

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

This chapter reviews literature on definitions of English articles and article acquisition by EFL/ESL learners. Section 2.1 discusses when to use *a(n)*, *the*, and  $\emptyset$ . Section 2.2 reviews previous studies on how articles are used by EFL/ESL learners of various L1 backgrounds.

#### 2.1 Definitions of the Definite, Indefinite, and the Null Articles

This section explores the definitions of English articles by reviewing literature from the early 1960s to the 21st century. Generally speaking, most earlier studies (Kałuza 1963; McEldowney 1977) failed to explicitly define the distinction between the definite and the indefinite articles because they relied mostly on obscure terminology and vague definitions. Not until the perspective of discourse participants was taken into account was the contrast between articles fully clarified (Bickerton 1981, cited in Huebner 1983; Master 1988; Givon 1993). The discussion below starts with problems present in Kałuza's and McEldowney's interpretations of English articles, and then proceeds to a review of more plausible and recent explanations of the same topic.

To begin with, Kałuza (1963) resorts to the unclear terms “particularize” and “identify” to develop the definitions of English articles. He says an indefinite noun phrase means either “one particular though unknown individual of a class” or “a less particularized individual of a class” (p. 115), as shown in (3) and (4) respectively:

(3) Yesterday I had *a letter* from Mr. Smith.

(4) He has never yet been in *a theater*.

What is missing in his definition is a clear explanation of “less particularized” and “unknown.” In fact, *a letter* in (3) is not totally unknown; rather, it is known by the speaker, who assumes the hearer does not know its existence. A more sensible way to

contrast these two NPs involves the establishment of entities in the universe of discourse (Givon 1993: 214). That is to say, *a letter* in (3) is a referring NP because it refers to a unique entity; on the other hand, *a theater* in (4) is non-referring since it does not refer to any unique theater. This involvement of discourse universe, which makes the functions of articles more sensible, will be further discussed later in our review of Givon's (1993) interpretation of English articles.

As for definite noun phrases, Kaluza (1963: 115) states that a noun phrase can be identified when it has been mentioned in the preceding context. Such a statement is faced with at least two problems. First of all, not every second-mentioned NP has to be definite, as exemplified in (5), in which *a screwdriver* does not refer to a particular entity but is rather indefinite (Grannis 1972: 279):

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

Secondly, an NP does not have to be mentioned in the preceding text to be identifiable, as shown in (6):

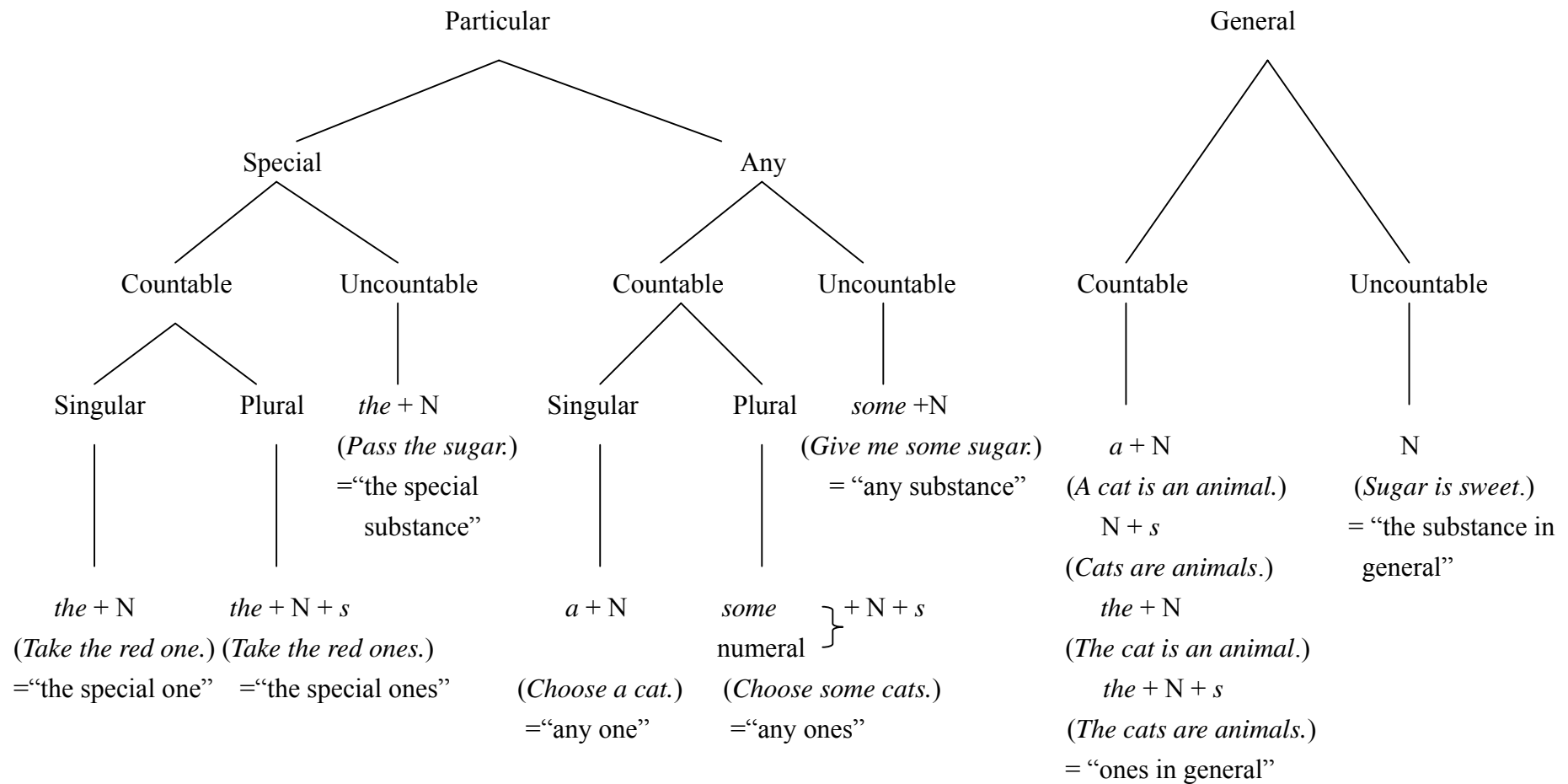
- (6) *The purse* that I put on the desk is gone.

In the context of (6), the referent of *purse* can be identified on the basis of the supporting information provided by the relative clause.

Similar to Kaluza (1963), McEldowney (1977) accounts for the article system simply based on obscure terms, and sure her description thus fails to capture the correct use of articles. According to McEldowney, the presence or absence of articles tells whether the noun phrase is (a) general or particular, (b) any or special, (c) count or noncount<sup>1</sup>, and (d) singular or plural, as illustrated in Figure 1:

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<sup>1</sup> Two sets of terms commonly used in literature for semantic features of nouns are count/noncount and countable/uncountable. The first set is applied in this study. According to Master (2002), count/noncount status of a noun is determined by the speaker. For instance, the word *pencil* in *The vet found bits of chewed-up pencil in the dog's stomach* is a noncount noun because it represents a formless mass rather than a discrete object. The sentence *I would like a coffee* is another example where *coffee* represents a discrete entity "a cup of coffee". These examples suggest that it is inappropriate to say that a word is permanently countable or uncountable. Instead, it is the speaker's decision to count a noun or not in a particular language context.



**Figure 1: English Articles Usage (from McEldowney 1977: 99)**

The distinctions of count/noncount and singular/plural are apparent and easy to understand. *A(n)* indicates a singular count noun, *-s* indicates a plural noun, and a noncount noun occurs with its stem form without *a(n)* or *-s*. Furthermore, *the* occurs with a singular, plural, or noncount noun.

What makes McEldowney's description problematic is her use of such terms "general/particular" and "any/special." Claiming that English articles can demonstrate whether or not a noun phrase is general or particular, McEldowney means a noun may refer to "a group of objects" (generic reference) or "a particular example of the group" (p. 97), as the following sentences show:

(7) *The Kiwi* is a New Zealand bird.

(8) *The bird* on my right is a kiwi.

*The Kiwi* in (7) is general in reference while *the bird* in (8) is particular. McEldowney further explains that a particular referent may refer to "any member of a group" or "a special member of a group." Examples are given in (9) and (10) below (p. 97):

(9) Choose *a chocolate*.

(10) Take *the smallest chocolate*.

The noun phrase in (9) refers to any chocolate while the noun in (10) refers to a special chocolate—the smallest one. Such a description of English articles, however, is rather confusing. For instance, the terms *particular* and *special* are not defined very clearly. What is the difference between "a particular example" and "a special member of a group"?

Furthermore, McEldowney's (1977) account in Figure 1 fails to present an overall description of English articles. According to this figure, a particular and special referent is accompanied by the definite article; a particular but any member occurs with the indefinite article. Now, which context is appropriate for *I saw a dog*, where the referent of *a dog* is particular and specific? In fact, no context in Figure 1

accounts for such an example. The reason the indefinite article is used here is that the speaker assumes the hearer is unable to identify which dog is being mentioned. In other words, the real difference between *the* and *a(n)* lies in speakers' assumption of hearers' knowledge (Givon 1993: 232).

Another problem with McEldowney's (1977) interpretation is the proposal that a plural noun with the definite article is one way to represent generic reference, while other researchers maintain that this is not a typical way to code generic nouns (Givon 1993: 242-43; Master 1988: 18). To illustrate it, consider the following example from Figure 1:

(11) \**The cats* are animals.

As pointed out by Master (1988: 18), generic *the* marks only singular count nouns. Thus compare the sentences in (12) below:

(12) a. *The tiger* lives in Asia.

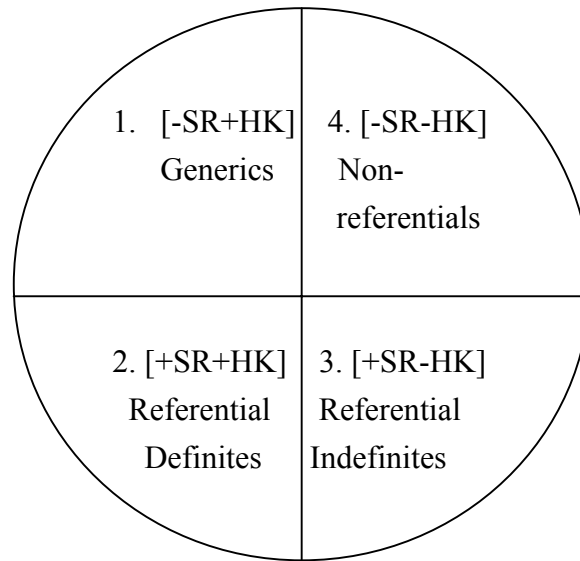
b. \**The tigers* live in Asia.

Accordingly, the claim that definite plural nouns, such as *the cats*, represent generic reference is refuted. Overall, McEldowney's description fails to guide learners to choose an appropriate article in a particular context.

As mentioned above, the terms Kałuža (1963) and McEldowney (1977) used to differentiate the definite and indefinite articles are quite misleading and do not really offer any substantial assistance to a speaker/writer to use articles appropriately. The crucial notion involved in article choice lies in whether the noun phrase refers to a particular entity in the universe of discourse and whether the entity is accessible to the hearer/reader. This notion is further explored in the descriptions of English articles provided by Bickerton (1981, cited in Huebner 1983), Master (1988), Thomas (1989), Givon (1993), and Master (2002), which will be examined in turn below.

First of all, Bickerton (1981, cited in Huebner 1983) classifies four environments

of noun phrase reference on the basis of two notions, [SR] (specific reference) and [HK] (assumed known to the hearer). A noun phrase which has a specific referent is marked [+SR]. If the referent is believed accessible or identifiable by the listener, the noun phrase is marked [+HR], and vice versa. Figure 2 is Bickerton's semantic wheel, which shows the four environments of noun phrase reference:



**Figure 2: Semantic wheel for noun phrase reference (Bickerton 1981, cited in Huebner 1983: 146)**

Nouns classified as [ - SR+HK] in the first quadrant represent generic reference and are marked with *a(n)*, *the*, or  $\emptyset$  (the null article). Quadrant 2, i.e. [ + SR + HK], stands for a specific referent assumed known or identifiable by the hearer. In this environment the definite article *the* is used. The third class [+SR - HK] means that the specific referent is known by the speaker but cannot be identified by the hearer (in the speaker's judgment). This category is coded with *a(n)* (for singular count nouns) or  $\emptyset$  (for plural or noncount nouns). Quadrant 4, i.e. [ - SR - HK], stands for nonreferential noun phrases, which occur with *a(n)* or  $\emptyset$ . Bickerton hypothesizes that "the specific referent/nonspecific referent distinction is in some sense the more primary distinction" (cited in Huebner 1983: 147). In other words, learners are able to

identify the specificity of an entity in initial stages of language acquisition.

Adopting a similar perspective on article description, Thomas (1989) further elaborates Bickerton's (1982) semantic wheel with examples of article use for each environment, as shown in Table 1 below:

**Table 1: Environments for the appearance of *a(n)*, *the*, and  $\emptyset$  (Thomas 1989: 337)**

Features	Environments	Articles	Example
[-SR+HK]	Generic nouns	<i>a(n)</i> , <i>the</i> , $\emptyset$	$\emptyset$ Fruit flourishes in the valley. <i>The</i> Grenomian is an excitable person. A paper clip comes in handy.
[-SR-HK]	Nonreferential nouns	<i>a(n)</i> , $\emptyset$	Alice is <i>an</i> accountant. I guess I should buy <i>a</i> new car.
[+SR-HK]	Referential indefinites	<i>a(n)</i> , $\emptyset$	Chris approached me carrying <i>a</i> dog.
[+SR+HK]	Referential definites	<i>the</i>	(Chris approached me carrying a dog.) <i>The</i> dog jumped down and started barking.
	previous mention		I approached his front door and rang <i>the</i> bell.
	specified by entailment		<i>the</i> latest crisis; <i>the</i> top drawer
	specified by definition		<i>The</i> moon will be full tomorrow.
	unique in all contexts		Among employees: <i>the</i> boss; among classmates: <i>the</i> midterm exam
	unique in a given context		

Bickerton's (1982) semantic wheel and Thomas' (1989) elaboration thus provide a systematic classification of article environments. However, neither of them provides much information about the relationship between discourse participants. For example, on what basis does a speaker judge whether his addressee can or cannot identify the referent? How does the addressee get access to the referent? In the following review of Master's (1988) article, sources of definiteness will be discussed.

While Bickerton (1982) and Thomas (1989) offer a system of article classification, Master (1988) focuses on the fine differences between uses of different types. He proposes that an article expresses two pieces of information: whether the referent is specific or generic and whether it is known or unfamiliar. When a noun refers to an actual example, it is called specific, as shown in (13) and (14) below (p. 6, 18):

(13) *The piece of chalk* that is in my hand is broken.

(14) John bought *a book* yesterday.

A specific noun may be definite or indefinite and can occur with *the* or *a(n)*. On the other hand, a generic noun refers to all entities which belong to the same class. As mentioned earlier, there are three ways to show genericness, including *a(n)*, *the*, and  $\emptyset$ . The limitation is that generic *the* is used with singular count nouns and  $\emptyset$  with noncount and plural nouns. The following examples illustrate how generic noun phrases are marked:

(15) a. *A dog* makes a good pet.

b. *Dogs* make good pets.

c. *Water* is the stuff of life.

d. *The tiger* lives in Asia.

e. \**The water* is the stuff of life.

f. \**The tigers* live in Asia.

Master (1988: 4) also explains that a known entity may be mentioned the second time in the context with the definite article used, while the first occurrence of the same noun is accompanied by the indefinite article. He further points out that *the* is not always used in second-mentioned context. It may accompany a noun phrase without any previous mention in the discourse context. In this case, definiteness can be based on the knowledge shared by the speaker and the hearer. For instance, it is believed that people living in the world know *the sun*, *the moon*, *the universe*, and *the*



*weather*. When a teacher asks his/her student to close *the door*, the addressee is expected to shut the door of the room. It is impossible and ridiculous for the student to ask “Which door?” unless there are more than one door open in the immediate environment. Furthermore, it is common for a mother to tell her child, “I’m going to the supermarket. Stay home and be good.” It is very likely that, based on shared regional knowledge, the child knows which supermarket his/her mother is going—the one in the neighborhood and where the mother often shops.

Another source of definiteness, according to Master (1988: 4), is “ranking adjectives”, such as superlatives (e.g. *the tallest*, *the most expensive*), sequence adjectives (e.g. *the first*, *the second*, *the last*), and unique adjectives (e.g. *the only*, *the same*). A noun phrase accompanied by one of these ranking adjectives requires the definite article *the*. In addition to ranking adjectives, pre- and post-modifiers can function as another source of definiteness. For example, a teacher may ask students to pick up the *red* book, not the *blue* or the *black* one. Besides, post-modifiers are usually relative clauses or prepositional phrases, seeking to provide information that helps hearers to identify the referent, as in:

(16) Pick up the book *on the desk*.

(17) The man *who is talking to Susan* is my brother.

Nevertheless, it is inappropriate to say every modified NP requires the definite article, as (18) and (19) show:

(18) There is a box *of chocolate*.

(19) A flea is a small insect *that has no wing*.

After all, article choice is based on the specificity and definiteness expressed by the NP, not on the linguistic form.

Although Master (1988) clearly identifies the sources of definiteness as either existing in discourse context or shared world knowledge, his resort to terms like

“specific”, “generic”, “known”, and “unfamiliar” to describe the article system poses some problems. First, the classification under the notions “specific” and “generic” is rather inadequate when an indefinite NP neither represents a whole class of referents nor refers to a specific individual. To illustrate this point, consider the referential status of the indefinite noun phrases in (20) and (21):

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

(21) I didn’t meet *a man* at the party.

According to Master, both NPs are “specific” because they do not refer to a whole class of referents. However, the NP in (21) does not refer to any “specific” entity since the speaker did not meet any men at the party. Second, it is arbitrary to use the terms “known” and “unfamiliar” to differentiate definite NPs from indefinite NPs. A noun phrase can be identifiable or accessible to the addressee although he/she has no prior knowledge about its referent. These problems can be solved under Givon’s (1993) description of English articles. A more comprehensible explanation is also provided by Master (2002) in a later report.

Givon (1993) explains the definite and indefinite articles in terms of reference and definiteness. First, while a definite NP must refer to a specific entity, an indefinite NP can mean a specific or non-specific referent, depending on our real-world knowledge or the propositional modality of the sentence in question, as presented in (22), (23), and (24) (p. 215):

(22) John wanted to marry *a rich woman*.

(23) John married *a rich woman*.

(24) She didn’t meet *a man* there.

*A rich woman* in (22) may have two interpretations, referring and non-referring. As a referring NP, it refers to a particular person John knew. On the other hand, the non-referring interpretation means John wished to marry someone rich but he did not

have such a specific individual in mind. In example (23), however, *a rich woman* has only the referring interpretation. With a fact modality, if John married someone, there must have been a particular individual. In example (24), only the non-referring interpretation is allowed because of the non-fact modality. Since the woman didn't meet a man, there was no particular person referred to. This notion of reference provides a solution to the inadequacy found in Kałuža (1963), as discussed earlier, where the unclear terms “less particularized” and “unknown” are used to define indefinite noun phrases. The examples are cited again below:

(3) Yesterday I had *a letter* from Mr. Smith.

(4) He has never yet been in *a theater*.

In the former case, *a letter* was written already, so the NP is referring; in the latter case, the non-fact modality implies there is no particular entity in the speaker's mind.

The difference between *a* and *the*, according to Givon (1993), lies in the absence or presence of “the communicative contract between speaker and hearer” (p. 232). Communicating with the addressee, the speaker judges whether the interlocutor is able to identify the referent. If yes, the definite article is used; if not, the indefinite article is used. To decide which article to use, there must be some grounds on which the speaker makes a decision. Givon thus identifies three sources of definiteness: (a) the shared current speech situation, (b) the culturally-shared universe, and (c) the shared current discourse. In the first category, the identifiable entity might be visible to the addressee or somewhere around the situation where the interlocutors are having the communication, as (25) and (26) show:

(25) Please close *the door*.

(26) I'm going to *the supermarket*.

With regard to the culturally-shared universe, examples include *the sun*, *the moon*, *the universe*, all of which are accessible to human beings, who live in the same “physical

world” and share the same “cultural world view” (p. 233). The first two categories correspond to Halliday’s (1985: 292-3) exophoric reference, in which the addressee relies on the immediate context or shared world knowledge to identify the referent. In the third category, the addressee can search backward or forward in the discourse text for information to identify the referent. Halliday identifies the former situation as anaphoric reference, in which the information is available in the preceding context:

(27) He met a bear. *The bear* was bulgy.

The latter situation is cataphoric reference, the reverse of anaphoric reference. The addressee is required to look forward for relevant information:

(28) This is *the house* that John built.

Corresponding to Givon’s (1993: 232) “communicative contract”, Master (2002: 334) also proposes that the difference between definiteness and indefiniteness lies in the speaker’s sense of the hearer’s knowledge about the referent. Examples are given in (29) below:

(29) a. Beethoven then wrote *a symphony* for which he was  
to become very famous.

b. Beethoven then wrote *the symphony* for which he was  
to become very famous.

In (29a), the speaker assumes the listener’s knowledge of Beethoven is limited and may not know the fact that Beethoven was famous for a particular symphony. The speaker in (29b), on the contrary, assumes the listener knows a particular symphony made Beethoven famous and probably even knows which one it was.

According to the aforementioned literature, the factors affecting article choice include whether or not the noun is count or noncount, singular or plural, whether the noun refers generically to all members of a class, whether the noun refers to a specific entity, and if yes, what sense the speaker/writer has of the addressee’s ability to

identify the referent. More specifically, when the referent is assumed identifiable to the addressee, the definite article *the* is used, regardless of whether the NP is count or noncount, singular or plural. On the other hand, an unidentifiable noun requires the indefinite article *a(n)*, for a singular NP, or the null article  $\emptyset$ , for a plural or non-count NP. Generic NPs can appear in the form of a singular count noun coded with *a(n)* or *the*, a plural or noncount noun coded with  $\emptyset$ . In sum, when deciding which article fits in a particular context, the speaker/writer not only considers semantic features of a noun, such as count/noncount or singularity/plurality, but also makes “a sometimes difficult and complicated assessment of his listener’s actual knowledge and probable expectations” (Grannis 1972: 286).

## **2.2 Use of English Articles by EFL/ESL Learners**

This section discusses how English articles are used by L2 learners. Scholars working on this field (Agnihotri, Khanna, & Mukherjee 1984; Master 1987, cited in 1997; Parrish 1987; Thomas 1989; Lee 1997) have pointed out that L1 interference is a very important factor that accounts for article errors made by L2 learners. Specifically, L2 learners whose first language lacks an equivalent of the English article system often have difficulties in acquiring it. Influenced by their L1, these learners tend to overgeneralize the null article into non-obligatory contexts. Another problem commonly attested in studies is overuse of the definite article. Also, use of the indefinite article in learners’ language production is less frequent and its acquisition occurs after acquisition of *the* and  $\emptyset$ . Besides, use of English articles in more specific environments, e.g. in front of modified NPs, commonly occurring sequences, and in exophoric/anaphoric/cataphoric reference contexts, are observed in some studies (Agnihotri, Khanna, & Mukherjee 1984; Parrish 1987; Takahashi 1997). These findings are discussed in greater detail below.

First, many studies have proved that  $\emptyset$  overuse is a salient feature in the English

of learners whose L1 does not have an article system. Agnihotri, Khanna, and Mukherjee (1984), for example, attested L1 influence in their study where 366 Hindi/Punjabi speakers of English, whose L1 lacks an equivalent system of English articles, took an article insertion test. Subjects' responses are presented in Table 2:

**Table 2: Percentages of inserting *a*, *an*, *the* and  $\emptyset$  in the potential places for the use of articles (from Agnihotri et al. 1984: 117)**

Response Target article	<i>a</i>	<i>an</i>	<i>the</i>	$\emptyset$
<i>a</i>	27.04	2.76	12.08	58.10
<i>an</i>	4.73	42.71	10.24	42.30
<i>the</i>	5.03	2.16	36.91	55.87
$\emptyset$	3.67	00.71	7.80	87.61

Table 2 shows that the percentage of accuracy is relatively high in  $\emptyset$  contexts (87.61%). However, this does not mean subjects know clearly when to use the null article. What is also indicated by this table is overgeneralization of  $\emptyset$  into *a*, *a(n)*, and *the* contexts. Therefore, the high accuracy of  $\emptyset$  usage is the result of overuse rather than nearly complete acquisition of this item.

Evidence of L1 influence was also found by Master (1987, cited in 1997), who observed in a study of 20 L2 learners across five L1 groups, including Japanese, Chinese, Russian, German, and Spanish, that first language has significant influence on interlanguage development. The Japanese, Chinese, and Russian speakers, whose first language lacks an article system, tend to overuse  $\emptyset$  from the start. Then, after realizing  $\emptyset$  is not appropriate in every context, the subjects seem to use *the* more frequently and sometimes even overuse it. In contrast, for subjects whose native languages are Spanish and German, which contain an article system, overgeneralization of *the* into indefinite contexts is the primary pattern. Master thus suggests that articles are acquired differently “depending on whether or not they occur

in the learner's first language" (p. 216).

L1 influence was also proved true by Parrish (1987) and Thomas (1989). Parrish's (1987) longitudinal study collected data of a Japanese learner of English for a period of four months. Overgeneralization of  $\emptyset$  to *the* and *a(n)* contexts was found throughout the language development. Thomas (1989), on the other hand, involved learners from 9 language backgrounds, five of which have equivalents of English articles ([ + ART]), i.e. Greek, Spanish, Italian, French, and German, while the rest four do not ([ - ART]), i.e. Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Finnish. Thomas finds that the [ - ART] group produced more instances of the null article, which is consistent with the results in Agnihotri, Khanna, and Mukherjee (1984), Master (1987), and Parrish (1987).

The influence of learners' first language on use of articles is also proposed by Lee (1997). To study English article acquisition by Korean EFL learners, whose mother tongue lacks an article system similar to English, Lee conducted a study in which 40 subjects were asked to write a composition. Results indicated the Korean subjects tended to use the null article when the head noun is accompanied by a pre-nominal modifier. In Korean, the function of the English definite article *the* is reflected in modifiers. Due to L1 transfer, if a modifier is already present, it is more possible for Koreans to use  $\emptyset$ . Lee's study once again proves the existence of L1 transfer.

Another generalization about article acquisition reported in many studies is the tendency for learners, either with a [ + ART] or [ - ART] L1, to use *the* in indefinite environments. Yamada and Matsuura (1982), for example, found that both their intermediate- and advanced-level Japanese subjects used the definite article in place of the indefinite article, resulting in the lower accuracy in *a(n)* environments.

Huebner (1983) also attempted to investigate the systematicity in different periods

of an adult Hmong's interlanguage development. The results indicate that initially the article *da*, an equivalent of standard English *the* in the subject's interlanguage, was used correctly in [+SR +HR] context. In the second stage (from week 3), *da* was overgeneralized into all noun phrases. Not until the third stage (week 21) was *da* eliminated from [-SR -HK] environments. Around the 27th week, the definite article was dropped from [+SR -HK] environments. This finding corresponds to Bickerton's (1981, cited in Huebner 1983: 147) hypothesis that specific/nonspecific distinction is more likely to be mastered earlier.

Use of the definite article *the* in *a* and *an* contexts has also been reported in Agnihotri, Khanna, and Mukherjee (1984), as shown in Table 2 earlier. Specifically, the percentages of inserting *the* in these contexts in their study of Hindi speakers of English are 12.08% and 10.24% respectively. Besides, Thomas (1989) also reports that the use of the definite article by his subjects, both [+ART] and [-ART] groups, was more accurate than the use of the indefinite article, which indicates the delay of acquisition of the indefinite article. This high accuracy relates to overgeneralization of *the* in [+SR] (specific referent) contexts because beginning learners tend to associate *the* with a referring entity, regardless of the addressee's ability to identify it. In other words, beginners tend to use *the* in [+SR - HK] and [+SR + HK] contexts.

As for acquisition of the indefinite article, the emergence of *a(n)* in its appropriate contexts is later and more gradual. For example, Parrish (1987) reports in her longitudinal study that the Japanese subject, in the beginning of L2 development, used articles more accurately in definite contexts than in indefinite contexts. At the end of the study, the subject used *the* with an 84% rate of accuracy and *a(n)* with only a 50% rate of accuracy.

In addition to the general tendencies of article acquisition in L2 learning discussed above, L2 learners' use of English articles in particular environments, e.g.



exophoric/anaphoric/cataphoric reference contexts, abstract nouns, certain lexical items or phrases, generic nouns, and modified NPs, have also been examined. For example, Agnihotri, Khanna, and Mukherjee (1984: 121-3) analyzed their Hindi subjects' ability to use *the* in four environments: (1) specification due to the use of superlative degree (with a 47% accuracy rate), (2) specification due to retrospective reference, i.e. anaphoric (42%), (3) specification due to immediate surrounding, i.e. exophoric (34%), and (4) specification due to modification by a phrase/clause, i.e. cataphoric (33%) (p. 123). The researchers attribute the good performance in the first two categories to instructional concentration and suggest that remedial courses should also concentrate on the latter two categories.

Furthermore, Agnihotri et al. (1984: 124) also found a tendency for their subjects to overuse the null article for abstract nouns. In the cases of abstract nouns involved in the study, over 40% of the subject chose the null article in place of the legitimate one, the indefinite article.

Lexical influence is also proposed by Parrish (1987), saying that "article use could be, in some cases, lexically determined" (p. 381). This is exemplified by the word *moon*, which the Japanese subject in her longitudinal study associated with *earth*, available with or without an article. Examples (30) and (31) show that *earth* may be preceded by  $\emptyset$  or *the*:

(30) The space shuttle Atlantis returned safely to *earth* today.

(31) *The earth* abounds with natural resources.

Unlike *earth*, the word *moon* does not occur with the null article, as in (32) and (33), both of which exhibit use of *the*.

(32) *The moon* cast a shadow on the wall.

(33) He took a walk with her under *the moon*.

The subject in Parrish's study mistakenly categorized *moon* with the noun *earth* and

thought  $\emptyset$  is also possible with *moon*.

Another source of difficulty about article choice is generic use of articles. Kubota (1994), in a study of 141 Japanese speakers taking a cloze test, studied article usage in terms of Bickertons' (1981) semantic wheel. All article environments were categorized into [ - SR + HK], [ + SR - HK], [ + SR + HK], [ - SR - HK] contexts. Kubota finds that the first category, [ - SR + HK], which represents generic nouns, is the most difficult, whereas the [ + SR + HK] is the easiest. Unfortunately, the researcher does not further investigate what kind of errors the subjects made for generic nouns, so learners' difficulty with generic nouns still remains uncertain.

Takahashi (1997) also confirms the significance of specific context on L2 learners' article performance. In order to clarify what difficulties Japanese learners of English have when studying English articles, Takahashi conducted a study in which 111 college learners of English took a cloze test. The study shows that the Japanese students used the definite article more frequently for modified noun phrases even if they required an indefinite interpretation. There is also a tendency to rely on memorized sequences, which are usually acquired by learners as chunks or formulaic expressions (e.g. *Where's the X?*, *the first X*), irrespective of whether the head noun really refers to a referent that is specific and accessible to the addressee. The Japanese subjects not only used *the* appropriately in commonly occurring sequences, as shown in (34), but also overused it in non-commonly occurring sequences, as in (35), where the indefinite article is required:

**(34) Commonly occurring sequence**

I asked him to go with me. But *the* first word he said was "No."

**(35) Non-commonly occurring sequence**

A: What do you think of him?

B: Honestly speaking I think he is \**the* second-class player.

These findings clarify on what basis Japanese learners decide which article to use in a particular context: they seem to depend on the existence of certain linguistic forms or sentence patterns.

To sum up, the aforementioned studies verify that EFL/ESL learners whose L1 lacks an equivalent system of English articles tend to overuse  $\emptyset$  in both *the* and *a(n)* contexts. Meanwhile, there is also a tendency for learners, both with a [ + ART] and [ - ART] L1 background, to overgeneralize *the* in indefinite contexts. Some studies even reveal that article use may depend on certain words, modifiers, or sentence patterns. Overall, use of English articles becomes more accurate as the learner's proficiency increases, although he/she is already exposed to a substantial number of articles at the beginning stage of L2 learning.