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TEACHING AND LEARNING ARTICLES IN ESL

BY

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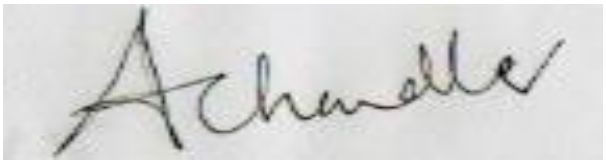

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, a Project Report entitled “Teaching and learning articles in ESL” submitted by “Anne Chandler” in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF EDUCATION in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL).

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Date: April 21st, 2014

Dedicated to my children: Rosemary, John, and Harry.

Abstract

English article use is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for both teachers and learners of English as a second language (ESL). A teacher in Yamada and Matsuura's (1982) study claimed that his students used articles "almost randomly" (p. 50) while some researchers (e.g., Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982; Swan, 2005) are convinced that the attempt to teach articles to ESL learners is a futile one. However, Master (1990, 2002) maintains that English article use has a system that is both teachable and learnable. He and other researchers (e.g., Butler, 2002; White, 2009, 2010) have proposed various pedagogical approaches for the teaching and learning of the English article system in ESL. In this paper I link research on English articles and English article acquisition to ESL pedagogy. I outline the form, meaning, and use characteristics of English articles, the difficulties associated with their acquisition, and guidelines suggested by the experts for teaching the article system to ESL students.

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Thirty-one years ago Peter Master (1983) presented a paper at the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) convention in Toronto. The presentation outlined the numerous rules associated with English article use and gave some ideas for teaching the correct usage. Twenty-five years later, at a presentation at the 2008 TESOL conference,

> dozens of ESL teachers crowded into a small conference room and aired their frustration. They expressed feeling intimidated by the complexity of the article system as well as a lack of confidence in current pedagogical materials. (White, 2010, p. 2)

This sentiment is endorsed by the views of second language acquisition (SLA) researchers Gass and Selinker (2008), who note that "the English article system... appears to be virtually impermeable to instruction" (p. 323). In contrast, Master (1994) suggests that English article use has a system, which is both teachable and learnable. Indeed, he and others have shown that "focused instruction (i.e., systematic presentation in a hierarchy of manageable segments with built-in recycling) can make a difference and can help learners improve their use of articles" (p. 250). Other researchers (e.g., Butler, 2002; Hinenoya, 2008; White, 2009, 2010) have also proposed and empirically tested various pedagogical procedures for the teaching and learning of the English article system in English as a second language (ESL).

In this paper I link research on English articles and English article acquisition to ESL pedagogy by addressing the question: What advice do experts in linguistics, second language acquisition, and grammar pedagogy offer for teaching the English article system to English as a second language learners? The review focuses on:

a) Linguistic descriptions of form-meaning-use (Part I)

b) Studies of the acquisition of English articles by ESL learners (Part II)

c) Investigations of different approaches to teaching English articles (Part III)

By studying the research literature in depth, I aim to provide ESL teachers with a greater understanding of English articles and recommendations for effective instruction. I will begin the discussion by considering the question of whether it is important to focus instructional time and effort on teaching articles.

Are articles important?

There is some dispute about the importance for second language (L2) learners to use definite and indefinite articles correctly. Ekiert (2007) argues that "articles appear to be the kind of structures that: (a) are particularly unnoticeable (often reduced to schwas in speaking), [and] (b) have no, or consistently little, communicative value and contribute minimally to the principal meaning in focus" (p. 6). This view is contradicted by Pica (1983), who showed that in the situation of requesting and giving directions, "communication broke down when articles were used in reference to items in one participant's experience but not in another's" (p. 231). Master (1997) has argued that articles should be included in the ESL curriculum because of their frequency in the input. As Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) wrote, "Articles are everywhere…" (p. 289). Not surprisingly, article errors are also very frequent. Pica (1983) attributed the high error rate to the over-use of textbook study at the cost of discourse-related practice. Thus, I believe there are strong arguments for encouraging teachers to help learners understand and use articles with greater accuracy.

Part I: Form, Meaning, and Use of the English articles

The English articles comprise a system that consists of markers indicating definiteness and indefiniteness. These forms function as determiners in a noun phrase. According to Larsen-Freeman (1997), in order to obtain a complete description of any grammatical form, it is necessary to consider morphological and syntactic form, semantic meaning, and pragmatic use (p. 2). The first two categories relate to accuracy of form-meaning mappings whereas use deals with the appropriate selection of forms in a given textual or situational context.

The Forms of English Articles

The article system consists of indefinite *zero*, indefinite *a/n*, definite *the*, and the definite *null*. The indefinite article pronounced as *a* [ə] is used when the noun referred to begins with a consonant but as *an* [ən] when the noun begins with a vowel (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010, p. 468). However, the use of *a* or *an* is dependent upon the sound of the initial letter of the noun to which it refers, e.g., *an* honour, *a* hope; *an* umbrella, *a* union. The indefinite article *a/n* is only used with singular countable nouns. The definite article, *the*, is pronounced [ðə] when used with nouns beginning with a consonant, e.g., *the* tree ([ðə] tree) or [ði] when used with nouns beginning with vowels, e.g., *the* apple ([ði] apple) (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010, p. 468). It may be noted that *the* is pronounced [ðə] when used with some nouns beginning with *u*, e.g., "union", where the initial vowel is pronounced [ju]; and [ði] in the case of up, [ʌp] as in "upstairs". This is because the form chosen is based on phonetics rather than on article-noun initial vowel/consonant agreement, e.g., [ðə] horse, [ði] honorable. *The* may also be pronounced [ði] when the speaker wishes the following noun to be emphasized, e.g., "That's *the* [ði] Ms. Bayrakdarian", (otherwise the definite null article θ_2 is used with proper nouns). The

indefinite *zero* article (θ_1) occurs with plural count nouns and non-count nouns, e.g., houses, cheese (see Table 1.)

Table 1.

Form-meaning-use of English articles

Form	Meaning	Use	Examples
a/n [ə], [ən]	Noun is unknown to the listener (or reader.	i) introduce a new specific noun ii) refer to an unspecified noun iii) generic reference	i) I saw *a* friend yesterday. ii) I'd like some kind of *a* sandwich for lunch. iii) *An* apple grows on *a* tree.
the [ðə], [ði]	Noun is known to speaker and listener (or writer and reader)	i) previous mention ii) entity is assumed known iii) generic reference	i) I have a dog. *The* dog's name is Bella. ii) (In someone's house): "Where is *the* bathroom?" iii) *The* boa constrictor has vestigial appendages.
zero (θ_1)	Plural count nouns. Non-count noun. (Least definite article)	Generic reference	θ_1Houses are expensive I like $\theta_1$cheese
null (θ_2)	Singular proper noun. (Most definite article)	Generic reference.	θ_2Bonnie lives next door.

The Meaning of English Articles

Whereas the forms of the articles are easily stated and easily learned, the selection of the appropriate form to express a specific meaning is much more challenging for learners due to the multiple and often abstract linguistic meanings they can express, for example, (in)definiteness, (non)specificity, and countability (Ekiert, 2007). In the following sections, I will discuss the concepts of definiteness, specificity, referentiality, and indefiniteness.

Definiteness

The article *the* is used to signal definiteness. As long ago as the second century A.D., Apollonius Dyscolus linked familiarity with definiteness (Lyons, 1999). Searle (1969) believes that identifiability is the basis of definiteness, (as cited in Lyons, 1999, p. 253) although Lyons maintains that familiarity is a component of identifiability. Lyons also asserts that association and the concept of uniqueness defines definiteness, e.g., *the* author of a book. Thus, definiteness may be defined on the basis of one or more of the following: identifiability, familiarity, association, and uniqueness. Consider the following sentences:

1. I've just been to *a* wedding. *The* bride wore blue.

    a) The speaker introduces a referent(s) to the hearer.

    b) The speaker "instructs" the hearer to locate the referent in some shared set of objects.

    c) The speaker refers to the totality of the objects or mass within the set, which satisfy the referring expression. (Toader, 2010, p. 15)

Hinenoya, (2008) calls this "instantiation", that is, "bringing the hearer into an accessible space" (p. 39). This is consistent with Hawkins' Location Theory in which *the* is used when the speaker/writer " invites the listener or reader to locate the referent by using provided or assumed known cultural, situation, structural, or textual information" (Liu & Gleason, 2002, p. 7). "A

wedding" evokes a set of connecting images such as: bride, groom, special clothing, bouquets, rings, bridesmaids, groomsmen, and guests. The speaker believes the hearer is familiar with this set of images, including the fact that there is usually only one bride at a wedding, that is, she is unique within the set and therefore identifiable. Therefore, the noun phrase (NP) "*the* bride" is definite although the hearer cannot identify the actual "bride" (associative anaphoric use of *the*).

2. *The* professor asked *the* teaching assistant to write *the* page numbers on *the* whiteboard (Hinenoya, 2008, p. 39)

The above sentence evokes an image of a classroom in which there will be a number of people - the students - as well as *the* whiteboard, chairs, tables, etc., and *the* professor with *the* teaching assistant. This image is familiar to students. The contents of this image are associative and make a "set" that the hearer is assumed to be familiar with.

3. "I wonder who *the* guest lecturer will be today."

Similarly, an associative set or conceptual framework is created in the mind of the hearer/reader by the speaker/writer's use of the definite article, *the*. Despite the fact that neither the speaker nor the hearer is familiar with *the* guest lecturer, *the* lecturer is unique and identifiable, and therefore definite. Even if there were more than one guest lecturer, *the* lecturers are differentiated from the audience by their uniqueness and are therefore definite.

4.We're looking for *the* vandals who broke in yesterday. (Lyons, 1999, p. 10)

5. Beware of *the* electrified wire! (Lyons, 1999, p. 10)

In sentence 3 all *the* vandals are being looked for. In sentence 4 one must be wary of the whole length of the wire surrounding a particular area. Therefore, Lyons (1999) proposes that, in the case of plural and non-count nouns, definiteness involves inclusiveness as well as uniqueness. Epstein (2002) describes the definite article as a marker of accessibility, that is, it

indicates the availability of an access path, thereby guiding the hearer/reader in constructing or retrieving discourse referents. Semantically, therefore, *the* ("definiteness") can be defined on the basis of: familiarity, associativeness, identifiability, uniqueness, inclusiveness, and as an access-marker to the referent (accessability). Hinenoya (2008) suggests that we should call *the* "the article***s*** *the*" because of the many different uses (p. 14).

Specificity and referentiality

Specificity and referentiality are two terms associated with definiteness. The difference between the two terms is sometimes unclear. In many grammar texts, the idea of specificity has to do with distinguishing a specific entity from a general entity, whereas referentiality is concerned with referring (pointing) to something. Referential use, according to Toader (2010) occurs "when a speaker intends to communicate something about a particular individual and expects the hearer to identify which individual is intended", but it is a specific use "when the speaker, though he has in mind a particular individual, does not require the hearer to realize any particular individual" (p. 22).

Indefiniteness

Indefiniteness is signaled by the use of the article *a*/*n*. Historically, the indefinite article *a/n* derives from the number *one* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 271). According to Biber, Conrad, and Leech (2002) the indefinite article *a/n* is used only with singular countable nouns. Leech and Svartvik (2002) define the indefinite article thus: "…if we want to express indefinite meaning without any added meaning of amount, etc., we use the indefinite article *a/n* (with singular count nouns), e.g., 'Would you like *a* drink?'"(p. 52).

The indefinite article *a/n* can be used to introduce a new specific entity into the discourse, e.g., "Last night *an* intruder stole a priceless painting by Van Gogh. The man entered through…."

or is used where the NP is non-specific, e.g., "I'm always on the look-out for *a* bargain.", where any bargain will do.

The NP is indefinite when it is new, unfamiliar, not identified (or not assumed identified) to the hearer, i.e., [-HK]. According to Heubner (1983) there are referential indefinites (other than first-mention nouns) as well as non-referential indefinites. There are also indefinite generic nouns, as well as indefinite plural count nouns, which use the indefinite zero article θ_1:

1. [+SR][-HK]: *a/n*, θ_1 (first mention noun, referential indefinite) e.g., (a) Rosie borrowed *an* interesting book from the library today; (b) I like reading θ_1 non-fiction.
2. [-SR][-HK]: *a/n*, θ_1 (non-referential indefinites) e.g., (a) John wants *a* new car; (b) Harry is looking at θ_1 houses.

This can also be shown as the intersection of specificity and indefiniteness to form both referential and non-referential indefinites (see Table 2).

Table 2.

The intersection of the specificity of a noun with the indefiniteness of the same noun

Referential indefinites [+SR][-D]	I met *a* soprano from *I Choristi* last night.	*I Choristi* is a specific Choir, however, the soprano who was met by the speaker is (assumed) unknown by the hearer, therefore indefinite.
Non-referential indefinites [-SR][-D]	I dream of buying *a* stone house in the countryside.	Neither a specific house, nor known to the hearer.

Although Heubner (1983) classified a context based on referential indefinites, Lyons (1999) did not commit to this concept, stating that indefinite NPs only have the *potential* to refer (p. 166). However, Toader (2010) explains that even though a hearer may not be able to identify the

particular referent in a set, the hearer is able to understand the meaning conveyed through the indefinite description, thus there is referential knowledge, e.g., I'm going to buy *a* dress tomorrow. You'll love the design (a specific dress, but unknown to the hearer, i.e., a referential indefinite: [+SR][-D]). Contrast this with: I'm going to buy *a* dress tomorrow. I have to get one for work (a non-specific dress unknown to both hearer and speaker, i.e., non-referential indefinite: [-SR][-D]).

The zero vs. null article

Paradoxically, noun phrases with no article (or other determiner) can be viewed as highly definite, e.g., proper names (*θ* London), or as indefinite, e.g., with non-count nouns (e.g., *θ* water). Some scholars refer to the lack of article with proper names as the null article, reserving the term zero for non-count nouns (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Yotsukura, 1970). Most ESL textbooks, however, do not make a distinction between *θ* that occurs before a proper or a common non-count noun.

The Article System

The articles are not separate grammatical items but rather parts of a coherent system. Master (1997) views the articles as a continuum that moves from the most definite to the least definite as follows: NULL > THE > A/N > ZERO. A different way of conceptualizing the article system has been proposed by Heubner (1983, 1985), based on Bickerton (1981). He integrates the different meanings for the definite, indefinite, and zero article into one framework. Thus, any use of article can be classified into two discourse conditions: (a) whether or not the noun is a specific referent [+/- SR] and (b) whether or not the referent is assumed known by the hearer (or reader)[+/-HK]. Combinations of these two conditions create four basic noun phrase contexts for article use (see Table 3).

Table 3.

Noun phrase contexts for article use

[+SR][+HK]	*the*	(a) unique (b) referential definite (c) previous mention	(a)*The* moon is full tonight (b) Look at *the* Alfa Romeo over there (c) I have an apple for lunch. *The* apple is red
[+SR][-HK]	*a/n, ~~θ~~*	(a) first mention noun (b) referential indefinite	(a) I borrowed *an* interesting book from the library today (b) I like reading *~~θ~~* books
[-SR][-HK]	*a/n, ~~θ~~*	non-referential indefinites	(a) John took *a* sandwich for lunch (b) John ate *~~θ~~* cheese
[-SR][+HK]	*~~θ~~, a/n, the*	generic nouns	(a) lions are carnivorous (b) a lion has a mighty roar (c) the lion is lord of the plains

Thomas (1989) later added idiomatic expressions, and other conventional uses as a fifth context, e.g., (a) *all of* ***a*** *sudden*, he woke up; (b) *in* ***the*** *1980s*, there weren't many cellphones; (c) meeting ***~~θ~~*** *face to face*.

The Use of Articles

To understand how articles are used, we can consider two different types of information. One is by studying the frequency of articles in large corpora (i.e., collections of many different types of texts), and the other is to examine their function in individual sentences and texts. Two of the main reasons for the difficulty in both teaching and learning English articles are their frequency

and their complexity of use. The Oxford English Corpus (OEC), which currently contains over 2 billion words, places *the* in first place as the most frequently used English word and *a/n* in sixth place. Master (2003), in his study of the three articles (*zero/null*, *the*, and *a/n*) from five genres of written English, found that the *zero/null* (*θ)* article occurred more often than *the*, and so should be placed in first position. Therefore, he estimated that the learner has to make an article choice every fourth word or so. Analysis of any article in context makes it very clear that they are not one-form-to-one-function words. The multiple meanings of the definite article are illustrated in Table 4, which presents the categories of use for the definite article outlined by Hawkins (1978).

Table 4.

Uses of the definite article (Location Theory by Hawkins 1978)

Type of use	Definition	Example
Anaphoric use	Use of *the* for a second mention noun	"There's a book on the table. Can you bring me *the* book, please?"
Visible situation use	Both the speaker and hearer can see the item	"Please would you pass me *the* salt."
Immediate situation use	As in anaphoric use but the object may not be visible	"I'm just going to *the* bathroom."
Larger situation use relying on *specific* knowledge	Common knowledge.	"I'm meeting Jack in *the* pub tonight."
Larger situation use relying on *general* knowledge,	General knowledge.	*the* moon.
Associative anaphoric use	Use of *the* is related to a previous noun rather than being the same noun	"We went to a wedding on Saturday. *The* bride wore blue."
Unfamiliar use in NPs with non-explanatory modifiers		My husband and I share *the* same secrets.

These uses vary from anaphoric use, to the use of modifiers, which then require the definite article because of a descriptive element incorporated within the NP. There is a further category applying cataphoric use, e.g., After he smashed the window, *the* burglar climbed into the house. The other five categories of visible situation use, immediate situation use, larger situation use (specific knowledge), larger situation use (general knowledge) and associative anaphoric use can be explained as a gradually expanding "set" (Epstein 2002; Hinenoya, 2008; Toader, 2010).

Hinenoya (2008) describes anaphoric use as "the blueprint" of the use of the definite article *the* and the indefinite article *a/n* for grammar text writers, giving the reason for its proclivity as its relative ease of explanation, learning, and testing, in an otherwise very complex sphere (p. 2). The indefinite article a/n, however, appears less complex (see Table 5).

Table 5.

Uses of the indefinite article

Type of use	Definition	Example
Numerical	*a/n* is analogous to *one*	I have two sons and a daughter.
Anaphoric use	Use of *a/n* for first mention of the NP.	*A* cat is sitting on my fence. (The cat is licking its paw).
Non-referential indefinite	The speaker cannot identify the referent.	There's *a* man in the ladies washroom! (I don't know him.)
Non-specific NPs describe rather than refer	The hearer understands the meaning conveyed, but does not know what the mess actually looks like.	This house is *a* mess!
Referential indefinite	The speaker can identify the referent, but the hearer cannot.	*A* man kissed me in the garden. (I'm not telling who!)

Generic indefinite *a/n*	Neither the speaker nor the hearer can identify the particular referent, only the set to which it belongs.	There's *a* fly in my soup.
Generic indefinite *θ*	(a) Plural count nouns (b) Non-count nouns	(a) Bonnie and Leah are *θ* teachers. (b) Jamaica's beaches have white *θ* sand.

The anaphoric use of *a/n,* in which the indefinite article is used for the first mention of a noun (and *the* is used subsequently), is one of the most widely cited uses of the indefinite article *a/n* in grammar texts (Yoo, 2009). The other is its historical association with the number one (Celce-Murcia & Larsen Freeman, 1999, p. 271), e.g., I have two apples and *a* (one) banana in my lunch bag. Other uses are found in Table 5. Difficulties for ESL learners are associated with referential indefinites and the concept of countabilty and abstract NPs.

Part II: Second Language Acquisition of English Articles

The Natural Order Hypothesis proposed in 1985 by Krashen states that there is a consistent order for the acquisition of grammatical morphemes in L1, and that the acquisition of an L2 follows the same order, regardless of the L1 and the age of the learner. Through their research with L2 learners, Master (1987) and Parrish (1987) found that the indefinite article *a/n* is acquired later than the definite article *the*. This is consistent with the research of Thomas (1989), who investigated the acquisition of articles by native speaking (NS) children and found the same pattern. However, Master (1987) found that the ease of acquisition of article use is dependent upon the learner's L1 – those ESL learners whose L1 contain articles ([+art], e.g., Spanish) have a distinct advantage over ESL leaners whose L1 is article-less, ([-art], e.g., Japanese). More recent investigation into English article acquisition by learners from an article-less L1 has been

carried out by (amongst others), Ekiert (2007) who studied Polish speakers; Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004) who studied Russian and Korean speakers; and Snape (2005), who studied Japanese speakers.

Chaudron and Parker (1988) found that the use of *a/n* emerged only after the use of *the* was assimilated. Similarly, Ekiert (2007) concluded that *a/n*, *the*, and *θ* are not acquired simultaneously, but that *the* is acquired first, followed by *a/n*. She also concluded that generic and idiomatic article usage is the most difficult to acquire. This is consistent with the work of Liu and Gleason (2002), who confined their study to [+SR, +HK], the referential definite or nongeneric *the*. When someone uses *the,* s/he is sure that the reader or listener is able to locate the referent, which has either been provided (anaphoric/previously mentioned) in a textual context, or which is assumed to be known in a cultural, situational, or structural context. Liu and Gleason's results suggest a hierarchy of difficulty for the four types of usage, with cultural use being the most difficult for ESL learners to grasp, followed by textual, then structural; the direct situational use of *the* appeared to be the easiest concept for ESL learners.

This seems logical, for if we consider the sentence: "I've just been to a wedding. *The* bride wore blue" and we conceptualise a wedding with the associational set of: church, pastor, groom, bride, parents, family, friends, limousine, etc., we are biased towards our cultural heritage. Another culture will be biased in a different way and have a different associative set, thus making understanding more difficult. As Hinenoya (2008) points out, "achieving the meaning of language, whether in production or in reception, is heavily tied to … conceptual elements that accompany the grammar of language" (p. 7). However, in a non-abstract situational context, where objects can be seen and touched, understanding is likely to be facilitated.

Butler (2002), in her analysis of the use of metalinguistic knowledge of Japanese ESL students in their selection of articles, found that the selection of the incorrect article was often caused by problems with noun countability. Butler (2002) gave cloze tests requiring the insertion of the correct article. From interviews carried out after these tests, in which the participants gave the reasons for each of their choices, she deduced that the rules associated with article use had not been conceptualized correctly. For example, the participants said such things as "I did not insert anything here because I thought culture is not countable" and "I was not sure whether or not history is countable…. Can it be countable?" (p. 475). Butler (2002) also found that the greatest number of ESL learner errors were caused by the failure to detect one of, or both the specific referent [+SR] and hearer's knowledge [+HK], although the detection of [+HK] seemed to cause the majority of problems.

Ionin, Ko, and Wexler (2004) replaced the classification scheme of [+/- SR/HK] with definiteness (+/- D) and specificity (+/- S). Definiteness is viewed as reflecting the state of knowledge of ***both*** the speaker and the hearer, whereas specificity reflects the state of knowledge of the speaker ***only.*** Ionin, Ko, and Wexler went on to propose the Fluctuation Hypothesis, positing that ESL learners, especially those from an article-less L1, will some times favour definiteness and other times favour specificity when making an article choice. They found a consistency in the errors that ESL learners make, which they determined as the development of an interlanguage. On the basis of his research, Master (1987, 1997) concluded that complete acquisition of the article system occurs late in interlanguage development and that learners may pass through several transitional stages before achieving mastery of the target structure. For example, many researchers (e.g., Master, 1997; Trenkic, 2008) have noted the

overuse of the article *the*, followed by underuse, before attaining a proficiency level at which appropriate use is the norm.

Similarly, researchers have reported an overuse of the zero article in the early stages of L2 acquisition, especially for those learners whose L1 lacks articles (Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989). This led Parrish to conclude that ~~*θ*~~ is acquired first, followed by *the*, and then *a/n*. However, Trenkic (2008, 2009) believes that article omission is due to misinterpreting articles as adjectives, which are then omitted as being pragmatically redundant. She calls this the Misanalysis Hypothesis, in which the learner is not aware of the form-meaning-use of the grammatical feature ~~*θ*~~. If instructors have a better understanding of the difficulties that ESL learners face, with regard to the concept of article use, they are better equipped to facilitate the acquisition of the English article systems in their students.

Part III: Teaching English Articles

Grammar texts

The article system is so complex that many grammar texts either deal only with anaphoric use and count/non-count uses of articles, or they overwhelm the learner with every possible rule and exception.

Berry (1991) points out three types of problems in grammar texts/work-books:

i) Incorrect or misleading formulations:

e.g., stating that "the indefinite a/an really means one" (Swan 2005, p. 364) and, more seriously, that first mention requires the use of *a/n*, and the second mention requires the use of *the*.

ii) Unwarranted emphasis on certain usage types:

Again the major problem is with direct anaphora. As Hinenoya (2008) states, "Because of its clarity, both teachers and learners tend to believe this anaphoric explanation to be the blueprint

of what the article *the* is all about" (p. 2). It is interesting to note that Pica (1983) states that this type of usage occurs more frequently in grammar texts than in real life discourse (p. 232).

iii) The lack of variety in formats.

Yoo's (2009) main criticism of the grammar texts and work-books he reviewed, is that much is left to the students to interpret and learn for themselves. Exercises in grammar texts mostly consist of one or two sentences of the cloze type that do not allow for the possibility of multiple alternative answers. Consider, for example, the coverage of the article system found in two popular ESL textbooks.

The Fundamentals of English Grammar (Azar, 2003)

In this grammar text, the difference between *a* and *an* is taught using fill-in-the-blank single word exercises, and copying from a dictionary after the rule has been explained. This is followed immediately by count/non-count noun classification using *some* as the deciding factor, e.g., *some* fruit (therefore fruit is a non-count noun). Abstract non-count nouns are illustrated by the use of idioms (the most difficult concepts for ESL learners). *The* and *a/n* are contrasted in longer passages, but most exercises consist of single words or sentences. There are many lists and rules of usage in this grammar text, and although there are some examples in dialogue form, they are given instead of elicitated. The whole gamut of the English article system is addressed in one section.

Focus on Grammar

In unit 2 of *Focus on Grammar 1* (Schoenberg & Maurer, 2012), the emphasis is on singular, plural, and proper nouns, despite the fact that research has shown that (a) the definite article *the* should be taught before *a/n* and (b) followed by the *θ* article. However, in this grammar text, conversations are encouraged. In unit 19 the count/non-count noun difference is illustrated in

conversations about food items and ordering in a restaurant. In unit 20, *a/n* and *the* are contrasted in conversations about clothes. However, research has shown that *the* and *a/n* should not be taught as contrasts, but separately - that the concept of definiteness (*the*) should be introduced first, then indefiniteness (*a/n*).

In *Focus on Grammar 3* (Fuchs, Bonner, & Westheimer, 2006), the learner listens to a passage about the Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl. Proper nouns, singular and plural nouns, and count/non-count nouns are emphasized and rules exemplified in the text. An excerpt from an interview with a lone yachtswoman provides an exercise for the learner to practice differentiating between types of nouns. Encouraging the students to research further provides authentic discourse related activities (pp. 240-248). The coverage of the definite and indefinite article *a/n* and *the* includes written and oral discourse, focused practice, and information-gap tasks (pp. 249-261).

Both *Focus on Grammar 1* and *3* appear to address the acquisition of the English article system by ESL learners in more meaningful ways than the *Fundamentals of English Grammar,* and by the grammar texts that Pica (1983) reviewed nearly 30 years ago. However, they do not appear to have availed themselves of the insights from research about the acquisition of articles as a system.

What should be taught

White (2009) suggested the following sequence for teaching English articles:

(a) determination of definiteness before determination of count status; (b) consideration of discourse context to determine in/definiteness through negotiation of meaning;

(c) conceptualization of countability, especially the use of the same noun in different contexts (p. 28).

Research has shown that definite *the* is acquired before the indefinite article *a/n* (e.g., Master, 1997; Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989); therefore, pedagogically, this is an appropriate starting point. Hawkins (1978) formulated the Location Theory, which attempted to explain the uses of nongeneric *the,* identifying eight types. According to Hinenoya (2008), many of these uses can be understood as schemas, which she defines as "a body of knowledge that is acquired through experiences in life and is stored (to be accessed) in our mental dictionary" (p. 2). She asserts that teachers can restore pre-existing schemas and build new schemas in the minds of their students.

An example of the consideration of discourse context to determine (in)definiteness through negotiation of meaning is found in Sauro, Kang, and Pica (2005). They paired learners who first read a passage based on a previously read text or prior discussion, so that it was familiar to the students. Each partner then each read a slightly different version of the passage, e.g., one version used *a/n* with a noun, the other version used *the*. Through negotiation, they chose a noun phrase and justified their choice of article. Then, without looking back at their choices or the passages read, they completed a cloze version of the original passage. Finally, they re-read the original given passage, compared it with their cloze version, identified discrepancies and corrected their text. This gave them the opportunity to notice the gap and receive corrective feedback (see example from Sauro et al., 2005 p. 8).

Master (1988) declared that countability "appeared to cause the most persistent difficulty in article acquisition" (p. 181). White (2009) states that countability has more to do with context than more practical considerations, and recommends discourse analysis exercises for the student: "..focusing on what it means conceptually for a noun to be count or noncount can move learners away from inflexible classifications of a word as countable or uncountable toward a richer and more detailed interpretation of texts and discourse" (p. 29). Activities could include the

discussion of nouns used in different contexts, e.g., *It's a wonderful life* vs. *Life is beautiful*. Master (1997) states that the "rules of article usage are much less useful to the learner than extensive exposure to natural language" (p. 228). An example taken from Master (1997) makes the count/non-count distinction using *a/n* or ~~*θ*~~

> Making _ chair.
>
> _ carpenter uses a number of tools and products in making _ furniture. In making _ chair, for example, he uses _ saw to cut _ wood and _ chisel to shape it. He uses _ hammer to drive in _ nail or _ peg, or _ screwdriver when _ screw is required. He also uses _ glue to give the chair _ strength and clamps to hold the pieces together. When the chair has been assembled, it is first sanded with _ sandpaper and _ steel wool. Finally, the chair is painted several times with _ paint or _ lacquer, lightly sanding between each coat (p. 231).

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) stress the importance of teaching noun classification for article choice, whilst Miller (2005) emphasizes the importance of using a learners' dictionary of English which "will give the countable or uncountable status of a noun and, usually, an example of its usage" (p. 81). Berry (1991) suggests cloze exercises with both the article and noun missing so that the learner associates articles with nouns. This can be followed by cloze sentences in which the noun alone is missing, thus emphasizing the link between article use and comprehension (p. 256).

How should articles be taught?

For the teaching of English articles to be effective, instruction needs to reflect what we know about the acquisition of grammar. In their call for a principled approach to grammar instruction, Batstone and Ellis (2009) propose (among other principles), the Awareness Principle, which

involves making learners aware of how a particular meaning is encoded by a particular grammatical form. Features that occur frequently in the input, such as English definite and indefinite articles and the zero/null article, may not be noticed, especially if the learner's L1 does not have an equivalent form. In this case, therefore, the instructor could devise activities that draw learners' attention to grammatical forms in different ways.

One way of raising learners' awareness and making learners notice is to include listening-based activities. In *Impact Grammar* (Ellis & Gaies, 1999), one unit focuses on the use of English definite and indefinite articles to perform the function of first and second mention. Learners are asked to listen to some information about which they are later asked questions. Then they listen to the information again, this time with a cloze exercise in front of them, with the definite and indefinite articles missing. Listening closely for the correct form in the input from the aural text, they fill in the blanks, thus directing attention to the articles that may lack salience in normal communicative contexts.

To promote the link between form and meaning, learners can be given an inductive grammar consciousness-raising (CR) task. A CR task is defined by Ellis (1997) as:

> a pedagogic activity where the learners are provided with L2 data in some form and required to perform some operation on or with it, the purpose of which is to arrive at an explicit understanding of some linguistic property or properties of the target language (p. 160).

As in Sheen's (2007) study, students can be given a cloze passage where they collaborate in choosing an article for a particular noun phrase, justify their choice, and subsequently construct a rule for why *a/n* is used with some noun phrases and *the* in others. Eckerth (2008) found that learners involved in CR tasks attend to the way in which form, meaning, use, and context interact

(p. 135).

It is claimed that the most productive tasks for SLA are those in which interaction must lead to a specific goal or outcome and reaching it requires a verbal exchange of information. This requires both the negotiation of form and the negotiation of meaning, to aid ESL learners in acquiring a targeted form (Ellis, 2003). However, when Pica (2002) examined the interaction that arose in content-based instruction with the definite and indefinite article, analysing instances of negotiation of meaning and focus-on-form, she found very little attention to form. Pica explained this as being due to the fact that although the students' utterances were ungrammatical, no change was required in order for comprehension to take place, i.e., there was actually very little need to attend to form. Therefore, although there was negotiation of meaning, there was no negotiation of form. To overcome this type of problem in the classroom, Pica recommended the use of focused information-gap tasks, e.g., a scrambled narrative/jigsaw (first mention vs. previously mentioned); spot the difference (not shared reference), and a map task (shared reference).

Accuracy of article use in writing is very important. Master (2007) pointed out that article inaccuracies often "prejudice the reader against the writing" (p. 1). Bitchener (2005, 2008) and Sheen (2007) studied the effects of written corrective feedback on the acquisition of the definite and indefinite English article. Bitchener (2005) and later, Sheen found that direct written corrective feedback combined with metalinguistic corrective feedback had a significant effect on improving accuracy with the anaphoric use of referential definites and indefinites (*a/n* for first mention and *the* for subsequent mentions). Bitchener (2008) recommended that teachers provide mini-lessons based on recurring errors and follow these up with small-group metalinguistic corrective feedback sessions.

Hinenoya (2008) differentiates between traditional reference- and cognitive-based theoretical frameworks. She defines the traditional reference-based framework (TR) as being centered around identifiability and reference, whereas the cognitive-based framework is centered around accessibility to schemas or "mental spaces" (MS), with articles being the markers to access paths in discourse. The differences inherent in these two frameworks suggest a difference in pedagogical approach, as exemplified in Table 6.

Table 6.

The differences in pedagogical approach based on traditional reference and mental space schemas

	Traditional reference-based framework (TR)	Mental space (MS)
Theory	Traditionally based	Cognitive based
Framework	Identifiability	Accessibility
Reason for *the*	*the* is there to identify the referent	*the* is there to mark an access path
Reference point	The reference point is not emphasised	The learner takes the speaker's view point
Concepts to teach	Identifiability is seen when the object referred to is 1. Specific/non-specific 2. Familiar (shared knowledge) 3. Unique	Accessibility is seen when the object(s) referred to is 1. Visible in the situation 2. Visible in the mind 3. In a membership relationship
Emphasis in teaching	Contrastive-based: when to use *a/n* and *the*; the difference between *a/n* and *the*.	1. Induced schema (camera technique- a snapshot taken by the mind) 2. Conceptual visualization

	Rule-based: a cat → the cat Semantic-based: specific, familiar, unique	3. Membership in a set Schematic explanation Visualisation of situation Topic and access path Metalinguistic explanations

(Hinenoya, 2008, p. 82)

Lessons can initially focus on using the same noun and article in different contexts, e.g., (a) *The water* in that glass is not clean. Don't drink it! (in the physical presence of a glass of water) (b) *The water* in the Tropics is not drinkable. You should carry bottled water (visual image of water in a lake). The instructor leads the learners through mental image creation by a series of questions such as: Can you see the lake? How far away are you from it? What does the water look like? After creating many visual sets for the learners the instructor brings them to the conclusion that it is the definite article *the* that points to an object that we can visualize in our mind as well as one we can see with our eyes. Thus, there is a connection between the speaker and the listener and the object (pp. 87-91). Once the learners have grasped the concept that, even if an object is not physically present, it can still be referred to in a definite way, Hinenoya (2008) suggests introducing the concept of membership, for example, by telling the learners a story which mentions a house and asking them to list everything they would expect to see in a house. This is a conceptual move from (in)visibility to membership, i.e., all the things listed by the learners are members of a set of "the house".

Later the concept of "false-membership" can be introduced, which strengthens the former concept of "membership", e.g., by asking the learners to visualize beds, kitchens, couches, etc., at a swimming pool. Thus, we use *the* for NPs that are members of a set we are talking about, but

not for NPs outside the set, e.g., I took *a* taxi. *The* driver drove very fast and **the* stone flew up and broke *the* window. Membership of "the taxi" includes *the* driver and *the* window, but not **the* stone **(*** denotes incorrect grammatical use**)**. Therefore, the indefinite article *a* should be used with the NP "stone".

Conclusion

The following are recommendations for the ESL classroom teacher, based on the research and in answer to the question posed at the beginning of this paper: "What advice do experts in linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA), and pedagogy offer for teaching the English article system to English as a second language (ESL) learners?"

1. Articles have multiple form-meaning-use connections, making them difficult to teach and learn. However, they occur so frequently in the English language that their correct use should be taught.
2. An article-less L1 makes for greater difficulty in the acquisition of the English article system. Dyer (2013) states that 198 languages have no definite or indefinite article. These include some southern and central African and many South American languages, Chinese, Finnish, Hindi, Indonesian, Japanese, and Russian.
3. There is a natural order of article acquisition. Ekiert (2007), for example, has shown that English articles can be taught neither simultaneously nor contrastively, but that *a/n* should be taught only after the learners have acquired the correct use of the definite *the*.
4. Master (1997) suggests that " … the complex, multi-componential nature of the English articles requires that they be introduced gradually over a long period of time…" (p. 228).

5. Researchers (e.g., Liu & Gleason, 2002) advise beginning with the definite article and direct situational use, gradually expanding to conceptual use (indirect or associative situational use) by teaching "sets" or schemas that incorporate themes.
6. This should be followed by structural and textual uses of the definite article and, finally, cultural use.
7. Introduce the difference between the zero and *a/n* articles, linking this with the concept of countability and noun classification.
8. Teach the articles through discourse, using a variety of authentic texts and passages of varying lengths, rather than one or two sentences.
9. Plan focus-on-form, form-focused-listening, interactive, and discourse-rich lessons with an emphasis on role-playing.
10. Don't just teach the rules. Allow learners to arrive at their own conclusions through inductive teaching and the use of grammar conscious-raising tasks, such as information-gap tasks.
11. Don't be frustrated if students seem to forget and revert to generalisations and over/underuse of a particular form – this is the process of consolidation of an interlanguage.

In 1998, Ellis wrote,

> The social worlds of the teacher and the researcher are often very different. Teachers operate in classrooms where they need to make instantaneous decisions regarding what and how to teach. Researchers … work in universities, where a system of rewards prizes rigorous contributions to a theoretical understanding of issues. Teachers require and seek *practical knowledge*; researchers endeavor to advance *technical knowledge* (p. 39).

This is the paradox then: research is done so that the practitioner can apply the findings to new methodologies to be used in the classroom, but research papers are written in such a way that the practitioner is often unwilling to read them. Rossiter, Abbott, and Hatami (2012) asked the question: "What are the characteristics of teacher-friendly research articles?" Answers from 57 ESL teachers included: practical; relevant to classroom/teaching context; clear language/minimal jargon; short, no/few statistics; focused on findings; authentic and classroom-based. My goal here has been to try to synthesize the complex literature on the teaching and learning of English articles in a way that is accessible to educators.

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