

Approaching Definiteness as a General Concept

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Abstract

In general, EFL students encounter the concept of definiteness in English incidentally, through the rules they are usually taught on the use of the definite article, *the*. However, it seems unlikely that this is how native speakers approach the use of *the* and other markers of definiteness, and more likely that they work off of a general concept of what definiteness is. The author explores the question of whether it might be useful to introduce our students to definiteness as a general principle, and suggests one approach for doing this.

Key words : definiteness, definite article, conceptions of language, ELT, EFL

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Greenbaum in his *Oxford English Grammar* (1991, p. 621) says of a definite noun phrase that it “conveys the assumption that the hearer or reader can identify what it refers to.” This conveyance is what is meant by the term “definiteness.” While definite noun phrases are commonly associated with the use of the definite article, other parts of speech that denote definiteness are proper nouns, personal pronouns, and noun phrases containing a demonstrative or possessive modifier (C. Lyons 1999:107-156). However, in ELT materials and in the ELT classroom, definiteness is by and large only ever encountered as a collection of rules on article use. This paper explores the question of whether it might help our students to be taught definiteness as a general property of English.

Certainly, the difficulties with using definite and indefinite articles in English for learners coming from languages without articles are well documented. Arabic, for instance, has a definite article but no indefinite article and Arabic learners of English have particular difficulty with use of the English indefinite article, often omitting it when speaking or writing in English (Kharma, 1981). For Japanese learners of English, coming as they do from a language that “has no part of speech equivalent of English articles,” the use of articles is particularly problematic (Kimizuka 1967, p. 79). Indeed, so prevalent are mistakes with article use among learners that Miller (2005, p. 80) suggests that such errors can be used as one of three major indicators that someone is a non-native speaker. “In almost any piece of writing submitted by a non-native speaker of English, three things will often indicate that the writer is working in a second language: the choice of tense and aspect, the subject and verb agreements, and the use of articles (*the, a, an*.)” This

despite the great exposure that learners of English have to articles. Hewson (1972, p. 131) notes, “the definite and the indefinite articles are among the ten most frequent words of English discourse” and Master (2002) says the definite article, *the*, is the most frequently used word in English. That is, any learner of English who has been in an English program for any decent length of time will have encountered thousands and thousands of instances of use of both the definite article, *the*, and the two indefinite articles, *a* and *an*, and yet for many such learners choosing when and where and which, if any, of these to use will remain one of the most problematic areas in their use of English.

The difficulty of this system is such that some teachers believe that article use cannot really be taught through the giving of rules (Krech and Driver, 1996). But this seems to be a minority position. Master (1967, p. 216) argues that “formal instruction does have a positive effect” and the great majority of grammar practice books and of English language textbooks seem to take this stance although some criticism has been made of the type of coverage given. Yoo (2009), for example, notes that the cataphoric use of the receives little or no attention in ESL texts—cataphoric use of *the* is where *the* is used in the first instance of use even though what specific object is being referred to is not yet known. Yoo notes the lack of attention given to such use despite the fact that around 40% of the academic use of the definite article is cataphoric. Another criticism of the coverage of articles in texts comes from Togo (2006, quoted in Yamasaki 2014) who argues that some of the simple rules used to teach articles, such as “Use *the* when a noun has already been used in the text,” fail to note how articles are being used in discourse and cannot really help students understand the article system in English. Applied for example to the famous quote in Act V of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, this would produce “A horse, the horse! My kingdom for the horse,” which would make little sense in this instance.

Yamasaki (2014, p. 32) describes the way Japanese EFL learners are taught definiteness. “In school, Japanese EFL learners study basic rules about the usage of the definite article *the*.” She gives an example from the Japanese Junior High School English textbook *One World: English Course 3* (Matsumoto, S. *et al* 2006).

- (1) a. Use *the* when nouns are general terms.
- b. Use *the* when it can be translated into *sono**. (*Sono* is one of the Japanese demonstratives followed by a noun which can be definitely recognized by hearers, or the noun which has already been introduced in the text).

Raymond Murphy in his widely consulted *Grammar in Use* also approaches the use of *the* as a series of rules, for example, “We use *the* when there is only one of something,” (p. 144). However, he also asks the reader to imagine the context and choose use of *the* with context in mind. For example, “We use *the* when we are thinking of one particular thing.” (p. 142). Could such a contextual approach be more generally applied to have students consider definiteness as a

general property of English?

After all, as previously mentioned, definiteness, is not purely a function of the articles. The author has noticed over the years that many of his students have problems with the definiteness of the personal pronouns. A typical example would be for a student to refer to 'my friend' in the first instance of use when what they really mean is 'a friend of mine.' The use of 'my' with its sense of definiteness indicates that the listener has some knowledge of who the friend is. If, like this, the noun phrase is given as definite without any context the unfortunate impression given is that the student only has one friend. In contrast, I can say 'my wife' in the first instance because the assumption is I only have one wife. However, while mistakes like this do occur, students can usually correct their use quite easily when it is pointed out to them, and there are no real other definiteness issues with other parts of speech where definiteness can be seen, such as the personal pronouns or the demonstratives. In the end analysis, it is only really the use of the articles that is problematic for learners, and our focus on definiteness in ELT should continue to be here. Still, the question remains of whether it would help students to consider definiteness in general terms.

A big problem with this is that there is no accepted explanation for what definiteness is. B. Abbott writes in the entry for *Definite and Indefinite* in the Encyclopedia of Language & Linguistics that "what differentiates definite from indefinite NPs has been a matter of some dispute." (p. 392) She begins by describing the Bertrand Russell tradition of viewing definite phrases as 'unique,' and points out how such an approach can be criticized because very often the "descriptive content of a definite description is not sufficient to pick out a unique referent from the world at large." (p. 393). For this she gives the example of "Please put this on the table" and says this is understood despite the large number of tables in the world. She then describes the other primary way of approaching definiteness, to see it as denoting familiarity. This is the tradition of the Danish linguist Paul Christopherson. However, as Abbott points out, in a sentence such as "Mary asked the oldest student in the class to explain everything," (p. 394) no familiarity with that student is needed in order to understand the referent. Finally, she gives the example of "the wrong answer" as something that cannot be explained by either of the two prevailing models.

Greenbaum (1996, p. 621) references both these traditions in the expanded definition of that given in the first paragraph of this paper. "A definite noun phrase conveys the assumption that the hearer or reader can identify what it refers to. Identification may be assumed when (for example) the phrase refers to something previously mentioned or uniquely identifiable from general knowledge or from the particular context." In other words, for Greenbaum it is the identification, whether through familiarity or uniqueness, that is the functionally important point. This could perhaps be seen as a starting point for helping students consider the issue of definiteness generally.

A Hypothetical Construct of Definiteness

The “natural partitions hypothesis is how Dedre Getner categorizes the idea that “the linguistic distinction between nouns and predicate terms such as verbs and prepositions, is based on a preexisting perceptual or conceptual distinction between concrete concepts such as persons or things and predicative concepts of activity, change-of-state, or causal relations and that the category corresponding to nouns is… more basic.” (p. 3). That is to say, the way we linguistically divide our world into NPs and predicates—a divide present in all languages—is primarily representative of how we cognitively perceive the world and not an artifact of language. If this is the case and if NPs are associated in some manner with our conceptual entities of primary focus, then I would like to offer the following conjecture. If how we make sense of the world through language is through identifying and then tracking these thought entities, however briefly, and in this way construct our conceptual maps of the world, and if definiteness has a role to play at this conceptual level, markers of definiteness could be seen as functioning as tracking markers, or tags, indicating that the NP is associated with a particular conceptual entity that is something previously mentioned, or something that will be mentioned again or expanded upon. In other words, definiteness markers such as *the* are there to indicate that the NP you are considering is connected to an ongoing concept of interest. The NP is tagged as one to be followed whether, as in Greenbaum’s inclusive definition, this is because it is unique, or familiar or due to some other indicator. In contrast, the indefinite marker, *a/an* perhaps could be said to function more like an identification marker—it says something is of a class and is specific, but doesn’t specify what member of that class it is that is to be tracked.

Note too that is not whether the speaker recognizes the item that is important, but that the utterer perceives that the listener has something (whether general or specific) that they can mark for tracking. Consider the following example.

- “Go into the room. There are four chairs in a square pattern. Choose a chair. Take **the** chair out of the room.”

In this example the speaker doesn’t know which of the four chairs was chosen, which of the four is being followed by the listener. But the speaker recognizes that the listener has chosen, that there is something to be followed.

A question for students as they come to consider definiteness might be something like:

“Is this a thing that the listener/reader is following or needs to follow?”

It seems to me that something like this is occurring in the mind of the native speaker, that the use of definiteness markers is not a matter of applying rules, or of repeating patterns of use heard in the past, but of identifying the definiteness of the NP. So while the giving of rules can

be a useful first step for the learner, it might be accompanied by such a more general consideration.

Below I attempt to describe how such a framework might work with what are commonly given examples of the use of *the*.

- Second occurrence: The NPs we tag are those that have already shown some movement, where this is at least the second instance of interaction, either directly...
 - There was a vintage car on the road. I looked into **the** car...or indirectly where a 'new' NP is identifiably connected with an already mentioned NP and so a continuance.
 - **The** dashboard was walnut.
- Contextual use: When we're in a context we could be said to be 'following' conditions within that context.
 - Please pass me **the** salt. (at the dinner table)
- Unique entities: This might be considered as the larger context within which we all exist and so the reference can be easily recognized and is followed as part of this larger world.
 - Don't look directly at **the** sun.
- General use of a word: This evokes an imagined NP that is ongoing in the mind of the receiver and part of the larger context of the world.
 - I don't want to live in **the** city.
- Cataphoric uses: This conception would also account for the previously mentioned cataphoric uses of the definite article and other definiteness markers, indicating from the very first instance of use that these are NPs to be followed.

Consider the examples below, both instances of first use.

- Look! A bird!
- Look at **the** bird!

In the second instance 'at' introduces the idea that there is something to be 'looked at,' to be followed. Hence the 'the.' In the first instance, there is simply the suggestion, 'Look!' use your eyes, but no suggestion yet that there is something to be tracked. Hence the use of the introductory (or identifying) 'A' before 'bird.'

Such a conception of the use of *the* doesn't seem to always hold for idiomatic uses or for

proper names with *the* as in the examples below.

- stick it to **the** man.
- We drove past **the** White House.

But as these are likely memorized as chunks it is perhaps not a large issue for learners.

This model would also seem to account for the use of *the* with “the wrong answer,” as we might not know precisely what the nature of the wrong answer was but we could follow it because it was THE wrong answer associated with this particular question. In contrast, we would say “I gave a wrong answer,” when the listener doesn’t know what the referent question is and so has nothing to follow.

In conclusion, while it continues to be useful for students to be presented with a series of rules on the use of the definite article, ultimately we should perhaps be trying to help them develop a sense of the definite that they can apply more generally. The author suggests that students can perhaps approach this by considering whether an NP is something that is being followed, or something to be marked for following, and that this might help them approach something closer to native-speaker use of the articles.

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