The Role of Specificity in Mastering the English Article System

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Abstract : The English articles are taught as a binary system based on nominal countability and definiteness. Despite the detailed rules of prescriptive grammar, it has been consistently reported in the literature that their correct usage is extremely difficult to master even for advanced learners of English as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL). Given that an English sentence (except for an imperative) cannot be constructed without a noun, which is always paired with one of the indefinite, definite, and zero articles; it is essential to understand specifically what causes ESL/EFL learners to misuse them. To that end, this study examined EFL learners' article use employing a one-group pre–post-test design. Forty-three Korean college students received instruction on correct English article usage for two 75-minute classes employing the binary schema set up for the study. They also practiced in class how to apply the rules as instructed. Then, the participants were assigned a forced-choice elicitation task, which was also used as a pre-test administered three months prior to the instruction. Unlike the pre-test on which they only chose the correct article for each of the 40 items, the post-instruction task additionally asked them to give written accounts of their decision-making procedure to choose the article as they did. The participants' performance was scored manually by checking whether the answer given is correct or incorrect, and their written comments were first categorized using thematic analysis and then ranked by frequency. The analyses of the performance on the two tasks and the written think-aloud data suggested that EFL learners exhibit fluctuation between specificity and definiteness, overgeneralizing the use of the definite article for almost all cataphoric references. It was apparent that they have trouble distinguishing from the two concepts possibly because the former is almost never introduced in the grammar books or classes designed for ESL/EFL learners. Particularly, most participants were found to be ignorant of the possibility of using nouns as [+specific, –definite]. Not surprisingly, the correct answer rates for such nouns averaged out at 33% and 46% on the pre- and post-tests, respectively, which narrowly reach half the overall mean correct answer rates of 65% on the pre-test and 81% on the post-test. In addition, correct article use for specific indefinites was most impermeable to instruction when compared with nouns used as [–specific, –definite] or [± specific, +definite]. Such findings underline the necessity for expanding the binary schema to a ternary form that incorporates the specificity feature, albeit not morphologically marked in the English language.

Keywords : countability, definiteness, English articles, specificity, ternary system