SOME SUGGESTIONS ON THE EFFECTIVE WAYS OF TEACHING THE ARTICLE IN ENGLISH

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Ⅰ. INTRODUCTION

The correct use of the article in English is often a source of extreme frustration for teachers as well as for the students of English as a second language. Even recent descriptions of English do not make the task any easier, since the major modern theoretical approaches to language description have not yet developed a means of adequately accounting for the referential complexities involved in the use of the article in English. The problem is much more serious for the Korean teachers and the students, because our native language does not exhibit the article as a distinctive feature as far as the meaning of a sentence is concerned. Consequently, the

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misuse and the omission of the article is one of the most evident and common grammatical errors made, even though he/she has a pretty deep knowledge about it. Teachers of English are well aware of the difficulties involved, but attempts to deal with these difficulties often fail because of the inadequacies of most descriptions concerning the nature of the article and its usage. Yet, the merits and the evaluations of the linguistic theories are not to be discussed in detail, due largely to their rather limited usefulness to the teachers as a pedagogical tool.

The goal of this paper is then to find and suggest some effective ways of teaching the article by reviewing some of the descriptions offered from the traditional and transformational viewpoints.

II. DESCRIPTIONS OF THE ARTICLE

Most traditional accounts of the definite article in English would explain the use of *the* on the basis of (1) certain fixed rules to follow, such as in front of the names of the rivers and the oceans, uniques, superatives, idiomatic phrases, etc. and (2) "contextual familiarity" or "previous mention", generally in conjunction with the indefinite article *a*. The followings are the examples of the above :

  1) the Mississippi River, the Atlantic Ocean, etc.

  2) the sun, the moon, etc.

  3) the most beautiful girl in our class, etc.

  4) the flu, the measles, etc.

  5) the rich, the poor, etc.

  6) She plays the violin beautifully.

  7) the less we know, the happier we are.

  8) the immortal Shakespeare, etc.

    9) the first, the second, etc.

    10) Please go to the kitchen and do the dishes.

    11) Take the dog out.

    12) There once lived an old man in our town. The man was known
        for his bravery during the war.

Sentences from (1) to (9) are the examples of the former case in which we simply apply *the* according to the rules, whereas sentences (10), (11), and (12) are the examples of the latter case in which the definite article is used, if the speaker is already familiar with whatever it is the noun refers to. Jespersen (1933 : 162) argues that, "the chief use of the definite article is to indicate the person or thing that at the moment is uppermost in the mind of the speaker and presumably in that of the hearer too. Thus, it recalls what has first been mentioned······ Or else, the situation is sufficient to show what is meant." In other words, the definite article is used when the speaker assumes that the hearer is aware of or familiar with the object or the person being mentioned. Otherwise, the indefinite article is used to introduce the object under discussion.

Before reviewing some of the analyses done within the transformational framework, it is better to be made clear that the primary concern of my discussion is given on the other uses of the definite article that are not so easily predictable, i.e., the uses that exhibit a potential alternation with the indefinite article, because those uses based on the fixed rules can be predicted fairly easily without reference to semantic or presuppositional factors.

Karttunen (1968 ; 1969) has reviewed various attempts in incorporating the definite and indefinite articles into transformational grammar, but there is not much difference to be found between his and the traditional analyses. He suggests the following conditions for the use of the definite article:

(1) Anything in the immediate environment of the speaker and the hearer towards which their attention is directed becomes a discourse referent regardless of its being mentioned. For example,

13) The window is broken.
14) The floor is slippery.

The above sentences indicate that the speaker assumes that the hearer is aware of the object being mentioned through the whole context in the given environment.

(2) In every discourse there is a basic set of referents which are known to exist regardless of their existence being asserted or observed. This set is determined by the common understanding or knowledge.

15) Did you already finish the work ?

Setence (15) shows that the speaker assumes that the hearer knows what he is talking about based on the common understanding shared by each other.

(3) A discourse referent is established without any explicit introduction by inferring its existence from the existence of another referent with which the listener supposedly is famillar.

16) I was driving on the freeway the other day when suddenly *the engine* began to make a funny noise. I stopped *the car* and when I opened *the hood*, I saw that *the radiator* was boiling.

Example (16) clearly shows that a referent is not introduced through the use of an indefinite article because of the implication contained within the sentence. When a concept "car" is used, it is presupposed that there is an engine, a hood, and a
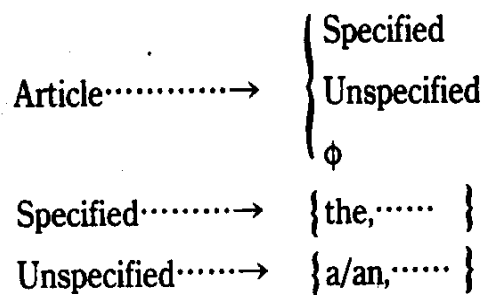
radiator based on the common knowledge.

However, he acknowledges that there are a variety of cases that cannot be dealt with the referential index hypothesis. Take the example below.

> 17)* I don't have *a car*, but *the car* is black.
>
> 18)* Mary expected *a present* from Peter, but *the present* was very expensive.

Since the definite article in the second part of the sentence in the above examples presupposes the existence of something which has just been implied not to exist in the first part of the sentence, the "previous mention" condition for use of the definite article is not workable in (17) and (18).

The conditions for the use of the definite article suggested by Karttunen (1968) are very, if not exactly, close to those of the traditional analysis. Basically there is not much difference found between his and the old accounts.

Lester is not the exception, either. His formation rule(1971 : 36) governing the article structure is:

$$
\text{Article} \cdots\cdots\rightarrow \begin{cases} \text{Specified} \\ \text{Unspecified} \\ \phi \end{cases}
$$

$$
\text{Specified} \cdots\cdots\rightarrow \{\text{the,} \cdots\cdots \}
$$

$$
\text{Unspecified} \cdots\cdots\rightarrow \{\text{a/an,} \cdots\cdots \}
$$

The only difference may be found in the vocabulary used. Instead of using the words "definite" and "indefinite", he adapted "specified" for *the* and "unspecified" for *a/an*. His description exactly matches the traditional one in the sense that the article is thought in terms of *a/an* as indefinite and *the* as definite article.

Whereas Whitman's description (1974 : 254) is somewhat different and rather interesting. He argues that the misconception in the formation of structure rules which has been preserved by many transformational linguists lies in thinking that *a/an* and *the* are essentially the same thing, i.e., the article. He views that they are quite different syntactic entities, even though they both occur within the same general structure rule such as this :

Article·········→ (Quantity) + (Determiner)

Quantity·······→{ a/an, one, two,···, some, many,··· }

Determiner···→ { NP+'s

the, this, that,··· }

In other words, the article consists of two independent constituents, quantity and determiner, each of which is optional. When the option is realized, the noun is generally quantified and when the speaker refers to a known group, whether singular or plural, a determiner is realized. While the constituent quantity has the semantic function of counting the noun phrase as well as the syntactic property of establishing whether the noun is singular or plural for the purpose of number agreement in the verb, the determiner *the* only marks the noun phrase as involving a known group. The known group may be identified by various sort of modifiers including adjectives, and the most common type of which is the modifying phrase following the noun, as shown in the examples below:

19) the man from Chicago, etc.
20) the girl who you saw, etc.

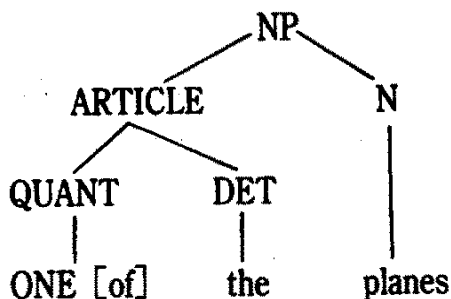This type of noun phrase covers nearly half of all instances of *the.*

He suggests that there are four possible types of article to be found in the noun phrase :

(1) **Neither QUANTITY nor DETERMINER** : Having neither quantity nor determiner, noun phrases like *boys, water, sugar,* etc. are "general" in quantity and "indefinite." When a noun is mentioned with any accompanying article, it means that we are in fact referring to its conceptual character rather than its real character. Therefore, when we are thirsty, it is better to say "May I have some water ? " rather than to say "May I have water ? " to concretize it.

(2) **QUANTITY alone** : Noun phrases with quantity alone are indefinite by having no determiner. There are two singular quantifiers, *a/an* and *one,* and quite a variety of plural quantifiers including all the plural numbers *two, three, four,* etc. and non-numerals like *many, some, all,* etc.

(3) **DETERMINER alone** : The presence of a determiner means that it involves a known group and the absence of a quantifier means that the noun is generally quantified, thus including all members of the referred-to group, although it consists of only one member. Hence, *the boys* means "all the boys" and *the boy* means "all one of him" since it is generally quantified.

(4) **Both QUANTITY and DETERMINER** : When a noun phrase has an article consisting of both quantity and determiner, an *of* must be inserted between them with an exception of *all* after which *of* is optional. Thus, the structure of NP *one of planes* is:

```
              NP
          /        \
     ARTICLE         N
      /    \          |
  QUANT    DET        |
    |       |         |
  ONE [of]  the     planes
```

The quantifier in the article plays its usual role of establishing the number of the noun phrase. Thus, sentence (21) is correct, while (22) is incorrect.

> 21) One of the planes is missing.
> 22)* One of the planes are missing.

Constraints on the interaction of quantifiers and determiners are also pointed out. They are:

(1) *A/an* cannot occur in an article which also contains a determiner. For singularity, the quantifier *one* must be selected as in (23).

> 23) One of the planes is missing.
> 24)* An of the planes is missing.

(2) Except for the quantifier *all*, quantity must be smaller than the general quantity.

> 25)* Four of the three linguists agreed.
> 26)* Three of the three linguists agreed.
> 27) Two of the three linguists agreed.
> 28) One of the three linguists was right.

(3) When quantity and determiner work together, the quantity must quantify the "head" noun, though lower nouns may not be quantified.

> 29) One of my uncle's cars is a Mercedes Benz.
> 30)* One of my uncles' cars is a Mercedes Benz.

Sentence (29) represents "my uncle, one of his cars" and (30) means "one of my uncles, his car." Since *car* is the head noun of the NP, only (29) is acceptable.

Here is what he explains about the generic uses of *a/an* and *the*:

(1) Generic *a/an* is used when it is presupposed that one is going to be fairly representative of all as in (31), by referring to a singular example.

31) A mouse is smaller than a rat.

But when the presupposition fails, the resulting sentence is anomalous.

32) ? A tree loses its leaves in the fall.

Since not all trees lose their leaves in the fall, any single example cannot represent all.

(2) Generic *the* is used when it calls forth an abstract median.

33) The mouse is smaller than the rat.

The difference between (31) and (33) is subtle. While *a mouse* in (31) represents all mice, *the mouse* in (33) represents the abstract average mouse.

Generic article *a/an* and *the* may be used only with countable nouns in that a representative sample and a median point both imply differentiability, which is not a characteristic property of mass and abstract nouns.

In respect to the article description, the transformational attempts seem to be less successful than the old ones in that they do not offer a conceptual scheme which can be easily adapted to a teaching situation, because they have converted

the usages into mechanical procedures without any explanatory value. However, it must be added that the transformational analysis opens up at least the possibility of formalized accounts of an old approach.

III. PEDAGOGICAL ORGANIZATION

Language acquisition is a habitual skill as well as a creative ability. These two aspects should always be taken into consideration when planning the lesson. Depending on the complexities involved and the levels of the students, teaching techniques and procedures should vary. I think that the practices through drills of various kinds together with detailed explanations following the sequential steps would facilitate the correct utilization of the English article.

Since the organization suggested below by Whitman(1974 : 258−261) seems to provide for ordered steps relative to each other, it is presented here as a model to be considered in terms of effectivity and productivity of desirable outcome.

Step One : Quantity. Since the concept of counting is considered to be easier to talk about than that of "known group," it is sensible to begin the learner on English quantifiers. He/she will, therefore, be restricted at this point to "count" nouns, and the syntactic lesson will concentrate on the singular/plural distinction, in which the singular quantifiers *a/an* and *one* are contrasted to the plural quantifiers *two, three, some, a lot of, all* etc.

This step may conveniently be combined with the demonstrative pronouns, to exphasize the singular/plural contrast. The teacher may set the class to pointing out and identifying various entities in various quantities about the classroom.

This is a book. [Reserving *one* for emphatic cases]

These are three pencils.

Those are a lot of books.

The resulting sentences are, in some cases, recognizably non-authentic, but achieving authenticity at the very beginning would be difficult, and it is assumed that quantification will be introduced in the first lesson or lessons.

Step Two : Generic plural. In the second step, the quantifier *all* is singled out for contrast to the generic plural, as meaning essentially the same thing. The learner is still restricted to "count" nouns and may, at this time, be given the paradigm below.

SING.	PLURAL	GENERIC
a book	some books a lot of books all books =	books

One type of drill in this step may involve conversions of the following sort:

All apples are red. ⟷ Apples are red.

All girls are pretty. ⟷ Girls are pretty.

Step Three : Non-count nouns. Non-count nouns are introduced in contrast to count nouns, via the augmented paradigm :

SING.	PLURAL	GENERIC
a book	some books a lot of books all books =	books
	some water a lot of water all water =	water

There are two point to be made. First, the mass noun should be introduced as

being semantically plural but syntactically singular. The teacher should emphasize, on the one hand, that mass nouns occur with all the non-numeral plural quantifiers, yet, on the other hand, they take no plural endings and occur with singular forms of the verb. The semantic plurality of mass nouns means that, in particular, the NP *water* should NOT be discussed as some sort of singular noun that doesn't "take" *a/an*. Instead, the noun phrase *water* should be related to the NP *all water* as generic plural. *A/an* has nothing to do with it, and introduction of *a/an* in this context can only serve to confuse.

The second point is relatively minor. The heavy practice of count/mass noun contrasts through drills with *many* and *much* may simply add another dimension to the problem, instead of making it easier for the learner to understand the real semantic and syntactic distinction involved. It might be better to use *a lot of* until the learner has mastered the count/mass distinction, which might bring an additional desirable effect : loss of the foreigner's characteristic nonauthentic use of *much* in sentences like *I have much money.*

Step Four : Determiner. In introducing the concept of determiner, there are two inter-dependent problems : how to communicate the idea of a known group, and how to communicate the meaning and function of *the*.

With respect to the former, it might be a good idea to introduce the learner to *which*-NP questions at the outset (Which books are red ?). A determiner can be introduced as something that specifies answers to such questions.

It may be better to start with the demonstrative adjectives rather than with the determiner *the*, since they are fairly universal, and consequently within the range of the learner's experience.

Which books are red ?
These books.

Then *the* may be introduced as a third type of "demonstrative adjective" (retaining, perhaps, the same terminology as used with *this* and *that*), whose meaning is neutral with respect to location, so that location, if appropriate, must be additionally indicated.

Which books are red ?
These books.

Which books are blue ?
Those books.

Which books are green ?
The books on that table.

One of the reasons for introducing *the* in this particular type of noun phrase--that is, with a following specifying phrase--is that this form accounts for close to 50% of all instances of *the*. In addition, with the specifier right there in the noun phrase, it is more explcitly defined.

When introducing the less explcit "second-mention" use of *the*, it may work out well to link it to the use of pronouns, which have, by and large, the same range of use. For example,

$$\text{I saw a book.} \begin{Bmatrix} \text{The book} \\ \text{It} \end{Bmatrix} \text{was called "Moby Dick."}$$

$$\text{A girl kicked me. I kicked} \begin{Bmatrix} \text{the girl} \\ \text{her} \end{Bmatrix} \text{back.}$$

Once the equivalence is understood, it may be explained that other things being equal, the pronoun would be used. If, however, there is some confusion as to ante-

cedent, then the noun phrase with *the* would be used.

Possessives--in all forms : *my, Mary's, the boy's*--can be introduced at virtually any point now.

Step Five : Quantity and determiner. In the fifth step, the learner is introduced to noun phrases that contain both a quantifier and a determiner. In addition to learning the formal structure of the article(i.e., to learning to use *of*), the learner must be apprised of the fact that it is the number given by the quantifier and not of the noun itself that establishes the number of the NP as a whole. Thus, the learner should be drilled on the contrast between singular and plural quantifiers in complex articles, with the students describing subsets of things in the classroom, perhaps.

One of these books is red.

One of the books on that table is blue.

Two of my books are green.

Note : Generic usage of *a/an* and *the* is probably best delayed considerably. They are not, in fact, all that commonly found, and are left entirely out of many EFL texts, which teach the generic plural alone.

IV. CONCLUSION

Language descriptions offered thus far seem to be incapable of covering all the uses of the article, particularly those of the definite article, with comprehensiveness and consistency. Many teachers have had success in teaching with the audio-lingual method which makes a heavy use of the pattern drills, while many others are also successful following the grammar-translation method which relies on the cognitive understanding. Depending on the linguistic description and philosophy, there are

a number of different teaching methods in use. But none of them seems to be significantly superior to any other. What really matters to the teachers of English is the techniques and the procedures to be applied together with the well organized sequential steps to follow, not the theory of language description.

I believe that better results could be expected when instruction (1) directs atten tion to the teaching point, (2) alerts the students to the specific differences between the definite article and the indefinite article by means of contrast and explanation, (3) follows the sequential steps, and (4) provides all possible ways of showing students how articles work in English. This means going beyond simple mem orization of rules or paradigms and utilizing pattern practices with drills of various sorts together with explanations and generalizations, brief and simply phrased, to give the students a cognitive grasp of the system.