Chapter Five
Pedagogical Implication

In this study, we have examined how English articles are used by Taiwanese EFL learners. Although it has been attested that article accuracy increases as L2 proficiency advances, advanced learners are still prone to make article errors in some contexts, e.g. non-commonly occurring sequences or generic nouns. Most importantly, repeated errors in their language might have a negative effect on readers (Berry 1991: 252) or cause communication to break down (Pica 1983: 231). Although difficulties in mastery of the English article system have often been attributed to L1 interference (Grannis 1971; Yamada & Matsuura 1982; Takahashi 1997), i.e. learners whose native language lacks an article system like English have difficulty judging specificness and definiteness of a noun, evidence has been proposed by scholars, e.g. Pica (1983), Rinnert (1986), and Berry (1991), to suggest that inappropriate instruction may be another source for learners' difficulties. Furthermore, the importance of evaluation of the English article system is usually underestimated in EFL/ESL courses. To effectively develop learners' ability for correct use of English articles, therefore, clear and explicit instruction must be provided, as emphasized by Wrase (1982), Yamada and Matsuura (1982), Rinnert (1986), Berry (1991), and Mizuno (1999). Also, assessment of students' use of articles should be integrated into general EFL/ESL courses.

In this chapter, we will first display how inappropriately article usage is presented in EFL/ESL textbooks commonly found on the market in Taiwan. Then we will discuss several principles underlying teaching the English article system, followed by a presentation of a 4-step instruction in order to give English teachers more ideas about how to teach articles effectively. Finally, we will discuss the need for assessing students' use of English articles and in some ways such an assessment

can be designed.

5.1 Inadequacies found in EFL/ESL textbooks

Problems with traditional article instruction have been posed by many scholars to raise teachers' awareness of those misleading formulations that are popularly used in EFL/ESL courses. Pica (1983: 222-3), for example, points out that EFL/ESL instructional materials typically rely on misleading rules and sentence-level realizations to present article usage, which cannot effectively help learners master the article system because "the linguistic information the student needs to use and interpret articles is often discourse-related" (p. 222). The instructional problem is also found in EFL learning in Taiwan since many grammar books Taiwanese students are usually exposed to do not accurately clarify the meaning and function of articles. The following is a typical example of inappropriate instruction on English articles, taken from *Tunghua Contemporary English Grammar* (Yang & Tseng 1986: 10-15):

(67) **The indefinite article**

1. *A* means "one"
   e.g. *Rome was not built in a day.*
2. *A* means "every, each, any"
   e.g. *A helicopter is a type of aircraft.*
3. *A* means "one and the same"
   e.g. *Birds of a feather flock together.*
4. *A* means "per"
   e.g. *Letters are delivered twice a day.*

The definite article

1. *The* is used with a noun mentioned in the previous context.
2. *The* is used with a noun referring to a specific entity.
3. *The* is used with a noun preceded by ordinals and superlatives.

With a description of English articles such as (67), students may easily get confused by the vague definitions and petty regulations. One problem regards the use of sentence-level examples to illustrate article contexts, as criticized by Pica (1983: 222). Without a discourse-level example, such an instruction fails to demonstrate how

a reader/listener gets access to relevant information in the preceding/upcoming context, the immediate environment, or the shared world. Second, it is easy to find counter examples for some of the rules given in (67). For instance, it is possible to have *a(n)* with a second-mentioned NP, as example (5) discussed in chapter 2, cited again below for ease of reference:

> (5) I need a screwdriver to this television set. *A screwdriver* is the
>
> only thing I can get out the tube with.

A screwdriver in the beginning of the second sentence, though following a first occurrence of the same NP in the previous sentence, does not refer to a specific entity and thus requires the indefinite article.

Another problem with (67) is that the definite article is not restricted to a noun phrase mentioned previously. Rather, *the* frequently appears as first mention (Pica 1983: 225; Berry 1991: 255), as shown below:

> (68) *The roses* are beautiful.
>
> (69) They are planning a trip to *the moon*.
>
> (70) *The girls* sitting over there are my cousins.

The roses in (68), without any previous mention, can be successfully identified by the addressee based on the information from the immediate environment, e.g. the discourse may be carried out in a garden. Similarly, the referent of (69) is accessible to the addressee since it is part of the shared world, and everyone who lives in this universe is aware of the existence of *the moon*. In the context of (70), *the girls* can be identified based on the supporting information from the following clause.

Furthermore, an instruction such as (67) is problematic also because ordinals do not always occur with the definite article, as in (71):

> (71) It seems there might be *a* third choice.

The head noun in (71), although preceded by an ordinal, does not refer to a specific

entity, so it requires the indefinite article.

Also, the claim that *the* is used with a noun referring to a specific entity is not warranted since the core meaning of *the* implies that the specific entity is assumed accessible to the addressee. In other words, it is possible that a specific entity requires *a(n)* instead of *the* because it is not accessible to the addressee, as exemplified earlier in (20):

(20) I met *a man* at the party.

A man in (20) refers to a specific person the addressee are unable to identify. Thus, *a* instead of *the* is used to mark the head noun.

Another crucial problem with (67) is its overlook of the null article and generic use of articles, which is a typical feature of instructional materials and thus results in rather low accuracy of article use in these contexts, as attested in the present study. Indeed, of the three articles, Ø obtains the lowest accuracy in our experiment. Due to the absence of explanation in instructional materials, students hardly notice its substantial occurrence in general reading texts and do not realize when to use it. Likewise, generic use of articles, another problematic area for Taiwanese EFL learners, does not capture much attention from teachers or textbook writers, so learners are not given enough opportunities to familiarize themselves with the appropriate forms of generic nouns.

According to the above analysis, inadequacies in article instruction may largely be responsible for students' difficulty in acquiring article use, as shown in the present study. Instructional materials, which are the main source of L2 input for EFL learners, rely on sentence-level samples and inappropriate formulations to interpret the article system. Under such circumstances, master of the system is impossible because appropriate article choice depends chiefly on discourse. Therefore, it is important for teachers to examine the textbooks being used in their classes. If any inadequacy, e.g.

reliance on oversimplified rules and sentence-level examples, is found, more comprehensible authentic materials need to be supplied in order to demonstrate the interaction between article choice and discourse context.

5.2 Principles in teaching English articles

According to our analysis above, traditional grammar instruction suffers from serious defects and thus fails to facilitate article acquisition. In fact, in some cases the defects even hinder learners' master of the system. Now, teachers may ask questions about how they should teach the English article system. To demonstrate the ways in which articles can be effectively taught, let us start with some principles in teaching English articles, based on which practical teaching activities will be presented step by step in 5.3.

First, instruction should adopt a principled descriptive account as a basis and should not rely on oversimplified rules (Berry 1991: 257). It has been observed by many scholars (Pica 1983; Berry 1991; Yoon 1993) that many instructional materials present article usage in inadequate and misleading formulations, without introducing the conception of "communicative contract between speaker and hearer" (Givon 1993: 232). As mentioned in the previous section, a typical interpretation of articles found in materials commonly used by EFL/ESL students is "the first mention of a noun is preceded by *a(n)*; the second mention by *the*." Correct counter examples, however, can be easily found in authentic language data, as those discussed in (5), (68), (69), and (70) in 5.1. Another example of inadequate formulation is the association of *the* with *first, second, third*, which is wrong because the noun may be unidentifiable or non-referring and thus requires *a(n)* or *Ø*, e.g. *Do I have a second chance, Is there a third choice*. To avoid these inadequacies in article instruction, therefore, a general and clear principle, instead of rigid rules, must be offered to account for the meaning of each article. A good model is established by Givon (1993), who points out that

article choice chiefly depends on the speakers' assumption of the addressee's ability to identify the referent. Thus, an indefinite NP, marked with either *a(n)* or *Ø*, can mean a non-specific or specific referent, which is assumed by the speaker to be unidentifiable to the addressee; on the other hand, the definite article *the* must mean a specific entity which is assumed accessible to the addressee.

The principled descriptive account should also involve use of *Ø* and generic articles, in light of our findings that these two contexts are problematic for Taiwanese EFL learners but are usually ignored in instructional materials. When introducing articles based on Givon's (1993) interpretation, teachers should clarify how *Ø* is different from *a(n)*, both of which mark indefinite NPs. Teachers should also present to students the possible ways to mark generic nouns, such as those in (15), which has been discussed earlier in chapter 2

Next, with the general description of English articles as a back-up, materials with discourse-level context should be used in order to offer students meaningful and relevant examples of article use (Pica 1983: 232; Rinnert 1986: 1; Mizuno 1999: 144). The judgment on whether a noun is referring or non-referring, definite or indefinite depends on information embodied in the whole discourse text. To decide which article is appropriate in a certain context, readers/listeners seek information from the preceding or upcoming text, the immediate environment, or the physical world. Since the information required for article choice is usually discourse-related, sentence-level examples, commonly found in EFL/ESL materials, cannot satisfy effective teaching of English articles. Rather, it is paragraph- or text-length discourse that really demonstrates the interaction between article choice and communicative contexts.

The importance of extended texts in article teaching also highlights the value of extensive reading. Indeed, the more learners read, the more examples of articles they are exposed to. This can explain why accuracy of article usage increases with years of

learning. More importantly, extensive reading offers learners opportunities to experience how articles are used in various NP contexts, including those proved to be problematic for L2 learners, e.g. non-commonly occurring sequences, abstract nouns, and generic nouns. Therefore, we believe that in addition to explicit instruction and practice in class, extensive reading is another important method for students to develop their familiarity with authentic use of articles in extended text.

With regard to exercises on English articles, cloze practice serves a useful way to focus on articles in context (Wrase 1982: 4; Yamada & Matsuura 1982: 61; Rinnert 1986: 1). Students should be given opportunities to judge independently which article to use for a particular position in the text. However, blank-filling exercises should not be overused because their limitation to stimulated production of articles do not necessarily reflect one's article performance in natural communicative context. Therefore, some class time needs to be allocated to discussion of learners' article usage in their own writing. Attention should be drawn to both correct and incorrect article instances (Parrott 2002: 20). Learners are encouraged to explain and justify their choice of articles, and teachers can work with students, discussing how communication breaks down when an article is used inappropriately. With active participation in article instruction, learners may begin to realize when, how, and why to use *a(n)*, *the*, and *Ø*.

Finally, it is important for EFL/ESL teachers to understand that "unless learners already speak a European language which has a similar article structure to that of English, they need a prolonged period of sensitization to how articles are used in texts before they can be expected to use them with anything resembling native-speaking accuracy" (Parrott 2002: 22). This suggests the need of regular integration of article instruction in EFL/ESL courses. Also, extensive reading, as mentioned earlier, facilitates article acquisition over English learning process. In an attempt to develop

the ability to use articles correctly, teachers should awaken learners' attention to article instances in texts and encourage them to think of the functions of articles during extensive reading.

5.3 Activities for article instruction

This section will present a 4-step instruction in the English article system, starting with discussion of article instances in fully-contextualized discourse, moving forward to practice in a cloze text, article insertion drill, and error identification/correction. It should be noted again that article acquisition is a gradual process, so regular instruction integrated in an EFL/ESL course is necessary. Besides, materials used for exercises or discussion are flexible, depending on learners' L2 proficiency level.

1. Discussion of article instances in context

To promote students' awareness of appropriate article use in discourse context, discussion on article instances occurring in the readings of student textbooks is necessary. For example, when teaching a reading text such as (72), taken from *Far East English Reader for Senior High Schools* (Shih, Lin, and Brooks 2002: 20-21), teachers can discuss with learners the functions of articles:

> (72) Long ago in India there lived five blind men. Even though they
>   were blind, they knew much about <u>the</u> world, because they used
>   their hands to touch Ø things. So they would spend their days
>   discussing all that they knew.
>   One day they were discussing Ø elephants. It was difficult, because   5
>   they had never touched one. They had never even been near one.
>   They knew only that Ø elephants were very big.
>   Finally they decided to go and find one. If each of them could feel
>   <u>a</u> real elephant, they would all know what this huge animal was like.
>   They asked <u>a</u> friend to take them to <u>an</u> elephant. Then each of them   10
>   placed his hands on <u>the</u> animal and began to feel it.
>   <u>The</u> first blind man touched <u>the</u> side of <u>the</u> elephant. "It is like <u>a</u>

great wall," he declared.

"No," said <u>the</u> second blind man, who was grabbing <u>the</u> elephant's

tail. "It is like <u>a</u> long, thick rope."   15

"No, no," said <u>the</u> third, who was holding onto <u>an</u> ear. "<u>An</u> elephant

is like <u>a</u> large fan."

First of all, the teacher asks students to underline every instance of *the* and *a(n)*, and to mark places where the null article is used. Based on Givon's (1993: 230-2) principles of reference and identifiability of the reference of an NP, which involves the speaker's intent to refer or not refer to a specific entity in the universe of discourse and the speaker's assumption of the addressee's ability to identify the referent, the teacher then guides the class to discuss why a certain article is used in each position, as illustrated in (73) below:

(73) a. In line 2, *the world* is identifiable because it refers to
the physical universe in which the utterances take
place and of which the interlocutors are residents.

b. In line 3, the plural noun *things* is indefinite since it
does not refer to any specific entity in the universe of
discourse.

c. The indefinite NP *a friend* in line 10 refers to a
specific person. Its indefiniteness stems from the
lack of information that can help readers to
identify the referent.

d. In line 11, *the animal* is an example of anaphoric
reference: its reference is understood as the elephant
introduced in the previous sentence by the indefinite
NP *an elephant*.

e. *The side* in line 12 is an example of cataphoric
reference: the following prepositional phrase *of the
elephant* makes *side* defining.

Given article instances in extended texts, learners practice searching outward (exophoric reference), backward (anaphoric reference), and forward (cataphoric reference) for information that helps them to identify the referents. The purpose of such an activity is for students to understand that correct article use facilitates readers'

understanding and interpretation of the passage.

Furthermore, the text in (72) also contains instances of generic use of articles, a problematic area for Taiwanese EFL learners and thus deserves our attention in terms of article instruction. Discussion of generic use of articles is exemplified in (74):

(74) a. *Elephants* in both line 5 and line 7 have a generic

interpretation; they refer to the species, rather

than to specific entities.

b. *An elephant* and *a large fan* in lines 16 and 17

refer to what is general for the whole class of

elephants and of fans.

To help students overcome the difficulties with generic use of articles, the teacher needs to show students in what forms generic NPs typically appear. One form is use of *Ø* for plural nouns and noncount nouns, as in (75):

(75) a. Line 5: One day they were discussing *Ø* e*lephants*.

b. Line 7: They knew only that *Ø elephants* were very big.

Besides, a singular noun marked with *a(n)* or *the* can also represent the whole class since the feature(s) being mentioned is shared by all in the class, as in (76):

(76) Line 16 and 17: *An elephant* is like *a large fan*.

2. Blank-filling practice

When learners are familiar with the function of each article, they are asked to complete a text with some articles deleted, as shown in (77). Not every article is deleted so that the reading will not be interrupted very often. The teacher then discusses with the class what their answer is for each blank and students describe how they search for relevant information and make the article choice.

(77) One fine day a boy was walking down the road, jingling some money in
his pocket. After a while he met ___1___ farmer with ___2___ basket on his arm.

"What is __3__ noise I hear?" asked the farmer.

"Oh!" said the boy, "that is __4__ money my brothers gave me. They say I am __5__ simpleton; so they gave me some money and sent me away from home."

The farmer liked __6__ sound of Simpleton's money. "See here!" he said. " I have __7__ very fine goose in my basket and I will sell it to you."

"Great! I will be glad to buy it!" said the boy. At once he gave the farmer __8__ money and took __9__ goose.

As Simpleton started to walk down the road, he saw __10__ beautiful palace on a green hill. "Whose palace is that?" he asked the farmer.

"Have you never heard of __11__ king's palace? Our great king lives there," said the farmer.

3. Article Insertion Drill

For more advanced-level students, teachers may use article insertion drills to develop learners' sensitivity to English articles. That is, students are given a text with articles deleted. Different from the cloze text mentioned above, article insertion drills do not underline the positions where an article is required. Therefore, students need to read the text very carefully and identify where to insert an article and which one to insert. The following is an example of an article insertion drill, taken from Rinnert (1986: 20):

(78) **Add *a(n)* or *the* as necessary to correct the following dialogue between a real estate agent (A) and a prospective homebuyer (B).**

A: I found interesting house for you to look at.

B: Great! What's house like?

A: It's two-story house with large living room, two bedrooms, and enormous backyard.

B: It sounds good. What about kitchen?

A: It's modern kitchen with built-in dishwasher. Refrigerator and stove are brand new, and cupboards are custom-built.

B: I can't wait to see it! How many bathrooms are there?

A: There are two bathrooms, one on each floor. Bathroom on the main floor is small, with only toilet, sink and shower, but one upstairs is quite large and has sunken bathtub, as well as two sinks, shower, and separate toilet.

B: Terrific! Does it have fireplace?

A: Yes, and it is heated with gas furnace, as well.

B: Where is house located?

A: It's in nice neighborhood that has stores and school nearby.

B: Good. What about price?

A: It's within reasonable range for your budget.

B: So far, place sounds perfect. When can I see it?

5. Error Identification and Correction

After the blank-filling practice and the article insertion drill, the teacher can show students a paragraph or a composition with some article errors. Students have to identify the errors on their own and correct them. As recommended by Chang (1997: 101), student samples are good materials for this activity because students are actively involved in the discussion. However, such a material has to be used carefully because students may not feel comfortable when the whole class is reading and evaluating their compositions. In this case, student compositions should be used anonymously, and the teacher needs to communicate with students prior to this phase, telling them that it is good to have so many friends help them improve their writing.

5.4 Evaluation of the English article system

After the presentation of teaching activities for article pedagogy, we will discuss in this section the role of evaluation in article instruction. First of all, there is a need to clarify the reasons for assessing learners' use of articles. Then we will discuss some test types of article evaluation.

5.4.1 Reasons for article evaluation

One question that many teachers will ask in regard to article evaluation is this: Is it necessary to evaluate students' use of articles since it is the development of communicative language ability that EFL/ESL courses focus on? Indeed, in recent years there has been a shift to the view that the goal of EFL/ESL courses is to develop learners' ability to *use* the language, rather than develop their knowledge of *language*

usage. In this case, learners are encouraged to use the target language to express their ideas, feelings, emotion, etc. Nevertheless, meaningful communication still depends heavily on grammatical accuracy, including use of articles. In fact, in many cases communicative breakdown can be found as the result of inappropriate use of grammatical structures. Take (79), for example:

(79) I received *the letter* yesterday.

The addressee in (79) may get confused if he does not have a particular entity of the head noun in mind. Therefore, teaching English articles plays an important role in EFL/ESL instruction, and evaluation of the English article system should also have a place in order to examine whether the teaching/learning is effective.

In fact, there are many reasons for testing learners' use of English articles. The most important one is to find out how well learners have mastered this language area and what difficulties they have when dealing with it. For example, by testing students' use of articles, teachers may discover that *the* tends to be overused for generic plural nouns. Remedial instruction can thus be conducted to improve students' language. Moreover, a test on English articles reminds learners of the importance of this language area. Receiving feedback from teachers after the test, learners are motivated to appreciate when to use articles and observe their own use of articles in their writing. This can be further verified with the comments given by the subjects in Master (1995), some of which are cited below:

(80) I cannot understand the usage of articles unless I receive
feedback from teachers. I think that it is very difficult for
me to learn articles without instruction.

(81) Receiving feedback on the summaries make me pay more
attention to count and noncount nouns and the use of articles.

With the help of feedback from teachers, students notice that the article system is an important language area and its inappropriate use causes misunderstanding or

communicative breakdown. Attention is thus provoked to use of articles in their own language production.

It must be remembered, however, that evaluation of article usage should not be overemphasized for it may have a harmful effect by giving learners great pressure to practice such items and neglect their overall communicative ability. We suggest that teachers make a careful decision about when and how to test their students' use of articles, based on learners' proficiency level, textbook content, and course objectives.

5.4.2 Test types of article evaluation

It should be noted that the text used to evaluate article usage must take the form of discourse-level context. Natural, contextualised language materials provide students with "enough background knowledge and details to avoid ambiguity and alternative interpretations" (Heaton 1995: 36). In fact, we have found two problems regarding article evaluation in many high school monthly tests in Taiwan: they either completely exclude this language area or use decontextualised items to test article usage. The following is an example for decontextualised items, taken from a final exam for third-year students in a Taipei municipal junior high school:

(82) Mrs, Huang was _____ old woman we saw yesterday.

(A) a   (B) an   (C) the   (D) ×

The answer given by the test designer is (C). The definite noun phrase thus means the addressee has known the fact that the speaker met an old woman. Nevertheless, it is also possible to use *an* if the addressee does not know in advance that the speaker met somebody yesterday. Such a poorly designed question actually demises students' ability, confuses their understanding, and hinders their acquisition of article use. These problems can be avoided if the item is set in context, so sufficient information will be provided for test takers to decide whether the addressee is able to identify the referent or not.

Unlike sentence-level items, as exemplified in (82), discourse-level texts provide test takers with background information which illuminates the communicative functions of the articles. Examples of discourse-level texts include blank-filling tests, as in (77), and article insertion tests, as in (78), both of which are presented earlier in 5.3. If teachers are interested in students' ability to use articles in free writing, pictures then serve as useful exam materials (Heaton 1990: 107). Given a sequence of pictures, students are asked to tell a story or describe a process in which articles are required to mark definite and indefinite noun phrases. This material has been widely used in experiments on L2 learners' use of English articles. Emslie and Stevenson (1981), for example, used a cartoon story consisting of three pictures which each subject had to tell another who could not see those pictures. (83) is a sample of the description (p. 320):

(83) Picture 1: A woman and a little girl are standing beside a table.
　　　　　　　The little girl is reaching for a bottle of milk.
　　Picture 2: The little girl has dropped the bottle of milk and
　　　　　　　is kneeling on the floor beside the broken bottle.
　　　　　　　The woman has her hands to her mouth.
　　Picture 3: The little girl is kneeling on the floor and a cat
　　　　　　　is drinking the milk from the broken bottle.

A text such as (83) can show students' ability to use articles to introduce new characters as well as the ability to refer to a specific entity that has been mentioned previously and thus accessible to the addressee. For example, *a woman*, *a little girl*, and *a table* in the first sentence are unidentifiable because it is the first time they are introduced and no background information is available for the addressee to get access to the referents. In the second sentence, *the little girl* is accessible due to its previous mention, and so is *the bottle of milk* in the third sentence. Furthermore, *the floor* in the third sentence is an article context that deserves our attention since the source of definiteness does not result from its previous mention but from its association with the

whole background: *the floor*, of course, refers to that of the room where the woman and the little girl stay.

Through a text like (83), learners' spontaneous use of articles can be tested. But note that pictures chosen for article evaluation have to be as clear as possible so that students can understand the content without any difficulty.

The purpose of presentation and evaluation of the article system is to help students understand that correct article use facilitates successful communication. In fact, appropriate article use mainly achieves pragmatic functions, not chiefly for mechanical grammar considerations. Therefore, we suggest that materials used for both presentation and evaluation of the system should be discourse-based. The reading passages in student textbooks serve as a good source for learners to discuss how correct use of articles facilitates the addressee's understanding of the text. Exercises on article use, such as blank-filling tasks and article insertion drills, then can be supplied in the form of extended texts. In these activities students practice judging whether the addressee has the ability to identify the referent of an NP. Besides, student writings can be used as samples for learners to analyze their own use of articles. We also suggest that teachers evaluate students' use of articles through discourse-level blank-filling tests or picture-description tasks. Both test methods carry out the principle of article pedagogy in that they stimulate students to produce language in meaningful and communicative contexts, in which correct use of articles facilitate communication.