A Closer Look at the English Article System: *Internal and External Sources of Difficulty Revisited*

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a short overview of the English article system along with a detailed account of the sources of difficulty that makes such a complicated system uneasily attainable for ESL learners. According to Hewson (1972), "the definite and the indefinite articles are among the ten most frequent words of English discourse" (p.131). As such, learners of English are likely to be heavily exposed to hundreds of instances that contain a wide range of uses of English articles, which will, presumably, provide non-native speakers with a perceptibly increased level of accuracy. However, the English article system has been reported to be one of the most difficult features of the English language, causing some students enormous difficulties; particularly, of course, those whose native languages do not use articles (Master, 1990; Mizuno, 1999; Park, 2006; *inter alia*). In this paper, I will discuss the factors that make the English article system difficult for speakers of other languages to use appropriately. The paper will be divided into three sections: (1) a short overview of the article system, (2) internal factors: those that pertain to the internal structure of English such as lexico-syntactic and discoursal factors, and (3) external factors: those that pertain to other languages such as presence or absence of the article system. Possibly unlike previously published research, this paper combines both factors and further works to the advantage of new instructors as it provides them with the rationale behind ESL learners' inappropriate usage of the article system.

Keywords: English article system, Internal factors, External factors, Lexico-syntactic factors, Discoursal factors, First language interference

1. Introduction

Learners of English a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) are faced with a wide variety of difficulties (e.g., semantic, syntactic, phonological, etc.) that often affect their overall proficiency. The article system is one feature of English grammar that has been reported to cause some students enormous difficulties; particularly, of course, those whose native languages do not use articles. According to Hewson (1972), "the definite and the indefinite article are among the ten most frequent words of English discourse" (p.131). In light of this, learners of English are likely to be exposed to hundreds of instances that contain a wide range of uses of articles, which will, supposedly, provide non-native speakers of English with a perceptibly increased level of accuracy. However, mastering the English article system has been reported to be one of the most difficult features of English, if not the most difficult (Master, 1990; Mizuno, 1999; Park, 2006; *inter alia*).

2. A Short Overview of the English Article System

In linguistics, an article is often defined as a word (or a determiner) used with a noun to indicate the kind of reference made by the noun. The English article system has two major types of articles: indefinite and definite articles. The former type embraces both articles *a* and *an*[1]. The latter type include only *the*. For the purpose of this paper, I should probably mention that most of examples used in this paper will come from *English Grammar in Use* by Raymond Murphy (2012). Yet, other examples, especially those from corpus data, might be used as well.

Most grammar books prescribe the use of <u>indefinite articles</u> in several categories, which can be combined as follows[2]:

- We use the indefinite article, a/an, with count nouns when the hearer/reader does not know exactly which one we are referring to:

e.g., Police are searching for a 14 year-old girl.

- We also use a/an to show the person or thing is one of a group:

e.g., She is a pupil at London Road School.

- We use a/an to say what someone is or what job they do:

e.g., My brother is a doctor.
George is a student.

- We use a/an with a singular noun to say something about all things of that kind:

e.g., A man needs friends. (= All men need friends)
A dog likes to eat meat. (= All dogs like to eat meat)

On the other hand, **the definite article *the*** is often prescribed for use as follows[3]:

- We use the definite article when referring to one particular thing:

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[1] Some researchers have argued that *some* can also be considered a definite article. Regardless, this is seen as falling outside the scope of this paper.

[2] The list is not exhaustive and only includes some of the most common uses of indefinite articles *a* and *an*.

[3] The list is not exhaustive and is never meant to be so; it includes only some of the most common uses of the definite article *the*.

e.g., Rhianna sat down on the chair nearest the door (a particular chair) *vs*. Rhianna sat down on a chair (any chair).

- We use the when it is clear which thing or person we mean:

e.g., Can you turn off the light? (= the light in this room)

Are you going to the post office? (= the post office in this town; usually there is one post office)

- We use the when there is only one of something

e.g., What is the longest river in the world? (=there is only one longest river)

- We also use it when we refer to a noun that both the speaker (writer) and the listener (reader) know exactly what is being referred to. The following examples are helpful to illustrate:

e.g., The Pope is visiting Jordan. (=there is only one Pope both addresser and addressee know of)

- Conceptual knowledge (universal and general)

e.g., The computer has revolutionized our life. (= computers have revolutionized our life)[4]

In this place, it is worth mentioning that the above-mentioned usages (of the definite article) have been given different labels and titles such as familiarity, identifiability, specificity, shared knowledge, common knowledge, etc. These, along with others, will be thoroughly discussed below as factors causing a lot of difficulty on the part of learners of English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL).

3. Sources of Difficulty: Internal Factors

Consulting the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) the definite article *the* has a frequency of 25065276 per million. Probably for this reason, Master (2002) lists *the* as the most frequent word in English (p.332). Needless to say, this high frequency of such a small word can have a huge effect on learners' proficiency. As previously maintained, acquiring[5] the English article system is nonetheless extremely difficult due to a set of internal factors, those that pertain to the internal structure of the English language. These factors can be categorized as follows: lexico-syntactic, and discourse[6]. These factors make the task of mastery difficult for learners of English to achieve, as we will see below.

3.1 Lexico-Syntactic Factors

As can be told from the name, lexico-syntactic factors are best understood as a blend of lexical and syntactic elements. These include, but are not limited to, the following:

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[4] In this example, we are not referring to one particular computer. Rather, we are referring to the concept. Even though the definite article is used, the referent is still non-specific.

[5] In this context, acquisition refers to the notion of mastery; it does not refer to the unconscious, effortless process experienced by native speakers as opposed to non-native speakers.

[6] In linguistics, these factors have been given many labels: structural, contextual, etc.

countability, definiteness, specificity, and many others. Even though countability, by itself, is not as important as other factors, I deem it appropriate to briefly talk about this concept, as it will be frequently mentioned when other factors are discussed.

3.1.1 Countability

The notion of countability is one of the chief factors, causing enormous difficulties among non-native speakers of English. Unfortunately, the concept of countability is not crystal clear for many ESL/EFL learners. Such complexity stems from the lack of distinction between what is countable (also referred to as count) and what is uncountable (as referred to as non-count or mass). On the surface level, the notion of countability seems like an easy concept to grasp, as it is often times understood in the practical sense (i.e., the mathematical sense: 1+1=2). On the underlying level, the concept of countability is a complex one, as it must be understood in the grammatical sense. That is, nouns that may take the plural form (i.e., —s) are countable (such as boys, girls, children, etc.), whereas nouns that may not take the plural form are uncountable (such as mud, money[7], etc.). The previous distinction is also referred to as individuated/non-individuated distinction. Needless to say, this grammatical/lexical feature is not automatically determined or easily attained. Several attempts, however, have been made to show the difference between count nouns and non-count nouns. One of the first attempts[8] is that of Keith Allan's (1980) Noun Countability Preferences (NCPs). Allan suggested that nouns (or NPs) show countability preferences "as some nouns more often occur in countable NP's, others in uncountable NP's, and still others seem to occur quite freely in both" (p. 566). In simpler terms, nouns can be seen as having two extremes:

(1) fully countable: (at the one extreme): e.g., boy (=boys)

(2) strongly countable: e.g., I like *cake* vs. I ate a *cake*. (= a piece of cake)

(3) weakly countable: e.g., She likes *beer*. (But one can still say 'I would like to have *two beers'*)

(4) uncountable (at the other extreme): e.g., *Knowledge* is powerful. *The knowledge is powerful.

Based on Allan's (1980) NCPs, Bond, Ogura, and Ikehara (1994) similarly divided nouns into five major categories. These are as follows:

(1) fully countable: fully countable nouns have both singular and plural forms and cannot be used with determiners like much, little, etc. e.g., girl > girls > *much girl > *much girls

(2) uncountable: uncountable nouns have only plural forms and can be used with much, little, etc. e.g., furniture> much furniture > *furnitures

(3) plural only: plural nouns can never be singular. e.g., scissors > *scissor

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[7] The plural form 'moneys' is often used in a business sense.
[8] To the best of my knowledge.

(4) strongly countable: They can be converted to uncountable. e.g., I like cake and I would like a cake.

(5) weakly countable: Uncountable nouns that are readily convertible to countable.

e.g., Beer can be harmful to the body. * The beer can be harmful to the body.

Identifying countability is useful because it helps the learner(s) to figure out the appropriate use(s) of the article system. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to predict the proper use of articles. For example, English grammar has the so-called zero article often used before uncountable nouns and plurals (such as a1 and a2) and null articles are used before singular countable nouns and proper nouns (such as a3).

(a1) There was sand everywhere. *There was the sand everywhere.

(a2) Pebbles are found on beaches. *The pebbles are found on beaches.

(a3) Use of this method implied[9]….

As seen, grasping the concept of countability can be extremely complex due to the many variables involved. Identifying countability is therefore problematic for most ESL/ EFL learners. It is not apparent when a noun is either fully countable, weakly countable, or uncountable at all. But even if a noun has been determined to be either countable or uncountable, the proper usage of the article system is not guaranteed. This moves us to the second criterion, (discussed below).

3.1.2 Definiteness

The notion of definiteness is essential to understanding the proper use of the article system. For our purposes, definiteness refers to a prominent, specific entity. As previously mentioned, the English article system has two types of articles: indefinite articles (i.e., a, an) and definite articles (the). The type of articles (i.e., *the*, *a*, *an*, zero and null) plays a key a role in determining the amount or degree of definiteness of the noun (or NP). To better understand the notion of definiteness, Chesterman's (1991) proposed continuum will be used as follows:

Most indefinite	Most definite
zero (Ø1)	*--a--the--*
null (Ø2)	

On the one end of the continuum, the zero article (Ø1) is the most indefinite article in the article system (Master, 1997, p. 222) because it "remove[s] the boundaries that make nouns discrete" (ibid). Let us compare the following sentences:

(b1) I ate <u>a pizza</u> vs. (b2) I ate <u>pizza</u>.

Obviously, both sentences are indefinite, but they differ in the degree of definiteness. In the

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[9] Since the null article is often used in scientific writing (such as a3), it can present an additional problem to students.

first sentence, the message communicated is that I ate one pizza, whereas in the second sentence, it is unclear how much pizza was consumed. Undoubtedly, the use of the zero article in the second sentence removes any boundaries of discreteness and gives a more sense of indefiniteness. Let us examine another set of sentences:

(1c) The man caught <u>a fish</u> (countable)

(2c) The man caught <u>fish</u> (uncountable)

In 1c, the word *fish* is used in a countable sense, whereas it is uncountable in 2c. What is important here is the role the use of the zero article has on the countability of the noun (or NP) being referred to. In other words, the use of the zero article before a countable noun transforms it into an uncountable noun as best obvious in 2c.

On the other end of the continuum, the null article (Ø2) is the most definite form of articles. The definite article is simply not used (omitted) because definiteness can still be internally attained without the addition of article *the*.

(1d) After <u>dinner</u>, I will see a movie

(2d) After <u>the dinner</u>, I will see a movie.

In 1d, the null article is used as it assumed by the speaker that the hearer knows what is being referred to. In other words, 'more' familiarity is assumed between the speaker and the hearer. In 2d, use of the definite article is possible, but it may suggest that the hearer is 'less' familiar with the subject. Such is often rare and usually calls for the use of the null article (Ø2) unless the context dictates otherwise, e.g., a reference to a special kind of dinner.

The center of continuum has both the indefinite article *a* and the definite article *the*. The indefinite article, as previously mentioned, functions as a remover of discreteness, thereby, achieving more indefiniteness.

(1e) What would you like to have?

<u>Coffee</u> would be great. (uncountable)

(2e) What would you like to have?

<u>A coffee</u> would be great. (countable)

As can be seen, the indefinite article can be said to have the exact opposite function of the zero article. To explain, the zero article (Ø1) gives the most sense of indefiniteness, whereas the indefinite article gives more definiteness in the noun or NP. The boundary is defined through the use of *a*. It is more likely to be a cup of coffee, not a coffee plant, for example.

The general function of the definite article *the* is "to single out or identify, or to indicate that the speaker either presumes a noun to be singled out and identified for the hearer or instructs the hearer to do so" (Master, 1997, p. 225).

(1f) Mustafa sat down on <u>the chair</u> nearest the door.

(2f) Mustafa sat down on <u>a chair</u>.

As obvious as it can be, the use of the definite article in 1f makes clear that the chair referred to is the one closest to the door rather than the window, for example. In 2f, the indefinite article, in contrast, does not identify what chair is being referred to, for example, its location to other chairs or to the door. In this place, it is worth mentioning that familiarity does not seem to as important as it is in examples 1e and 2e. Rather, it is the description provided, i.e., *nearest the door* "with any necessary contextual supplementation should provide (or be regarded as providing) defining information about the referent" (Huddleston, 1984, p. 251)

Needless to say, understanding the concept of definiteness is not an easy one for most ESL learners to attain, at least in their initial stages of learning. In my capacity as a learner of English, I attribute such difficulty to context-related factors (e.g., discourse), which moves us to the next factor adding to the overall difficulty of mastering the English article system.

3.1.3 Specificity

Both indefinite and definite articles can be used to identify the degree of specificity embedded in a noun. Both can be used to indicate specificity and non-specificity. Let us examine the following set of sentences to see how the use of indefinite article suggests both sense of specificity:

(1g) I purchased <u>a book</u> about history or I purchased a history book.

(2g) I would like to buy <u>a book</u>.

In 1g, the indefinite article indicates that a specific book was purchased. It is about history rather than sociology, for example. In 2g, the indefinite article does not indicate what type of book and whether it will be purchased. These examples show that the indefinite article can be used to refer to a specific or non-specific referent.

Similarly, the definite article can be used either specifically or non-specifically. I will use the same examples:

(1h) I purchased the history book.

(2h) I purchased the book. (*the one we talked about earlier, the one you bought, etc.*)

Using the above logic, 1h signifies that a specific type of book was purchased – history not sociology, for example. In 2h, the book was purchased, but it is not obvious what kind of book it was. However, understanding 2h is totally dependent on contextual cues or shared knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.

Closely related to specificity is the notion of genericness, i.e., generic vs. non-generic uses of articles.

(1i) <u>A dog</u> chased after me.

(2i) <u>The English</u> are cold.

The use of the indefinite article in 1i is generic, as it is used to refer to a class of animals with

no reference to a specific breed. Likewise, the use of definite article in 2i refers to a class of people with no reference to any specific individuals. But now let us examine the following sentences to see if my stream of thought holds water:

(1j) <u>A cat</u> is a lovely pet.

(2j) <u>Cats</u> are lovely pets.

(3j) <u>The cats</u> are lovely pets.

In 1j, the indefinite article is used generically as we are not referring to a specific cat, but more of the class. In 2j, the use of plurality does not change anything; we are still referring to the class. The same can be said of 3j, regardless of both the definite article and the plural morpheme —*s*. Obviously, both definiteness and plurality do not seem to affect the generic references because, as Quirk et al (1985) puts it, "we are thinking of the class without specific reference" (p. 265). Thus, ESL/EFL learners may be confused by the notion of genericness and wonder which sentence is correct when all three of them can be possible/permitted in English.

In addition to the above-mentioned lexical factors, there may be certain syntactic constraints that ESL/EFL learners should also be aware of. Some of these include, but are not limited to the following:

(1) The definite article must be used with superlative constructions:

e.g. Mustafa is <u>the tallest</u> boy in the class.

(2) The definite article must be used with *same*:

e.g., X and Y cannot be <u>the same</u>.

(3) etc.

3.2 Discourse

Discourse and discourse-related factors can also play a key role in determining the proper use of the English article system. In this section, I will discuss the following factors: unique identifiability, familiarity and accessibility and others. Some of these factors were briefly introduced in the previous section, but a more detailed account will be provided below.

Discourse is the name given to units of language longer than a single sentence[10]. In discourse, the use of the definite article, as opposed to indefinite articles, has often been approached from one of the following perspectives: (1) identifiability and (2) familiarity, neither of which seems to be either identifiable or unique for learners of English as discussed below.

3.2.1 Unique Identifiability & Familiarity

Birner and Ward (1994) argue that the most appropriate use of the definite article requires that "the referent of the NP be either familiar within the discourse … or uniquely identifiable

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[10] I will rely exclusively on corpus data to obtain longer stretches of language.

to the hearer" (p. 1). The two notions are interrelated, but can still be argued to be slightly different. On the one hand, a referent becomes identifiable when it is unique. In other words, an identifiable referent is unique when it is "the only entity of that type within the discourse model (Epstein, 2002, p. 336). On the other hand, a referent becomes familiar when it has previously been mentioned in the discourse; albeit, uniqueness is not required. It is unclear whether identifiability can be separated from familiarity "since an entity typically must be familiar in a given discourse in order to be identifiable to the hearer" (Birner and Ward, 1994, p. 1).

Regardless of the differences (if any), both accounts seek to explain definiteness as associated with entities that are uniquely identified and familiar to the hearer. The difficulty stems from being able to fully recognize these two concepts. According to Hawkins (1991), identifiability/familiarity is achieved as follows:

(1) A referent of NPs can be uniquely identified and made familiar to the hearer(s) when it has previously been mentioned in the discourse. In other words, the referent is a part of the previous discourse. Quirk et al (1985) refers to this as a 'direct anaphoric' reference because the same noun is used in the reference (p. 267). Consider, for example, the following set of sentences:

(k1) I saw <u>a man</u> walking down the street. <u>The man</u> was wearing a hat.

The initial mention of *a man* permits the subsequent mention of *the man*. Without the initial mention, the subsequent mention would have been ambiguous, i.e., that it is neither uniquely identified nor familiar.

(2) A referent of NPs may be uniquely identified and made familiar to the hearer(s) if "it is part of the immediate situation of utterance in which the speaker and the address find themselves (Hawkins, p. 408), eliminating any ambiguity on the part of the hearer(s). Consider the following:

(l1) Give me <u>the key</u>.

The sentence above assumes the listener is familiar with the key being referred to and it is uniquely identified in the sense that there is only one key – unless there is another key, which may curb down the degree of uniqueness.

(3) A referent of NPs may also be uniquely identified and made familiar to the hearer(s) due to "the physical location of an utterance … as the defining point for a 'larger situation set' of entities (Hawkins, p. 408). Consider the following:

(m1) "Where are the jobs?" Romney wrote in an open letter to <u>the president</u> on Thursday running as an ad in the Tampa Bay Times.
[COCA]

Due to their physical location, inhabitants of the US can speak of <u>the president</u> irrespective of many presidents elsewhere. The president here refers to the president of the United States, not France, for example.

(4) Finally, A referent of NPs may also be uniquely identified and made familiar to the hearer(s) based on "a more general kind of knowledge of associative relationships between entities" (ibid, p. 408). Consider the following:

(n1) If you've visited the Zoo during the summer, you may have had the chance to see <u>the seals</u> do their twice-daily training.
[COCA]

The sentence above assumes that the listener knows that a zoo usually has and is often associated with animals such as the seals. In fact, the indirect anaphoric reference here is greatly established after the topic is introduced. Once the zoo has been introduced, it becomes even more possible to speak of the lions, the camels, etc.

Ironically, neither familiarity is familiar nor unique identifiability is easily identified. Such causes learners of English to wander around and continue to have difficulties with the English article system. For this reason, Epstein (2002) argues that neither unique identifiability nor familiarity is sufficient to identify whether or not a referent is either uniquely identifiable or made familiar to the hearer. He cites the following examples:

"As he circled <u>the Indians</u>, Richard Alexander thought about buying one" (p. 339)

Epstein argues that none of the above-sources (1 through 4) is applicable to the sentence above. He states the use of the definite article *the Indians* is neither uniquely identifiable nor familiar to the listener because they

> have not been previously mentioned in their respective contexts (the text in 1b comes from the very beginning of the story), they are not included within the reader's immediate situation of utterance, they do not constitute knowledge shared by people in the same physical location, their existence cannot be predicted or inferred from the co-occurrence of some other entity, and the descriptive content of the NPs themselves are not rich enough to allow readers to identify the referents on that basis alone. (p. 339)

This moves us to the notion of accessibility first introduced by Epstein (2002).

3.2.2 Accessibility

The notion of accessibility is defined as "the degree of activation of information in long or short-term memory. Highly accessible mental entities—those which are most active in consciousness—require less processing effort to be retrieved and implemented than do entities of low accessibility" (Epstein, 2002, p. 344). The definite article is argued to be a marker of accessibility, one that has a low degree of accessibility. Three factors determine the degree of accessibility, which in turn serve as functions of the definite article:

(1) Discourse prominence

The use of the definite article requires a referent to be a highly prominent entity; that is, an entity that "plays an important part in the broader discourse context" (Epstein, 2002, p. 349). Let us examine the following example:

(1o) <u>The boy</u> studied graphic design and <u>the woman</u> was very well known (the very beginning of a story).

(2o) Did you hear about <u>the murder</u>? What murder?   …

The example above illustrates a definite description at the very beginning of a story employed to attract the readers' attention to both the boy and the woman. This description is highly topical, i.e., it signals that they will be topics in the subsequent portion of text. Similarly, the definite article in 2o is preferred over the indefinite article as the speaker intends the murder to be the subsequent topic of the conversation (what murder?). The referents in the examples above are said to be accessible because "addressees interpret them by attempting to link them to other accessible elements (or other retrievable information, more generally) within the evolving discourse configuration" (Epstein, 2002, p. 356). Needless to say, neither familiarity nor identifiability holds water when explaining either 1o or 2o.

(2) Role/value status

The role or its status may trigger the use of the definite article over the indefinite article. Definite descriptions can be used to signal roles or their values because "they are part of the larger situation set or because they can be inferred from knowledge of a previously evoked frame" (p.360). Let us look at the following sentences:

(1p) <u>The president</u> is vising China. Then, he will return to the States.

(2p) He is heading toward <u>the unknown</u>. (Metaphorically)

In 1p, the definite article is used to access the role of the president of the United States because he is part of the larger situation set. In 2p, the definite article is used to convey the idea that a person may be at risk if he or she has gone against everyone's advice, for example. It is assumed that they are doing the wrong thing based on knowledge of a previously evoked frame. It is not obvious what the unknown is (not uniquely identifiable), but it is still definite.

(3) Point of view shifts

The final function of the definite article is to signal shifts in point of view. This is often apparent in literary works at the very beginning as to "empathize with, or adopt the viewpoint of, the narrator" (p. 363). An example would be helpful to illustrate:

> *In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across <u>the river</u> and <u>the plain</u> to the mountains.*

The above is the opening line of Hemingway's opening line of *A Farewell to Arms*. Neither the river nor the plain is identifiable nor are they made familiar to the reader. They are only so to Hemingway himself. However, Epstein argues that the use of the definite article indicates "the narrator's point of view, in addition to portraying an entity as discourse prominent" (p. 363).

In summary, the English article system poses a lot of difficulties on ESL/EFL learners. As we have seen, the internal structure of the article system is extremely complex and thus requires

that learners understand and be exceedingly familiar with abstract concepts ranging from lexical choices, syntactic constructions, to discourse constraints.

4. Sources of Difficulty: External Factors

Learners of ESL/EFL can also be constrained by a set of external factors, those that pertain to their own mother tongue (L2). Leaners' first language can either facilitate (positive transfer) or hinder (negative transfer or interference) the process of learning the English article system due to similarities and differences between L1 and L2. Both languages (L1 and L2) may be similar due to the existence of the article system (e.g., Spanish and English). Other languages may be partially or completely different due to the existence of the article system in L1 and its absence in L2 and vice versa (e.g., Chinese, Arabic, etc.).

4.1 Similar or Semi-Similar Systems

García Mayo (2008) conducted a study to see whether or not L1 (i.e., Spanish) has any effect on the participant's ability to learn the English article system. Irrespective of the existence of the article system in Spanish (L1) and English (L2), the researcher found that all four non-generic uses of the definite articles presented different levels of difficulty and most importantly it was reported that participants overused the definite article due to heavy transfer from L1 (Spanish) to L2 (English). Such was confirmed by Ionin et al. (2008) who argues "L2 learners whose L1 has articles transfer article semantics from their L1 to their L2" (p. 560). However, having an article does not necessarily guarantee the proper use of the article English system. Let us examine the following sentences:

> (1q) She died of cancer   vs. Ella murió de cancer
>
> (2q) She died of the plague   vs.   Ella murió de la plaga
>
> (3q) *She died of plague   vs. *Ella murió de el plaga

<p align="right">(Isabelli-García & Slough, 2012, p. 97)</p>

Both English and Spanish do not use the definite article when referring to diseases such as cancer and plague. However, the cultural reference to each disease may be different: English views plague as masculine, whereas the Spanish equivalent is a feminine reference best manifested by the use of the feminine definite article in 2q. The third set of sentences may be acceptable in English[11], but never in Spanish.

Whereas English and Spanish have indefinite and definite articles, Arabic employs only a system of one definite article (i.e., ال/*al*) and lacks indefinite articles. Thus, Arab learners of English are expected to have more difficulties with indefinite articles. Kharma (1981) investigated the types of errors committed by Arab learners of English. Of all errors committed, the article system was reported to be among the most difficult features of the English language to tackle. Learners had the most difficulty with indefinite articles and least difficulty with the definite article *the*. The least difficulty was attributed to positive transfer because both English and Arabic use the definite article in the same sense (Swan and Smith,

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[11] According to a native speaker of English.

2001). The most difficulty was attributed to negative transfer or differences between English and Arabic. Let us consider the following examples:

(1r) Maya is <u>a girl</u>.

(2r) Maya (hiya[12]) <u>bent</u> (Arabic)

    Maya (is) <u>girl</u>. (Translation)

     *Maya is <u>girl</u>.

Due to lack of indefinite articles in Arabic, Arab learners of English are prone to omit the use of the indefinite article *a* as shown above in 2r because of the fact that all words in Arabic are indefinite by default (Schulz, 2004). Let us examine another set:

(1r) He lived in India.

(r2) ʕa. ʃa fi al hind (Arabic)

   Lived (he) in <u>the India</u> (translation)

    *He lived in the India.

The example above shows how native speakers of Arabic employ the definite articles with proper nouns. While English does not permit the use of definite articles with proper nouns, Arabic, in contrast, mandates its use. Obviously, such choices are heavily influenced by L1 (Arabic), which yields negative transfer in most cases. Other examples of negative transfer may be spotted due to differences between English count/non-count nouns and their equivalents in other languages. For example, a non-count noun in English may be regarded count in Arabic such as *money*. *Information* is never pluralized in English, but it is perfectly correct when pluralized in French (i.e., *Informations*). Thus, identifying countability is problematic for learners whose native languages do not distinguish between count and non-count nouns (e.g., Japanese) or those languages where pluralization is dealt with differently (e.g., French).

4.2 Dissimilar Systems

Unlike Spanish and Arabic discussed above, Japanese "has no part of speech equivalent of English articles" and such "constitutes one of the greatest problems for the Japanese learner" (Kimizuka, 1967, p. 79). Moreover, Japanese does not distinguish between singular and plural noun forms (Makino & Tsutui, 1984. p440). Similarly, Chamonikolasová and Stašková (2005) analyzed the writing of 30 Czech and Slovak students. Five major error types were detected: grammatical, lexical, lexico-grammatical, text-coherence, and formal errors. Of the grammatical errors, the article system was reported to have the highest frequency (i.e., 23.7%) due to "the absence of articles in the Czech and Slovak grammatical systems" (p. 54). Other languages that have no article systems include, but not are limited to, the following: Latin, Sanskrit, etc.

5. Conclusion

The English article system has been shown to be an extremely complex subject, imposing enormous difficulties on ESL/EFL learners. Such difficulties stem from a combination of

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[12]The main verb is optional. It can be deleted without affecting the overall meaning of the sentence.

internal and external factors. Internal factors are those that pertain to the structure of the English language. Internal factors can be either lexical, semantic, discourse or all put together. External factors are specific to the learners' first language (L1) such as absence or presence of the article system. Similarities could lead to positive transfer and differences to negative transfer. However, I believe that mastering the English article system, like any other feature of the English language, does not happen overnight. It requires a lot of efforts on the part of the learner. Increasing proficiency leads to mastery.

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