ARE WE AFRAID OF ARTICLES?

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Abstract

English articles are frequently used function words in English. Despite their high frequency and early input, the acquisition of this very complex article system remains one of the biggest challenges for an ESL/EFL learner. It is widely known that the acquisition of articles comes rather late, due to the fact that article choice is complicated, context-specific, and very often beyond simple rules, and that articles are usually unstressed grammatical words and hence perceptually non-salient and semantically light-weight. In almost any piece of writing submitted by a non-native speaker of English, three things will often indicate that the writer is working in a second language: the choice of tense and aspect, the subject and verb agreements, and the use of articles *the*, *a*/*an, Ø*. While verb problems can largely be overcome and the mistakes in agreements eliminated by careful proofreading, the problems with articles frequently remain. The main aim of this paper is to explore how ESL/EFL students in Montenegro acquire the system of English articles and their uses. Montenegrin, unlike English, does not have a system of articles and this is why the students experience a lot of problems with this aspect of English grammar. This paper also deals with the underlying processes in terms of article accuracy and use, the deciding factors in their choice of article and why they resort to avoidance if they find a structure difficult. In this error-analysis research conducted with the fourth year students – future English teachers, the learner language was investigated and the proportion of errors in the grammatical category of definiteness was provided. It was also demonstrated how avoidance strategy occurs when students know or anticipate there is a problem with the articles.

*Keywords***:**article system, category of definiteness, non-native speakers, acquisition, avoidance strategy

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Theoretical Framework
The English Articles – Their Meanings and Functions

Very often, while teaching young learners in elementary schools, the most difficult questions teachers in Montenegro face with are the following: ,,And what is this word? Why do I have to say *It`s A book*. And what does *the* mean? How do we translate *a* or *the*?". It seems to be very frustrating for the teacher to explain these issues to schoolchildren because there is no corresponding category in Montenegrin language. And the teacher, being in trouble what to say, decides to tell them that articles do not mean much in themselves (cannot be translated into any form of their mother tongue), but only mark whether a nounis definite or not. He/she also points out that there are two kinds of articles, the definite article *the*, and the indefinite articles *a/an*, and sometimes when there is no article before a noun (for example, Ø books), the term *zero article* is used. Telling them this abstract explanation, very often schoolchildren are left worried and confused by what articles actually mean. Thus, articles represent one of the biggest problems for Montenegrin speakers.

Unlike content or lexical words (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs), articles are grammatical words that determine and indicate the reference and degree of specificity (i.e., definiteness) of a noun, which it precedes and modifies. The English articles belong to the group determiners. Leech (1994:268) suggests that "determiners are words which specify the range of reference of a noun, e.g. by making it definite (***the****book*), or indefinite (***a****book*), or by indicating quantity (***many****books*)". It means that determiners are used to identify what people are talked about in the discourse (Collins, 2005:42). Determiners include articles, demonstrative determiners (*this*, *that*, *these*), possessive determiners (*my*, y*our*, *one's*, *his,*etc), quantifiers (*a few*, *a little, some,*etc), and so on (Leech, 1994:268). When it comes to determiners, ESL/EFL students should bear in mind that more than one specific determiner in front of a noun in English cannot be used (Collins, 2005:43). For example, '*the your*mother' is not correct.

According to Quirk et al. (1991:251-265) the articles are central determiners which occur before thenouns acting as a head of the noun phrase and they are used to refer to the linguistic or situationalcontext. The noun phrase may have definite or indefinite reference depending on which of the three articles is used. Definite reference is indicated by the definite article and indefinitereference by the indefinite or zero article. The examples are:
1.   a) Have you seen **the** bicycle? (definite)
         b) Have you seen **a** bicycle (**Ø bicycles**)? (indefinite)

Apart from expressing definiteness/indefiniteness, Quirk et al. (1991: 251-265) pointed out that articles can also be used for specific or genericreference (Figure 1). For example, in 2a the reference is specific since we have in mind particularrepresentatives of the class lions and tigers. When the reference is generic it is to the whole classof tigers and not to one or some representatives of the class of tigers. *Tigers* in 2b refers to thewhole class of tigers and provides us with a general characteristic of the class.
2.   a) A lion and two tigers are sleeping in the cage. (specific)
         b) Tigers are dangerous animals. (generic)

SPECIFIC REFERENCE: Indefinite form	GENERIC REFERENCE: Indefinite, zero or definite article
SPECIFIC REFERENCE: Definite form	

Figure 1: Categorization of article usage (Quirk et al. 1991:149)

Although there are some inconsistencies in the interpretation of the meanings and functionsof the articles, most grammarians agree that articles can be used for specific and generic reference. However, such general explanations cannot tell when and which article should be used in detail. It is well known that the use of articles, in most cases, is determined by both the nature of the noun which the article is attached to and the type of reference of the noun phrase in contexts. Thus, these vague explanations might lead on to some difficulty for both learners and the researcher who intend to analyze data for errors.

The English Articles - Article acquisition

Concerning article acquisition, there are three major theoretical approaches to the analysis of the use of the English article system. The first approach is Bickerton's semantic wheel (Figure 2) for noun phrase reference, marked by the features, [±Specific Referent (±SR)] and [±Assumed Known to the Hearer (±HK)]. Bickerton (1981: 248-249) thinks that the use of English article is governed by the semantic function of the noun phrase (NP) in discourse. This semantic wheel model has been widely applied in a number of studies and research projects (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1987; Parrish, 1987).
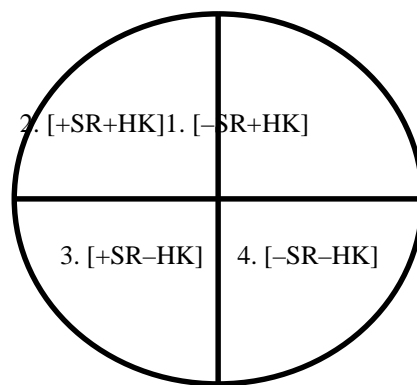

Figure 2: Semantic Wheel for Noun Phrase Reference (Huebner, 1983:133)

Based on Bickerton's semantic wheel model, Huebner (1983:132) suggested that pre-noun contexts could be classified in terms of four semantic categories:

1. [−SR, +HK], (*the,a/an, Ø*): Generics
2. [+SR, +HK], (*the*): Unique, previously mentioned, or physically present referents
3. [+SR, −HK], (*a/an, Ø*): First-mention NPs, or NPs following existential *has/have* or *there is/are*
4. [−SR, −HK], (*a/an, Ø*): Equative NPs, or NPs in negation, question, or *irrealis mode*

The second approach is Master's (1990, 1997) binary system, along with his six-point hierarchical schema designed primarily for article pedagogy. Master's six-point schema suggests systematic article instruction in the following hierarchical sequence: the distinction of countable/uncountable, indefinite/definite, pre-modified/ post-modified, specific/generic, common/proper, idiomatic/non-idiomatic.

The third approach is Gundel, Hedbergand Zacharski's (1993: 274-307) six implicationally related cognitive statuses in the Givenness Hierarchy: In focus > Activated > Familiar >Uniquely identifiable > Referential > Type identifiable.

The usage of article defined by the semantic wheel (Figure 2) is a lot more easily understood than the Figure 1 for learnersto know about the semantic environments for English articles. However, as it classifies the usage ofarticles according to semantics rather than as an illustration of each kind of article usageseparately, it is still not clear enough for us to understand the usage of every kind of article. Asthis study is to investigate the

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acquisition of articles of Montenegrin students and to identify the errors they tend to make, therefore, it is necessary for us to know in more detail the usage of all three articles.

The usage of definite article

The definite article as one of the five most frequently used words (Master, 1990: 461) indicates that the speakerrefers to a specific thing or person in mind (e.g. *The*chair is broken). Bickerton (1981:147) explains that 'definite' means the thing or people that is talked about ispresumed known to the listener, no matter if it is the previous knowledge about it (*the*man youmet yesterday), unique character of the thing or people that is talked about (*the*sun is setting),unique character in a given setting (*the*battery is dead-car do not usually have more than onebattery), or general knowledge that a named class exists (*the*dog is the friend of man).

Combining this explanation with the semantic wheel, Bickerton (1981: 147) illustrates the usage of the definite article *the* in the followingsituations. First, the definite article *the* is used in the [+SR, +HK] situations which may include:

> A. use *the* to refer to a specific person or thing, or to a specific group of people orthings which are both know byspeaker and hearer. Sometimes, people mayput modifiers or add qualifiers to indicatewho or what the speaker is referringto: *the*man you met yesterday.
> B. use *the* to refer to the people or the thing which is unique in the world: *The*sunis setting.
> C. to refer to the things or people which is unique in a given setting, both thespeaker and hearer know it: *The air in this city is not very clean.*
> D. use *the* to refer back to the information which has been mentioned above: *Aman knocked on my door. The*man was bleeding.
> E. use *the* with superlative adjectives: *That was the*worst storm of 1985.

Second, the definite article *the* is also used in the [-SR, +HK] situations. These situations arerelated to general knowledge, including:

> F. use *the* together with a countable noun in singular form to refer to the thingmore general or to refer to every member of a species: *the*dog is the friend ofhuman.
> G. use*the* together with an uncountable noun to refer to something in a generalway: *I once read a story about the*courage and strength of these wild pigs.

The usage of indefinite article

According to Bickerton (1981:147), the indefinite article *a/an* refers to something which isexpected unknown to the listener, whether by lack of knowledge (*a*man you should meet is Mr.Black), an unspecified referent (*Bill is looking for a*wife), or a referent which does not exist(*George couldn't see an*aardvark anywhere).Generally speaking, the indefinite article *a/an*is used as general reference or reference to onemember of a kind (Collins, 2005:54-55). Their usage is illustrated in a more detailed way in thefollowing:

> H. use *a/an* together with countable noun to indicate the subject which the speakeris talking about is countable: *I once read a story.*
> I. use *a/an*to mention things for the first time, and expected unknown to thehearer: *There is an*orange in that bowl.
> J. use *a/an* together with noun to refer all the people or things of a particular kind:*An*elephant is stronger than a cow.

The usage of zero article

The zero article∅ appears when a noun is used without *the* or*a/an*. For example: *Time is gold.*Generally, there are mainly four kinds of situations which require the zero article∅:

    K. express the generic uncountable concepts: *I hate ∅ cheese.*

    L. some idiomatic or conventional expressions: *play ∅football, go by ∅bus orhave ∅breakfast.*

    M. use ∅ in front of some countries, streets, languages and single mountains: *I amfrom ∅ Montenegro.; She speaks Chinese. .*

    N. use ∅ in front of the plural form of countable nouns to refer to all the people orthings of a particular kind: *∅ Tigers are stronger than ∅ cats.*

1st TASK: Collecting Data and Analysis of the Results

Based on this account of the article usage, the aim of our research was to investigate if Montenegrin students have problems with articles and if so, how these errors relate in number to other kinds of errors. For this purpose, we asked fifteen 4th-year students of English, (students of Business English at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in Podgorica) to participate in the research. Before the testing, all of the participants were not given any specific training about using English articles.Data collection was performed during regular school classes in the eighth semester of academic year 2012/2013 with a note that the results of this essay will have no impact on the overall success of the subject.

Their first task wasessay writing (the students were given the choice of three topics taken from the TOEFL-preparation books), a kind of production task, and by analyzing the errors in essays we were able to find out their frequency in the usage of articles. The topics were:

1. It has been said, "Not everything that is learned is contained in books."
   Compare and contrast knowledge gained from experience with knowledge gained from books.
2. Always telling the truth is the most important consideration in any relationship.
3. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
   Television has destroyed communication among friends and family.
   Use specific reasons andexamples to support your opinion.

They were supposed to write at least 300 words and spend about 60 minutes on this task.

The second task referred to the type of errors which we tried to categorize into three types.

Having checked the students` essays, we grouped errors into three categories: syntactic, semantic and mechanical errors (Thu, 2005). Syntactic errors were subdivided according to their appearance within a noun phrase, verb phrase or clause structure. Lexical errors were considered as semantic errors and errors in punctuation and spelling were classified as mechanical errors. The following table 1 shows us the details of each category.

Type of errors	Description of errors	Number of errors no=378	Percentage
Errors within a noun phrase	Wrong usage of articles; wrong premodification or postmodification	147 (106 article errors)	35,68%
Errors within a verb phrase	Wrong usage of tense; verb forms; voice; mood; aspect; subject-verb	59	14,33%
Errors within a clause structure	Lack of subject; wrong word order	68	16,5%
Lexical errors	Word choice and word-form choice	77	18,69%
Mechanical errors	Spelling errors; punctuation	61	14,8%

Table 1.Types and relative frequency of errors in essays

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The results show that students made more errors in the noun phrase in the article usage than it is the case with the verb phrase, clause structure, lexical or mechanical errors. As it can be seen in Table 1, a total of 412 errors we found in essays, 35.68% of errors were made within noun phrases. And within this category, the most numerous were the errors in the use of articles, which is 25.72% as compared with all other errors within noun phrases.

Therefore, the assumption that Montenegrin speakers often make errors while using articles proved correct in this part of the study. Regardless of the level of language proficiency, accuracy in using English articles is a constant problem which our speakers always face with. It can be concluded from the fact that even some excellent essays (i.e. essays with very low number of errors) may have a relatively large number of errors in articles.

However, these results proved to be in conflict with Oller and Redding's remark that "the learning of article usage goes hand-in-hand with the development of overall proficiency" (1971: 93). Based on our research and those carried out in other similar [-Article] languages, it seems that L2 students do not "automatically" internalize the rules for article use even when they become more proficient (Thu, 2005:20). In other words, articles are not taught "automatically" in the process of language acquisition.

2nd TASK: Collecting Data and Analysis of the Results

Since we have found that articles are the most common errors in essay writing, the second task wasabout the types of errors within noun phrases which fall mainly into three categories. It also revealed the reasons why the system of articles is very difficult to acquire for L2 learners whose mother tongue does not possess the elements like articles or their equivalents.

McEldowney (1977: 95-112) stated that the same errors are always made no matter if they are made by elementary or college students, teachers or scientists. She centralized the article errors within three categories in the following way:
   a. Omission*a/the/-s*
      (ex. *Put book on table. He is in difficult position. Idea is that I should get rich.*)
   b. Wrong/Unnecessary Insertion*a/the/-s*
      (ex. *It was a very hard work. He lives in the Manchester. He bought a big oranges.*)
   c. Confusion*a/the/-s*
      (ex. *The metres are the units of length. I like eating the bananas.*)

It was necessary to define these terms before the analysis was done. Omission means when one of the articles is omitted in front of a noun phrase. Thus the table 2 reveals the fact that this type of errors is the most frequent in the students` translation task. Unnecessary insertion tells that the article is used where it is not required and confusion refers to the contexts where the definite article is used instead of the indefinite article and vice versa.

Based on McEldowney`s taxonomy of articles, a comprehensive review of types of errors in the usage of *a/an/the/Ø* was provided.

Our second group consisted of thirty four 1st-year students and eleven 4th-year students who were studying English at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Department of Business English, the academic year 2012/2013. Their task was to translate in English one short passage taken from the novel *The Hound Of The Baskervilles*by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The passage contained about 150 words and 28 noun phrases. When selecting the text for translation, the contained linguistic material relating to the use of articles and expression of definiteness and indefiniteness was considered.

The passage in Montenegrin:

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„Kakva je to buka?" upita ser Henri. Zastao je i stavio mu ruku na rame da me zadrži. „ uo sam je ve ranije," rekoh. „Steplton kaže da je to krik ptice."
„Votsone," re e ser Henri dok mu je glas drhtao, „to je zavijanje psa. Šta ljudi iz kraja misle da je to?"
„Kažu da je to zavijanje Baskervilskog psa," odgovorih.
„Ima li istine u toj pri i?" re e ser Henri.
„Da li sam u opasnosti zbog takvog zla? Mislim da sam hrabar koliko i drugi ljudi ali mi se od tog zvuka sledila krv. Me utim, mi smo stigli da uhvatimo tog zatvorenika i sam avo me ne e natjerati da se vratim."
Bilo je teško pre i mo varu po mraku ali smo najzad stigli do svijetla. Stajao je na stijeni. Iznenada neko zlo ina ko lice, više životinjsko nego ljudsko, pogleda nas iza stijene. Odbjegli zatvorenik nas ugleda i kriknu okrenuvši se da bježi.

The original passage in English:

"What's 1 <u>that noise</u>? "asked Sir Henry. He stopped and put 2 <u>his hand</u> on 3 <u>my shoulder</u> to hold me back.
"I've heard it before", I said. "Stapleton says it's 4 <u>the cry</u> of 5 <u>a bird</u>."
"Watson", said Sir Henry, with 6 <u>a shivering voice</u>, "it's 7 <u>the cry</u> of 8 <u>a hound</u>. What do 9 <u>the local people</u> think it is?"
"They say that it's 10 <u>the cry</u> of 11 <u>the hound</u> of 12 <u>the Baskervilles</u>", I replied.
"Is there 13 <u>any truth</u> in 14 <u>the story</u>?" said Sir Henry.
"Am I 15 <u>in danger</u> from such 16 <u>an evil thing</u>? I think that I am as brave as 17 <u>other people</u>, but 18 <u>that sound</u> froze 19 <u>my blood</u>. However, we managed to catch 20 <u>that prisoner</u> and 21 <u>the devil</u> itself won't make me turn back.
It was difficult to cross 22 <u>the moor</u> in 23 <u>the dark</u>, but we finally reached 24 <u>the light</u>. He was standing on 25 <u>a rock</u>. Suddenly 26 <u>an evil face</u>, more animal than human-like looked at us behind 27 <u>the rock</u>. 28 <u>The escaped prisoner</u> saw us and screamed as he turned to run away.

Having analyzed and classified all the article errors, we concluded that the omission of articles is the most frequent error while translating into English.

	Omission	Unnecessary insertion	Confusion	Total number of errors
a/an	244	26	19	289
the	112	47	34	193
Total	356	73	43	472

Table 2. Types of errors
The results here showed that Montenegrin learners tend to avoid the indefinite article *a/an* more than the definite article *the*. Theirbiggest problem was the following semantic context:

[+SR, −HK] - (*a/an*, Ø): First-mention NPs, or NPs following existential *has/have* or *there is/are*

They also omitted *a/an* in front of nouns used as general reference or reference to one member of a kind, i.e. in the[−SR, +HK] semantic environments where *the,a/an,* Ø are used for generics.

As for the definite article, they omitted it more in the [+SR, +HK] situations than in the [-SR, +HK], especially when *the* refers back to the information which has been mentioned above.

As for the zero article, the students reached a relatively low accuracy rate of using the zero article although they made 356 omissions. This reveals that also students do not master the use of the zero article well. In a word, most students cannot correctly use the zero article and may not clearly know the rules of how to use the zero article.

The numbers in the table 2 are interesting because the higher grades the students are in, the fewer errors they make in omitting the articles. We could discover that eleven 4th-year students made the lowest number of errors of omission. They made 124 errors in omitting articles when the nouns / noun phrases actually required *a/an* or *the*. Concerning the other two types of errors: unnecessary insertion and confusion, it appears that the majority of Montenegrin students, even when they did use the article, have not yet reached an understanding of English article usage in discourse.

The analysis revealed that ESL/EFL students in Montenegro acquire the system of English articles with a lot of difficulty and they usually resort to avoidance when they find a structure not easy. Not knowing which article to use they tend to omit them thus creating structures and elements which are not English-like at all. Leaving a noun without definite or indefinite, specific or generic reference is the students` strategy in using articles which may lead to conclude that they are not aware of articles as the elements which bear no meaning and have no function in the sentence at all. Or they are actually afraid of articles because they anticipate that there is a problem and while choosing the required article they simply avoid it. This fear might be explained by the fact that Montenegrin learners are not familiar very well with these "little words", their meaning and function as the equivalent structure is not present in their L1.

Back to school

The results from this experiment have certainly shown thatthere are two main causes for article errors. One cause is students` insufficient understanding of the articles. This might stem from the way how they learnt the articles at school and how articles were treated by English textbooks and teachers.The only reason they do not understand them, we believe, is that no one has ever drawn their attention to them. The other cause is that Montenegrin learners, having no such category in their L1, have little practice using articles in discourse. Their lack of experience in using articles at the discourse level compounds their confusion in using them. This means that students in Montenegro, if they want to master English articles, probably need more practice to use them in discourse. Therefore, further studies should be conducted with lower-level Montenegrin learners, as well as studies performed with oral tasks, in order to build up a complete profile of article acquisition for Montenegrin learners.

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