

The complexities Polish students encounter with the use of English articles

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Abstract

English articles constitute a permanent source of difficulty for Polish students. They often complain about the tremendous burden the articles are for them to comprehend and later to use properly. In Polish the articles are used differently than in English and simultaneously cause doubts while being used.

Therefore this article will relate to this matter. The author attempts to indicate major sources of inappropriate use of articles based on various instances. In addition, the author intends to emphasize which articles (definite or indefinite) are used by students relevantly or erroneously.

The research results are juxtaposed in tabular forms indicating the most problematic issues, including the reasons of such results and subsequent teaching implications.

Key words: English articles, definite, indefinite, use.

1. Introduction.

The research conducted on the processes of learning the English articles by EFL/ESL learners abounds in available sources. There has been a lot of research dedicated to this problematic issue and still not all posed questions have been answered.

The research revolving around this challenging question of English function words, which articles apparently comprise, has been found to initially focus on isolated features of the English article system (Chaudron and Parker, 1990; Goto Butler, 2002; Jarvis, 2002; Kharm, 1981; Liu and Gleason, 2002; Mizuno, 1999; Yamada and Matsuura, 1982; Yoon, 1993) falling into two areas: pedagogy and its effectiveness and the process of acquisition.

A good number of the studies yielded important findings (Hakuta, 1976; Huebner, 1979, 1983; Tarone, 1985) were specifically conducted to examine grammatical morphemes rather than article acquisition per se.

Only Master (1987 and 1997), Parrish (1987), Tarone and Parrish (1988), as well as Thomas (1989) specifically studied the acquisition of articles.

Master (1987) was the first to point out that articles seem to be acquired differently, depending on whether or not they occur in the learner's native language. Overall, the acquisition of the definite article *the* precedes the acquisition of the indefinite article *a* (Huebner, 1983; Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989). Several studies (Huebner, 1985; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Chaudron and Parker, 1990) found an overuse of the definite article, but higher proficiency learners improved in accuracy with indefinite *a*.

Although both Master (1997) and Huebner (1983) referred to the phenomenon of '*the*-flooding' in which *the* is overgeneralized with a dramatic rise in usage, Thomas (1989) found the *zero* article overgeneralized across proficiency levels.

For learners whose native languages lack articles (including Polish), researchers (Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987; Ekiert, 2004) reported that zero dominates in all environments for articles in the early stages of language learning.

Parrish (1987) suggested an order of acquisition in which the **zero** article, the definite article, and the indefinite article are acquired consecutively.

2. Research method and procedure

The subjects of the study were 60 students. The research group consisted of the following subgroups, representing different universities: 2 private and 1 state university.

- 20 1st year students from a private higher school in Katowice (WSZOP),
- 20 1st year students from a private higher school in Katowice (Gallus),
- 20 1st year students from a state university (UP) in Cracow.

The words used in brackets reflect the abbreviations for the names of the universities the subjects originated from. Such abbreviations are used by the author of the research to more easily distinguish the groups of subjects in the subsequent parts of the article.

The subjects participated in an obligatory course of writing during 1st and 2nd semesters. The course composed of miscellaneous tasks devoted to enhancing students' writing skills, e.g. writing essays, summaries, letters, etc. After the end of 2nd semester all their assignments were collected. 30 sentences were selected for each group. They were checked in relation with their use of English articles in the following categories:

1. deletion of articles (both indefinite and definite)
2. substitution of the indefinite article for the definite article (*a* – *the*)

3. substitution of the definite for the indefinite article (the – a)
4. substitution of ‘a’ for ‘an’
5. the use of articles with plurals
6. the use of articles with uncountable nouns
7. the use of the indefinite article with adjectives

3. Test instrument.

The test material has been collected from miscellaneous tasks the subjects were obliged to follow during their course of writing, as it was outlined earlier. Below we may find the exemplary sentences and phrases in which the students made the most noticeable errors. The bracketed articles are the appropriate ones, which should be used. The articles preceding the brackets are the erroneous ones, used by students.

3.1. Private higher school (WSZOP) exemplary erroneous sentences (20 students)

1. 0 (A)Shop assistant told me that....
2. ...and each time 0 (the) player says...
3. ...or black dots appearing on 0 (the) screen...
4. In addition we put into effect 0 (the) new offer...
5. Most often by leaving the classroom for a chat with a (0)fellow teachers.
6. ...to ensure that such 0 (a)situation does not continue.
7. Alcohol is included in a (the) price and...
8. As we noticed, windows in our room had a view on a (the)crowded and dirty streets.
9. Instead of drinks and alcohol, 0 (a) restaurant was serving a warm beer...
10. Someone thought we were a (0) journalists...
11. I covered 0 (the) stain by 0 (a) chair and...
12. May I visit you at the (0) next weekend?
13. ...so I will have 0 (a) chance to try fix it.
14. I wrote it in 0 (a) formal style.
15. As a sales representative of 0 (the) company ‘Krzyś tyres’...
16. We understand that building 0 (a) parking area is expensive, ...
17. I am writing to complain about 0 (a) bad situation in your school.

18. My son told me that teachers very often left all students in 0 (the) classroom and...
19. I have booked 0 (a) windsurfing course in Italy on holiday,...
20. Moreover, they gave me 0 (a) priceless gift – a cup with printed photo of them all.
21. I saw a magical room connected with 0 (the) kitchen.
22. 0 (The)Small pot was there and something bubbled up in it.
23. ...that my stomach sent me an (0) information to my brain that I really have to eat it.
24. He improved 0 (the) whole world just by loving others.
25. 0 (The) Good example is problem with H5N1 as an big epidemic.
26. Nowadays going to work by car is 0 (a) very popular method of transport.
27. ...and wait for a bus for the (0) ages.
28. Moreover, in 0 (a, the) car we feel very comfortable.
29. Using 0 (a) car is very expensive.
30. ...during 0 (the) semester I've been studying a lot...

3.2 Private higher school (Gallus) exemplary erroneous sentences (20 students)

1. 0 (The) Employer cares about 0 (an) employee.
2. 0 (A) Very beautiful summer gives you 0 (an) amazing time.
3. ...for example in 0 (the) UK, ...
4. ...you are in 0 (a) better position than 0 (a) Polish cleaner.
5. Another point I want to discuss is 0 (a) geographical point of view.
6. ...your parents and colleagues stay in 0 (a) different place.
7. They want to earn an (0) extra money.
8. ...it is much easier to learn a foreign language in 0 (a) real situation.
9. ...we can also learn 0 (a) language in our country...
10. ...if we move to 0 (a) different country...
11. ...because in 0 (the) same part of the Earth...
12. ...if we ask any young man 0 (a) question about politics,...
13. 0 (The) Basis for this reluctance is the negative image...
14. For a (the) last few years...
15. ...get a (0) new experiences...
16. ...have 0 (a) better salary...

17. ...find 0 (a) better job...
18. ...in the countries like France, Ireland and 0 (the) Netherlands,...
19. If you know 0 (a) foreign language...
20. ...get 0 (a) job experience...
21. ...in 0 (a) group of our friends.
22. ...be raised in a (0) different environments.
23. ...you are treated like 0 (a) stranger by people you work with...
24. You can learn 0 (a) foreign language...
25. 0 (A) Happy childhood is 0 (the) main reason to have a beautiful life...
26. It is 0 (the) age when girls always take care about their friends.
27. From 0 (the) economic point of view...
28. 0 (The) Polish are very familiar people, ...
29. ...some other countries can offer us a (0) huge possibilities, ...
30. ...to make a (0) real friends in a new country.

3.3. State university (UP) – exemplary erroneous sentences (20 students)

1. It is not easy to pay back such 0 (a) loan.
2. It was something of a (0) great importance.
3. That very conduct is seriously starting to backfire, as 0 (the) situation constantly develops...
4. ...to dispense unanimous verdicts about being an (a) university student.
5. ...university students have 0 (a) wide circle of friends and acquaintances.
6. ...it is worth studying at the (0) university...
7. ...it is compulsory in 0 (the) contemporary world...
8. ...graduating cannot ensure 0 (a) lucrative job.
9. On the other hand, a university cannot ensure an (0) employment.
10. One of the most beneficial factors is receiving an (0) education.
11. I would like to discuss whether academic studying is worth all 0 (the) efforts that students put into it.
12. I could also say that she is truly 0 (a) decent person.
13. ...try to cope with a (0) huge problems or tragedies, ...
14. ...and to be ready for doing everything what 0 (a) man wants.

15. That lets us feel everything around us in 0 (a) more artistic way.
16. Most of them never took the lessons of painting, or playing 0 (an) instrument.
17. After that event, 0 (the) city council focused on ...
18. The city hired 0 (a) professional art critic, ...
19. Beyonce is 0 (a) beautiful woman in her thirties, ...
20. Graduates are better prepared for working in a (0) particular professions.
21. We could complain to 0 (the) hostel authorities.
22. I am writing on behalf of 0 (the) students from our department.
23. It would give us 0 (a) completely different view on English culture.
24. We managed to earn some money, but it is only half of an (the) amount that is needed.
25. Trembling with fear 0 (a) woman whispered to her lover...
26. Pushing 0 (the) lover out, she mumbled:...
27. There was a girl and a boy, sitting on a bench. 0 (The) Girl was listening to a song, using her headphones.
28. There were also two half-drunk cups of tea and a (an) airline ticket.
29. He lurked for a (an) offender and scared him away for good.
30. The woman, anxious about her lovely reptile, informed 0 (the) vet about it.

4. Results and discussion

The tables 1-7 clearly demonstrate the use of English articles by Polish subjects – 1st year English philology students. The tabular form was selected as the most convenient way of presenting the results of the erroneous use of articles by L2 subjects.

The results are presented based on the categorization that was outlined in section 2 and which was the following:

1. deletion of articles (both indefinite and definite)
2. substitution of the indefinite article for the definite article (a – the)
3. substitution of the definite for the indefinite article (the – a)
4. substitution of 'a' for 'an'
5. the use of articles with plurals
6. the use of articles with uncountable nouns
7. the use of the indefinite article with adjectives

Table 1 below presents the results of improper use of definite and indefinite articles by Polish subjects. In fact, they did not use any articles in this category. The percentage of incorrect use of the indefinite article is considerable in case of subjects representing higher private school 2 (56%), in contrast to two remaining groups, higher school 1 and state university students (correspondingly 43% and 36%). The tendency to avoid using any article is due either to lack of awareness of the existence of this type of article or transfer from L1. In case of the definite article, the difference is less noticeable, as the subjects seemed more familiar with the way of using this type of article.

	Indefinite (a, an)	Definite (the)
Higher private school 1	43%	40%
Higher private school 2	56%	30%
State university	36%	30%
Exemplary sentences: Another point I want to discuss is 0 (a) geographical point of view. ...during 0 (the) semester I've been studying a lot...		

Table 1. The deletion of articles (both indefinite and definite) – percentage of incorrect use

Table 2 describes the incorrect use of the definite article. Here the subjects representing all groups proved to be more familiar with the use of the definite article, as demonstrated below. The third group of subjects, state university students, turned out to be much more fluent in this respect in comparison with the first two groups of students, making no errors.

	a-the
Higher private school 1	6%
Higher private school 2	3%
State university	0%
Exemplary sentences: Alcohol is included in a (the) price and... For a (the) last few years...	

Table 2. The substitution of the indefinite article for the definite article (a – the) – percentage of incorrect use

Table 3 illustrates the use of indefinite article. There have been no observable instances of the substitution of the definite article for the indefinite article in all tested groups. It proves that in some contexts, the students managed to preserve control over the appropriate use of articles.

	the-a
Higher private school 1	0%
Higher private school 2	0%
State university	0%
Exemplary sentences: none	

Table 3. The substitution of the definite article for the indefinite article (the – a) – percentage of incorrect use

In table 4, presented below, there has been no substitution of ‘a’ for ‘an’. Actually, such result was expected before calculating the research result, as at this level of command of English both the indefinite article and its variant ‘an’ are used appropriately.

	a-an
Higher private school 1	0%
Higher private school 2	0%
State university	0%
Exemplary sentences: none	

Table 4. The substitution of ‘a’ for ‘an’ – percentage of incorrect use

Table 5 juxtaposes the results of the use of the articles with plurals. With reference to the percentage of incorrect use, illustrated below, we may apparently state that the subjects dealt with its use very fluently. Such a low percentage reflects sufficient knowledge of the use of the articles with plurals. What is also interesting is that these results are very similar in all tested groups.

Higher private school 1	1%
Higher private school 2	1,3%
State university	1,3%
Exemplary sentences: Most often by leaving the classroom for a chat with a (0)fellow teachers.	

Table 5. The use of the articles with plurals - percentage of incorrect use

Table 6 indicates the use of the articles with uncountable nouns. In their case, higher private school 2 students and state university students make a smaller number of errors in comparison to higher private school 1 subjects. However, the difference is really slight and the elaboration in this matter is rather unnecessary. It may be due to lack of concentration or too swift a construction of sentences.

Higher private school 1	3%
Higher private school 2	1%
State university	1%
Exemplary sentence: ...that my stomach sent me an (0)information to my brain that I really have to eat it.	

Table 6. The use of the articles with uncountable nouns - percentage of incorrect use

Table 7 reflects the use of the articles with adjectives. Here, the results are similar in case of higher private school 1 students and state university students. They amount between 2 and 3% of incorrect responses. However, when analyzing higher private school 2 students the result is extremely unexpected. It occurred that these students had tremendous difficulties in providing appropriate responses. Their unexpected result may be due to language transfer from L1 or the habit which they possess being exposed to other languages, e.g. German.

Higher private school 1	2,3%
Higher private school 2	56%
State university	3%
Exemplary sentences: As we noticed, windows in our room had a view on a (the) crowded and dirty streets. I wrote it in 0 (a) formal style. 0 (The) Good example is problem with H5N1 as an big epidemic.	

Table 7. The use of the articles with adjectives - percentage of incorrect use

5. Conclusions and implications

During the analysis of the study we observed the inappropriate use of the definite and indefinite articles in the first category, namely the deletion of the articles. The subjects used the avoidance strategy preferring not to use any articles in fear of producing any erroneous sentences, correspondingly (43% and 40% in group 1), (56% and 30 %) in group 2 and (36% and 30%) in group 3.

The substitution of the indefinite article for the definite article and vice versa was not inappropriate being characterized by a small percentage of omissions rather than errors.

The substitution of 'a' for 'an' is appropriate, the subjects were not tempted to make any errors.

The use of the articles with plurals (category 5) and with uncountable nouns is characterized by omissions, similarly to category 3.

The use of the indefinite article with adjectives is appropriate in groups 1 and 3, however it is highly surprising and inappropriate (56% of wrong instances of use) in group 2 due to permanent hesitations which article to use with adjectives appearing individually or preceding nouns.

There occur several teaching implications to be used in exposing students to the appropriate use of the English article system. In the first place, further exposure to miscellaneous contexts containing articles is vital. Moreover, more in-depth teachers' elaboration on the need to use articles more frequently is advisable and emphasizing omission of articles as highly inadvisable in obligatory contexts.

This study had its limitations, namely there was the constrained number of sentences/phrases exemplifying the use of articles at the researcher's disposal.

In the future study what seems to be of vital significance is collecting more oral data (e.g. via recordings, spontaneous speech during conversation classes) juxtaposing the use of articles by subjects at different proficiency levels. Such a source and subsequent results would definitely indicate and prove the subjects' needs and familiarize them more with this ongoing and challenging part of English function words, as articles obviously are.

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