results in the course Communicational Grammar 1, the results in the course English Exercises 1, and the first continual assessment test in the second semester, they were divided into high proficiency (7), average (12) and lower proficiency (7) groups. In their first year they did not have any theoretical course in linguistics. They took a practical language course and a course in grammar in each term. In the latter, when the articles were addressed, the teacher tried to give them some insight into the problem of definiteness and indefiniteness in English and Croatian, and the way these two categories are expressed in the two languages.

Results and discussion

Answers by the fourth-year students

Answers to question number one

The respondents seem to have taken the task very seriously, and tried to give as detailed answers as possible. We can say that the high proficiency students gave rather thorough analyses of their problems, and three of them linked the problem of using the articles with the phenomenon of definiteness and indefiniteness, which is expressed in Croatian in a very limited number of contexts. The most frequent answer to question number one (11 occurrences) was abstract nouns.

The rest of the answers were: geographical names, the use of the zero article, the use of the indefinite article, the use of articles with countable as opposed to uncountable nouns, with plural nouns, with nouns pre-modified by adjectives, with *of*-phrases, with the generic use, and with exceptions to the rules.

One high proficiency student claimed that she had problems remembering rules, and that she relied too much on her intuition. The same person wrote down as her answer to question number 3 that she thought university students should not be cramming rules by heart. They should analyse texts, and teachers should explain certain usages of the articles to them. So we can state that this student's intuition might be the product of trying to remember the rules combined with analysing certain usages of the articles.

Another problem stated by students (all three groups) was overusing the definite article. Substitution errors such as this one, according to studies carried out to date, mark an advanced stage of the acquisition of the English articles. As stated in the Introduction, Trenkić (2002) suggests that using ‘the’ is a ‘safe or safer bet’ than using the indefinite article. This seems to be compatible with one of the respondents’ answer (in the high proficiency group) to question number 2, and that is: “For non-native speakers articles are ‘empty words’ which they have to use to sound more like native speakers.”

Only two students out of the thirty, one high proficiency and one average, claimed that for them articles were not really a problem.

One average proficiency student said that when the rules are clear, she has no problems. As examples for clear rules she mentions abstract nouns and of-phrases. Just like her peers who mentioned abstract nouns and of-phrases as problems, I also consider the usages of the articles with abstract nouns and of-phrases problematic. These usages depend very much on particular contexts, and sometimes on the extralinguistic context, which may not be completely clear (for example, He drove at *a* speed of 50 mph).

Answers to question number two

The fact that Croatian has no articles was mentioned as the major problem by five respondents (4 high proficiency and 1 average proficiency student). Four respondents (2 high proficiency and 2 average proficiency) suggested that non-native speakers of English often do not understand that the use of the articles depends on the context.

This statement is compatible with the previously mentioned suggestion by another respondent that for non-native speakers articles are ‘empty words’ which they use to sound more like native speakers. One average proficiency respondent said that non-native speakers use articles where they think they “sound okay.”

The other problems mentioned by the respondents are as follows:

- there are too many exceptions to the rules
- the problem with the concept of countable and uncountable
- abstract nouns pre-modified by adjectives
- omission and substitution (three advanced proficiency students and two average proficiency students used these terms, and the others expressed themselves differently, e.g.: “non-native speakers tend not to use articles or use wrong articles in wrong places”)
- the generic use
- geographical names

One respondent belonging to the group of average proficiency students mentioned that non-native speakers did not understand the difference between specificity and non-specificity. This answer is rather surprising, since the notion of specificity and non-specificity is somewhat neglected in teaching the articles, even to advanced learners. Some modern grammars for advanced learners include these categories (e.g., Eastwood, 2005; Biber, Conrad & Leech, 2002), which I find to be a very important improvement.

One high proficiency student mentioned that Croatian learners of English had problems acquiring the system of English articles because the notion of definiteness and indefiniteness is not as stressed in Croatian as it is in English.

The respondents' position is that the problems Croatian learners of English encounter using the English articles are basically the same as those they encounter themselves.

Answers to question number three

On the whole, lower proficiency students suggested either a mechanical way of learning articles (“Exercises, exercises!”), or exposure to the language (TV, reading, going to English-speaking countries), with a hope that better perception and better use of the articles will come eventually.

None of the high and average proficiency students mentioned grammar exercises or learning rules without mentioning how important it is to analyse various texts and explain the usage of the articles. I find this very important, because these respondents suggested that students should take an active role in the learning process. Some high proficiency and average students also mentioned that students should learn about various theoretical approaches to definiteness and definiteness. My position is that theoretical approach to the

problem of definiteness and indefiniteness is necessary when advanced learners are concerned.

Answers by the first-year students

Answers to question number one

All students think they do have problems using articles. Only three high proficiency students provided explanations regarding these problems. The same high proficiency students and an average proficiency one mentioned context as an important factor in choosing the right article. This answer shows at least some understanding of the interconnection between the articles and the context.

Answers to question number two

Nine students wrote down that they did not know the answer. Seven commented on the general misuse or lack of use of the articles, and two mentioned that people do not take context into consideration. Eight students wrote down that for speakers of languages without articles it is very hard to learn how to use the English articles. In these answers we cannot detect any difference in the quality of answers and understanding of the matter between the groups formed according to students' proficiency.

Answers to question number three

The answers were as follows: studying, doing exercises, reading in English and being exposed to English.

Just like with the answers to the previous question, it is impossible to find a discernible difference between the groups formed according to students' proficiency.

Conclusion

The results of this study have shown that fourth-year university students of English have better understanding of the problems they encounter acquiring the English articles than do first year students. These more advanced students have also shown better understanding of the problems encountered by Croatian learners of English in general. High and average proficiency fourth-year students provided answers that reflect their theoretical knowledge of linguistics, and their awareness of the existence of definiteness and definiteness in Croatian. The group of lower proficiency fourth-year students have shown some uncertainties regarding the problem of acquiring English articles. They also suggest that learning rules and doing exercises is the best way of acquiring the system of the English articles. Unlike them, the high and average proficiency students suggest students' active and analytical approach to learning.

We may conclude that, when university students of English are concerned, there is a correlation between theoretical linguistic knowledge and linguistic proficiency.

The first-year students participating in the study have shown a general lack of theoretical linguistic background, and, consequently, of analytical approach to the problem of acquiring the English articles. Still, three high proficiency students gave explanations regarding these problems. The same high proficiency students and an average proficiency one mentioned context as an important factor in choosing the right article. This answer shows some understanding of the interconnection between articles and context, which reflects some analytical thinking.

To avoid constant frustration by the English articles, I believe that Croatian university students should acquire good theoretical knowledge about definiteness and indefiniteness, not only as grammatical categories, but primarily as semantic and pragmatic categories. They should become aware of the fact that definiteness and indefiniteness do exist in Croatian, but are expressed in a limited number of cases.

Only when they have understood definiteness and indefiniteness as pragmatic and semantic categories, will they, in my view, be able to understand the meaning and the use of the English articles.

My intention is to conduct a similar study with the students who are currently in their first year of studies in four years' time, when they are fifth-year students.

They will be given the same questionnaire, and some exercises testing their knowledge of the articles. I also plan to conduct an interview.

I intend to apply the same procedure to the first-year cohort of 2010/2011.

My expectations are that in their final year the students will both show better use of the articles and better theoretical knowledge about the problems of their acquisition. I also expect that particular students' results in the practical part will directly correspond to the quality of their answers to the questionnaire.

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