Teaching Strategies on the Misuse of Articles in Junior High School English Language Teaching

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Abstract: *The English article system is one of the most complicated aspects of English grammar and accurate use of the article system in English is a common problem even for advanced students of English as a second language. As the system of articles is absent in the Chinese language, it will be difficult for Chinese students to understand and use articles. Based on the analysis of article misuse, some suggestions and solutions to the teaching of articles for Chinese Junior High School Students will be given in this paper.*

Keywords: *English articles; Article misuse; Teaching strategies*

1. Introduction

For middle school students, grammar learning is a basic part of language acquisition. Many scholars and second language researchers believe that English articles are a difficult point in English learning and teaching. English learners are usually late to master articles. Even learners with higher English proficiency will still have problems using articles if there is no article system in their first language[9]. This paper mainly addresses several problems that I encountered in junior high school article teaching.

2. Context and Problems

I used to be an intern teacher in a middle school for one semester, and I was familiar with my students. Here is some basic information about my students. The first language of my students is Chinese. My students are in grade eight, and they have been learning English for six years since the third grade of primary school. As for their English language proficiency, they have reached the level of A1[2]. They can understand the statements about familiar topics and participate in discussions, discuss topics related to daily life, cooperate with others, solve problems and complete the learning tasks together [3].

I found that the learning the article system is a difficult point for students. Students often make the following three article errors: The first kind of error is omission of the article (when zero article should be used before uncountable nouns, the indefinite article is used); The second type of error is misuse of the article (*an* is used in front of nouns beginning with vowels, but it is misused as *a*); The third type of error is overuse of the article (proper nouns, like North America, usually do not need to use articles, but students use definite articles). To address this problem, I will expand on it in the following sections.

3. Literature Review

3.1 An Overview of Articles

Table 1: Quirk's categorization of article usage

Generic Reference	Specific Reference
The indefinite articles (a/an), zero article (Ø) or definite article (the)	Indefinite articles (a/an) or definite article (the)

The definition of the article is "a word which is used with a noun, and which shows whether the noun refers to something definite or something indefinite" [16]. There are three articles in English: the

(the definite article), a/an (the indefinite article) and zero article/no article (Ø). Quirk [14] summarized the range of use for the three articles (a/an, the, Ø) as in Table 1.

The first kind of usage of articles is called generic references. Richards and Schmidt [16] defined generic references as "a type of reference which is used to refer to a class of objects or things, rather than to a specific member of a class". The reverse is a specific reference. For example:

Specific Reference	Generic Reference
"*The bird* is sick.	*A tiger* is a dangerous animal.
The birds are sick.	*Tigers* are dangerous animals.
There is *a bird* in the cage.	*The tiger* is a dangerous animal".

From the examples above, we can see that *The bird* and *a bird* refer to a particular bird. *The birds* are a particular group of birds. What these three examples have in common is that they all refer to specific birds in the category of birds. However, *A tiger, Tigers*, and *The tiger* all realized a generic reference. *A tiger* and *The tiger* are both generic, referring to any tiger in the category of tiger. *Tigers* emphasize the category of tiger. In the last three examples, none of the three expressions refers to a particular tiger.

Seonaid's [1] explanation of "the", "a/an" and "Ø" is as follows. On the one hand, when we talk about a particular thing (or a particular group of things) that the reader or listener knows, we add " the" before the noun. On the other hand, when we talk about something that the reader or the listener does not know, we add "a/an" before the singular countable nouns and "Ø" before the plural or uncountable nouns. For example, *I bought a pink T-shirt yesterday*. The listener doesn't know which T-shirt I bought, so I put an "a" in front of the T-shirt. The other example is that: *Give me the book*. The listener knows which book I'm talking about, so I use "the" .

3.2 Why Is It Difficult

I think there are two primary reasons for article learning difficulties.

First, the difficulty derives from two facts about the article system.

(1) Articles are the most frequently used function words in English [9]. Sinclair [19] found that *the* ((309 497) 25.1%) to be the most frequent word in a corpus of 20 million words, while *a* in the fifth place ((129 928) 10.5%) (after *of*, *and*, and *to*). Master [13] also considered that the proportion of articles is much higher than that of other determiners in the corpus of nearly 200 000 words.

From the learner's point of view, the application of any article rule needs to be repeated many times, and often in the same single sentence. This makes non-native speakers often ignore the definite article "the" when the noun phrase reappears after the first few occurrences [17].

(2) Function words are usually unstressed. Therefore, for non-native speakers, non-stressed articles are difficult to distinguish in spoken language mode, and also affect the validity of their input. The only stressed article in English is "the" (The pronunciation is /ði/). It means "famous" or "most important". But such usage is rare. In most cases, articles are non-stressed. The unstressed "the" sounds like a very short /θ/ or /ð/. For most learners, these pronunciations are difficult to distinguish, and they sound like nothing [12].

The second aspect is the negative influence of first language on article acquisition. Parrish [13] investigated the acquisition of English articles by an adult whose first language is Japanese. He found that the difference between the first language and the second language may have some effect on the acquisition of the article. There are no articles in Chinese or Japanese. Robertson's [15] research shows that this conclusion also applies to Chinese students. Roberston [15] conducted a study on the use of indefinite and definite articles for a total of 18 Chinese learners from Singapore, Malaysia, and some Chinese mainland areas who studied in the UK. It is found that there is no part of speech corresponding to articles in Chinese, which has a great impact on learners' misuse of articles.

3.3 Suggested Methods for Teaching Articles

Two possible grammar teaching methods will be stated in this part. The first and most common grammar teaching approach is the the deductive approach. The most effective grammar teaching includes some deductive characteristics [6]. Nunan [12] pointed out that the deductive approach is a

teaching method and it is a process of learning knowledge through the application of principles to examples. The definition of the deductive approach is "starts with the presentation of a rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is applied" [21]. the deductive approach is a rule-driven approach. According to Stern [18], the framework of deductive method: rules → examples → practicing, which means the regular grammar teaching procedures are: first, the teacher presents the new rules to students, and then explains the related use of the new rules. Finally, students will practice using the rules in a variety of different ways.

Here is an example from Thornbury [21] to illustrate how to teach articles within the framework of a rule-driven approach. The process of this lesson is as follows.

Step 1: The teacher divides the class into several groups（depending on the class size) with 3 to 4 students in each group and gave each student an exercise sheet that requires students use either "a/an", "the" or "Ø" to complete the gaps. The students were asked to finish it in 5 minutes. After that, the teacher gave out three different pieces: paper A, B, and C with the rules of articles. She distributed paper A which covers rules about when to use "the" to each student in group 1, paper B has rules about the "a/an" to group 2, and paper C has rules about "Ø" to group 3. Make sure that each group of students can only see their own group's paper. The students in the same group were asked to study the grammar summary to complete their exercise.

Step 2: After the students finish, the teacher rearranges the students in the same group in this order (1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 3). The number represents the student in each group. And ask three 1s to form a group, three 2s in another group, three 3s in another group (1 1 1 2 2 2 3 3 3). The students in each new group use the rules learned from the paper to help other members to complete the exercise. This time, each student was asked to explain to other group members the reason for the article used in different gaps.

Step 3: The teacher will check the students' answers and ask the students to justify their answers by referring to the grammar rules on their sheets.

The other famous teaching method is task-based language teaching. The description of the task-based language method is to determine the language teaching tasks according to the actual communication needs in real life. The teacher formulates the task plan to guide the students to complete the task through group cooperation and independent learning, thereby gaining the ability to master the comprehensive use of language [4]. Nunan [11] points out that a task is a kind of classroom activity in which the learner understands, controls, expresses, or interacts with the target language, but his attention is mainly focused on the meaning rather than the language form. This method focuses on how students communicate information and solve practical problems through communication and interaction, rather than emphasizing what language forms students use. The key point of students' learning is how to complete tasks, and the standard of evaluating tasks is whether the tasks are completed.

As for the task-based learning model, Willis' model is generally considered to be the most representative and well-designed. Willis'[23] task-based learning model is divided into three stages: pre-task stage, task cycle stage, and language focus stage.

In the pre-task stage, the teacher introduces the topic and task and highlights new words and phrases. In this process, teachers' language input inevitably involves the rules of articles. The purpose is to provide students with relevant language and help students understand the task [19]. Students can listen to some recordings of similar tasks. There are three parts in the task cycle stage: task, planning, and report. In the first phase of the task cycle, students need to use the target language to complete tasks in groups and the language used by students inevitably involves articles. The teacher monitors from a distance [23]. In the panning section, students prepare to report to the class how the task is completed and the results achieved. Students should consider the language structures used in the text in order to correctly select the articles. The teacher gives some suggestions to students to help them modify the language. In the report session, the teacher selects some groups to present their reports to the class. Students compare results, identify the accuracy of the use of articles in other reports, and check whether they use articles correctly. In the Language focus part, on the one hand, students discuss the text of the recording and compare it with their reports. On the other hand, the teacher instructs the students to practice the usage of articles.

4. Solution

In order to solve the three problems I mentioned earlier about article teaching: omission of the article, misuse of the article and overuse of the article. I decided to adopt deductive method to teach articles in my context. Because the advantage of deductive method is to go straight to the point [21] and it is characterized by teachers' direct and specific explanation of grammar rules [22]. This method is conducive to systematically mastering articles, which contain so many language points. Moreover, Shen[20] believes that middle school students from China must master systematic English grammar in order to improve the accuracy of using English, thereby improving the efficiency of English learning.

As how to use the deductive approach to teach articles will be described in the following section. I will talk about how to solve the omission of articles and overuse of articles from the first presentation stage and the second example stage. I'll talk about how to make improvements in the first phase of the presentation of rules. As mentioned earlier, the difference between the first language and the second language may have some effect on the acquisition of second language articles [13], while the similarities between the two languages can help learners learn quickly and easily [5]. Although there are no articles in Chinese, which will bring difficulties to the learning of articles, when teaching "a" and "the", they can use their Chinese meaning to explain. On the one hand, when explaining the grammatical rules of the "a", I can mention the numeral one "一" in Chinese, which has the same meaning as "a", so that students can understand the usage of "a" faster and better[24]. On the other hand, the demonstrative pronouns "这" and "那" in Chinese are similar to the meaning of "the" in English. The two Chinese characters both have the usage of referring to the objects or people that appear before, which also plays a positive role in students' understanding and mastering the usage of the definite article "the" [24]. The use of first language can help students understand the grammatical rules of articles clearly, to reduce the omission of articles and overuse of articles.

In this paragraph, I will talk about how to solve misuse of the article. In the first part of the introduction of grammar rules, before teaching the usage of indefinite articles "a" and "an", 20 vowel phonemes and 28 consonant phonemes should be reviewed. In this way, students will no longer confuse words beginning with vowel letters and words beginning with vowel phonemes. After understanding phonetic knowledge, I should give many examples to illustrate and consolidate this knowledge. For example, some words begin with vowel phoneme, but the letter is consonant, such as *hour*, *honey*, etc., and some words start with a vowel, but they are consonant pronunciation, such as *one-year-old*, *European*, *umbrella*, etc. This should help students distinguish the usage of different articles.

5. Conclusion

This article analyzes the reasons for the difficulty of article learning and two common grammar teaching methods, and finally explains how to use deductive methods to solve the common problems of article teaching. Although there are no articles in Chinese, the rules of articles can be better mastered by using Chinese characters with the same meaning as articles. Although there are no articles in Chinese, the rules of articles can be better mastered by using Chinese characters with the same meaning as articles.

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