Teaching Grammar and the Need to Ensure that Techniques Match Grammatical Structures

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Introduction

The teaching of grammar has always been bogged down by the issue of whether it should be taught explicitly or implicitly. The history of language teaching has seen numerous pendulum swings from teaching grammar explicitly to a more discovery or implicit teaching of grammar and back to didactic, teacher fronted approaches. We are aware of the Grammar Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method, and more recently the Communicative Approach – all of which presented grammar either explicitly or implicitly to varying degrees. Writing recently, however, DeKeyser (2005) bemoans the lack of a serious and concerted effort to teach grammar according to research on the nature and degree of difficulty of individual structures. He urges the academic community to “go beyond the simplistic question of whether explicit grammar teaching and systematic practice are useful for L2 grammar learning” (p. 18). The concern today should be to examine the ways different types of instruction can affect the learning of different grammatical systems. This paper will examine the problems faced especially by Malaysian students in learning one specific grammatical system – i.e. the English article system; various suggestions that have been provided in teaching grammar that may be either indirectly or directly relevant to the effective teaching and learning; and the implications to teaching grammar as a whole in the Malaysian context.

Challenges in teaching and learning the English article system

In teaching grammar, the different grammatical structures may have a range of potential implications on the choice of pedagogical treatment. DeKeyser (2005) notes that “different activities are likely to have a differential impact on different structures
characterized by different learning problems” (p.17). The English article system is a complex system which has its own specific characteristics which may influence the selection of teaching techniques. From the point of view of frequency of occurrence, the English article system - consisting of the definite the, indefinite a/an, the unstressed some /sam/, as well as the use of no articles at all, otherwise known as the zero article - is one of the most often used sets of words in the English language (Sinclair, 1991). Together, the articles the and a make up almost 50 percent of the frequency of the top five most frequent words in the COBUILD corpus. Interestingly enough, Master (1997) notes that according to percent occurrences in five selected genres, the zero article ‘occurs’ more frequently than the articles the and a and hence represents the most common type of article. While articles represent the most frequently used words in the English language, they are, however, notoriously difficult for second and foreign language learners to master and by entailment they are also difficult to teach. This is emphasized by a statement by Izzo (1999) as cited by Ferry (2007) notes that a survey of 34 professors in 20 Japanese Universities found English articles to be a frequently reported grammar problem in comparison with other common errors (p. 5).

There are many reasons why the article system is especially difficult for second language learners of English. While the English articles seem structurally simple as they consist of a few letters and appear before noun phrases, they are actually semantically complex and can convey various notions and meanings. Various concepts associated with articles such as given and new information; generic and non-generic meaning as well as specific and non-specific reference all contribute to the difficulty of mastering the article system. The article system, thus, can be seen as containing highly abstract notions that are extremely difficult to infer from the input. Additionally, phonological aspects including pronunciation and intonation also influence the interpretation of the article and its referent noun phrase. Stressed articles, for example, can bring a meaning beyond simple emphasis as a stressed definite article may indicate uniqueness or a difference of perspective. For example, in the utterance

(1) Not a report … THE report
the definite article *the* conveys more than just emphasis but a specific reference to a particular noun phrase or object. Students therefore need to first become conscious of the many different notions conveyed by articles through various means in order to expertly use the article system.

The difficulty of the article system due to its semantic complexity is further compounded by the absence of a direct single form to single function mapping which occurs at different planes. First, the article system often stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme (Master, 2002). For example, the article *the* may carry the notion of definiteness, countability and known reference in a sentence such as

\[(2) \quad I \text{ know you are looking for him, but the man does not live here.}\]

While it is easier for a student to understand one meaning as expressed by one single form as is the case of a straightforward form to function mapping, this is certainly not the case with the English article system.

Secondly, in relation to Bahasa Malaysia which is the first or native language of many Malaysians, the notions expressed by the articles do not have a corresponding morpheme in the first language. Bahasa Malaysia is a [-art] language which does not use an elaborate article system to encode noun referents. Bahasa Malaysia translations of sentences (3) and (4) below would be (5) and (6) respectively.

\[(3) \quad A \text{ young boy walked to school}\]
\[(4) \quad The \text{ young boy arrived early at school}\]
\[(5) \quad Seorang \text{ budak lelaki berjalan kaki ke sekolah}\]
\[(6) \quad Budak \text{ lelaki itu/tersebut sampai awal ke sekolah}\]

Hence the Malay words *seorang* and *itu/tersebut* are used to translate the articles *a* and *the* respectively. Unfortunately, these words are not equivalents to the English articles
used and may in fact be used to express other notions such as a pointing device as in *Budak itu nakal* or *That boy is naughty*. The absence of singular words in the first or native language to explicitly express the notions expressed by English articles and nothing else adds to the confusion that students face in comprehending the article system.

Articles are also difficult for second language learners of English because of its lack of salience. Articles are usually not phonologically stressed as like most function words they are unstressed and therefore lack phonological salience. The few situations where they are stressed are when the speaker intends to emphasise the number of the referred noun such as *There was only A boy*; or indicate importance or fame such as *It was THE game of the century* and *Are you THE Michael Jordan?* Hence, although teachers may be using articles often in their speech but because they are not stressed, they are not salient and students may not discern the articles in the input. In fact, the frequency of occurrence of articles can limit its actual use as suggested by Master (2002) who notes that “conscious rule application difficult over an extended stretch of discourse” (p.332).

Another feature of the article system is that its accurate use is entrenched in the context of the communicative situation. The discoursal characteristic of some articles such as the article *the* when used to encode second mention noun phrases as well as the inferred background knowledge of the interlocutors that determine the use or non-use of articles may also contribute to the difficulty of mastering the system. The anaphoric and sometimes cataphoric reference made through the use of the definite article may exerts a psycholinguistic strain on the interpretation of utterances and sentences which may not exist in comprehending more local and immediate references. Similarly, the article system in the English language is heavily dependent on the degree of shared information – either assumed or real – among the participants in a conversation or between writer and reader in a text. Such a situation will involve cultural knowledge and personal experiences in order to accurately encode and decode the noun phrases which follow the articles. Second language learners who lack such cultural knowledge may therefore not be able to correctly understand article use or worse fail to understand entire sentences in such situations. Idiomatic phrases, for example, are especially prone to such inaccuracies
as the use of articles in phrases such as *Kick the bucket* and *The straw that broke the camel’s back* cannot be easily explained from a semantic point of view but needs a fair deal of cultural or background knowledge.

The intricacies and complexity of the article system can be highlighted by the zero article. Master (1997) theorises that beginning learners of English who do not have an article system in their first language simply ‘use’ the zero article in early interlanguage. However, he also notes that “the zero article with a clearly identified referent occurs frequently in the speech of even highly English proficient speakers” (p. 220). It is therefore quite safe to presume that the zero article will provide beginning learners of English with a considerable amount of difficulty. The nature of the zero article further adds to the problems the second or foreign language learner of English may face with this grammatical substructure. Master (1997) discusses two kinds of zero articles based on Chesterman (1991). The first, referred to as the zero article, is described as “the most indefinite of articles” while the second, the null article is considered “the most definite of articles” (pp. 222-3). Examples of the zero article given by Master such as

(7) *The boys ate chicken*
(8) *Herbert arrived by car*; and
(9) *He was man enough to admit defeat*

all illustrate indefiniteness in the noun referents *chicken*, *car* and *man* respectively. Alternatively, the null article used in the sentences

(10) *Mr. Jones was appointed chairman* and
(11) *After dinner, we’ll watch a movie*

express a sense of definiteness due to the noun referents chairman and dinner being familiar. Although many now prefer to use the term ‘zero articles’ to refer to both the zero and null articles described here, the difference between the two types of articles will still cause some confusion among language learners.
Teaching the English article system

Various educationists and researchers have suggested broad guidelines for the teaching of grammar. Most, however, believe that grammar instruction must go beyond the teaching of the formal aspects of the language. Larsen-Freeman (2003), for example, proposed a three-dimensional framework made up of structure, semantics, and use of grammatical items in teaching grammar. Every grammatical structure can be examined from the perspective of the three dimensions. The formal dimension of this framework includes the morphology, pronunciation, orthography properties of grammatical structures. The semantic dimension refers to the meaning expressed by the grammatical structure including the concepts and notions that are associated with it. Finally, the use dimension involves discourse and pragmatics – the actual use of the grammatical item. Larsen-Freeman goes on to explain that teachers should be aware of which of these dimensions constitutes the most difficult aspect for learners – a concept that she refers to as the “challenge principle” - and consequently focus on this dimension in teaching.

Batstone (1994) proposes three grammar teaching approaches: Teaching grammar as product, teaching grammar as process and teaching grammar as skill. While these three approaches have a close correspondence to the three dimensions proposed by Larsen-Freeman, Batstone’s discussion of his three approaches to teaching grammar include cognitive and psycholinguistics processes such as noticing, structuring, grammaticizing, and proceduralization. He argues that learners must first notice the grammatical structure in the input before they are able to integrate it into their developing language systems. Activities that promote noticing by the learner are followed by activities that allow students to manipulate the grammatical structure in controlled situations. Such activities are considered by Batstone as an opportunity for students to structure their knowledge of how the grammatical structure works. While the product approach to teaching grammar focuses on the form of grammatical structures and practice within a controlled situation, the process approach emphasizes the use of these structures in a less controlled, but regulated situation. Elements present in communicative situations are systematically introduced into learning tasks in order for proceduralization or the automatic deployment
of grammar in naturalistic communicative situations to occur. The third approach to teaching grammar suggested by Batstone highlights several abilities that teachers need to encourage in students such as reflection and the ability to grammaticise or use grammar to convey their intended meaning.

When it comes to teaching the English article system, some fall back on the belief that only simple and straightforward grammatical systems can be taught and the more complex systems such as the article system should only be introduced in the classrooms for students to use or be drilled in. This approach, however, could be unfair to students as teachers may be seen to be concerned only with structures that the students may be able to figure out on their own and relinquish their responsibility when it comes to the more difficult ones. In order to chart out a more organized plan in dealing with such difficult structures, a possible starting point is to understand and anticipate some of the problems students may face with the structures. The difficulty faced by many learners in learning the English article system is not necessarily with respect to the entire system. The use of the definite article *the* in second mention noun phrases, for example, is relatively easy to understand. Hence, it is important to identify more specific problems that different learners – in this case Malaysian learners - face. In a study involving 19 university level students, several types of articles that were especially difficult were identified (Arshad, 2005). The study categorized article use into 5 categories according to a categorization scheme proposed by Huebner (1983). In this scheme, articles were categorised according to the semantic function of the noun phrases that they encode and whether these noun phrases were either of specific or non-specific reference and known or not known to the hearer. Using an elicitation instrument developed by Ekiert (2004) based on this categorization scheme, which required students to correctly complete sentences using articles when needed, the students were found to have significantly higher error rates for Type 1 articles that involve generic use of articles and Type 5 articles involving idiomatic use of articles compared to other types of articles. Some of the errors made for the Type 1 and Type 5 articles are presented in italics and underlined in the sentences as follows.
Type 1: Generic

*The favourite food of 0 lion is wild deer.
*0 Cat eats mice.
*0 Tiger is a fierce animal.
*0 French are against the war in Iraq
*0 Internet is a very recent invention

Type 5: Idioms

*In 0 1990’s, there were many protests against the Afghan war
*All of 0/the sudden, he woke up from his coma

Many of these examples show how students failed to provide the definite article the where needed. In Table 1 below, the kinds of errors that were made for all the article types are reported.

Table 1
Frequency and percentage of kinds of errors made by students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Error</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>a is used when the/zero article is needed</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Zero article is used when a/the is needed</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>11.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>a is used when the is needed</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Zero article is used when the is needed</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>38.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>the is used when a is needed</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>10.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Zero article is used when a is needed</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>14.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>the is used when zero article is needed</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>9.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>a is used when zero article is needed</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>9.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>678</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 1, we can see that of all the incorrect responses, a large percentage (38.79%) was for using zero articles when the definite article the was needed. In fact, many of the errors involved not providing either a definite or indefinite article. These findings corroborate an earlier study by Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2003) and Thomas (1989) which
found that most errors made by second language learners involved the failure to provide articles.

The findings of this study indicate that the five different types of articles have variable levels of difficulty for Malaysian ESL learners. Although the students in this study are quite proficient in the use of the articles, they still encounter problems especially with two types of articles. There are several implications for teaching that one can derive from this study which will be discussed in general in this section.

It seems quite apparent based on the results of the above study that the generic and idiomatic use of articles need to be given additional emphasis when the English article system is taught to learners. Despite the relatively advanced level of proficiency of the students in this study, they still face difficulties in accurately using these two types of articles. The English article system does not seem to have a one-to-one form-to-function correspondence as each form (a/an, the, and 0) can have several functions. As Ferry (2007) observes, in order to master the use of the English article, learners need to understand the meaning of new versus given, definite versus indefinite, and generic versus specific. Therefore, instead of attempting to match form with function, it may be wiser to focus on how different articles may be used to express these various meanings. This approach that emphasizes meaning is in line with Larsen-Freeman’s (2003) three dimensional framework in teaching grammar. With respect to her “challenge principle”, a starting point for teaching accurate article use may not be the structure or form of the article itself but rather such notions as definiteness, indefiniteness as well as generic and specific reference. This may certainly be helpful in teaching Type 1 articles which refer to generic nouns with which the students have problems.

One specific technique to highlight the notion of generic use of noun phrases is by direct contrast between generic and specific noun phrases. Hence students could be introduced to sentences such as Lions in cages are dangerous animals and The lion in the cage is a dangerous animal and A lion in a cage is a dangerous animal and asked to differentiate the meanings of the three sentences, focusing on the use and non-use of the definite
article. The use of contrast in helping learners understand grammatical concepts and meanings is not an altogether new technique as contrasting between first and second language use (Finnegan, 1999) as well as between nuances of meanings conveyed by sentences (Ferry, 2007) has been suggested in teaching determiners.

As the findings in this study also indicate that the most common type of error is to not provide the definite article *the* when it is required, students may also be given tasks in which they have to decide when to use the definite article *the* in sentences containing various kinds of noun phrases. Such a task may help raise students’ awareness of when to use the definite article *the*. While the non-use of the definite article may be because the learners feel that the communicative intent has been conveyed even without the use of the article *the*, it must be stressed to students that important information can actually be included in the definite article. Hence activities in which the use of the definite article carries specific meaning especially Type 1 and 2 articles involving noun phrases that are generic, referential definites, previous mention, specified by entailment, specified by definition, unique in all contexts, and unique in a given context should also be consciously introduced to the students. In this respect, Ferry (2007) reminds the learner not to “simply memorize rules such as: Use an indefinite article before a noun the first time it is used in a paragraph” as this may lead to inaccurate use. Rather, as mentioned earlier, he stresses that they must understand the meaning of new versus given, definite versus indefinite, and generic versus specific.

As for the use of articles in idioms, there seems no other technique but to introduce the idiom as a whole and not to focus on its parts. The use the definite article *the* in the idiom “To kick the bucket” cannot be explained as either a Type 1 or Type 2 article.

Teaching techniques that suggest presenting lexical chunks to students (Hill, 2000; Lewis, 1997) instead of grammatical structures may be effective and relevant when it comes to dealing with article use in idioms. Thornbury (2006, p. 108), however, provided an interesting classroom activity that may help in dealing with articles that “point away from the text” or immediate context and require knowledge of the cultural, global, and even universal context. His activity involves using a contextualized text consisting of
numerous noun phrases and definite articles. The texts are distributed and students are first required to underline each instance of the + noun phrase. Working in pairs, students are then required to ask each other Which noun phrase? Based on an Arab folktale used as the text, Thornbury provides the following example to illustrate the activity:

… even when the man beat it …
Q Which man?
A The man who had a donkey

… the man brought one of his sheep to the loom …
Q Which loom?
A The loom implied by ‘to weave’

While this activity may not completely address the issue of cultural and world knowledge, the second example may help students to realize that the use of the definite article the may be governed by background knowledge rather than information derived simply from the noun phrase referent it encodes.

The approach to be used – whether explicit or implicit – may be influenced by the activities used. Ferry himself has suggested a discovery-based writing unit, in which students become more competent with English articles and determiners as they collaborate in teams, test hypotheses, gather resources, and practice reading, writing, speaking and listening to determiner and article use in context. He describes how one task involves

“… investigating authentic data and hypothesizing rule formation in groups. Groups encounter determiners and begin to search for patterns and rules governing their use. Once they have discussed their hypotheses, they share their guidelines for use with the class. The class can then engage in a wider discussion of their explicit knowledge of determiner use. Finally, students will receive assistance from the instructor and will turn to expert resources, which they will have researched. Student generated examples and authentic business letter discourse are certain to raise other grammar questions, and this creates focus on form opportunities for teaching both
On the other hand, Master (2002) suggests the use of information structure to teach the English article. Using the notions of new and given information as well as the canonical arrangement or information structure involving these notions in language use, he argues that it is possible to alert students to the correct use of definite and indefinite articles. He argues that explaining this information structure to students by indicating to them that “the (or occasionally null article) occurs for noun phrases to the left of the main verb, a (n) or zero article for noun phrases to the right, and then apply other criteria … to refine the selection” (p. 343) can help them select the correct article.

The appropriate approach to teaching the article system is not easy to determine. Sometimes students may request that explicit instruction on articles be given as noted by Ferry (2007) based on his experience in teaching the language. Various researchers, however, seem to agree that an explicit approach is more effective. Master (1994) for example, believes that learners of English will benefit from explicit, focus on form instruction when it comes to the article system as learners in his study who received specific instruction on articles benefited over those who did not. He goes on to write that an emphasis on comprehensible input and communicative competence fails to result in acquisition with “aspects of syntax that contribute little to communicative effectiveness” (p. 229). The English article may accurately be associated with such a description as in many instances students would still be able to convey their intended message without the accurate use of articles. Hence, Ferry (2007) believes that “input-based, communicative, and focus on forms approaches, while valuable, fail to provide learners with the instruction they need to use English articles” (p.222).

**Implications to the Malaysian Context and Conclusion**

This paper began by discussing the need to examine grammar instruction beyond the simple question of whether an explicit or implicit approach is needed. Rather grammar
teaching should consider the grammatical system to be taught in terms of its unique structure as well as difficulty in learning. Using the English articles as an example, it has shown that Malaysian learners may find several types of articles especially difficult relative to others. Various teaching approaches in teaching grammar as well as the article system have also been examined. The discussion of all these issues highlights the need to examine how grammar can be more effectively taught in the Malaysian classroom.

The Malaysian syllabus and the textbooks used in Malaysian classes tend to treat the English article system as a whole. When it is introduced, all the different types of articles are introduced as a whole and treated in the same manner. Based on the findings of the studies discussed in this paper as well as the different ways to teach articles that have been examined, it may be much more efficient and effective to identify articles that are especially difficult for the learners and vary the type of pedagogical treatment given accordingly. It may be understandable for all the articles to be part of a general and overall initial exposure to students. However, after this has been done, the specific requirements for teaching each type of article should guide their pedagogical treatment. Larsen-Freeman’s notion of a challenge principle as well as Batstone’s three approaches to grammar teaching can be used as a general guideline in order to determine which article should be taught in which manner. For example, while second mention definite articles could be introduced using a text; notions such as specific reference and indefiniteness require a different technique altogether. This is true not only of the article system but also for all other grammatical systems containing various morphemes that express different concepts and notions such as relative clauses, prepositions, and negation.

The suggestion that grammatical structures be taught incidentally as well as in a cyclical manner should also be revisited and a much clearer explanation regarding this approach should be given to teachers in order to better organize grammar teaching in Malaysian schools. Cyclical presentation of grammar items should highlight the need to introduce the grammar items in different ways, focusing perhaps on form, meaning and use for each presentation rather than just the repeated presentation of the form alone as part of input. Similarly, the incidental teaching of grammar needs to be clarified as given the
complexity of a grammatical system such as the article system discussed in this paper, an incidental and unplanned approach may not be effective. What is clear from the discussion in this paper is that it is not only the learning of grammatical structures that is daunting, but also its teaching and curricular planning as well. These challenges, however, need to be overcome in order for grammar teaching to be more organized and consequently more effective.

References


