

THE FIRST/SECOND-MENTION RULE IN TEACHING THE ENGLISH ARTICLE

Elena ROTARU, senior lecturer

Rezumat

Utilizarea corectă a articolului în limba engleză prezintă dificultăți pentru majoritatea studenților care studiază limba engleză ca limbă străină. Una din dificultăți este că forma articolului în limba engleză depinde de faptul că substantivul la care se referă este menționat în context, pentru prima sau a doua oară. În acest context se face o analiză a regulilor de utilizare a articolului hotărât și nehotărât în limba engleză.

The easiest aspect of the article system for an EFL student to master is the first/second-mention rule, which states that the first time a noun appears in context it is considered indefinite, as if being viewed from afar, like a photographic distance shot. The second time the same noun appears in context, it is considered definite, like a focused close-up shot. For example:

1. *A man* is walking down *a road* with *a boy*. *The man* is tired, *the road* is long, and *the boy* is thirsty [2, p. 8].

Indirect second mention can occur with synonyms. For example:

2. Combine *butter*, *sugar*, and *eggs*. Add flour to *the mixture* (a synonym for the first three ingredients).

First mention makes *a(n)* the correct article for a singular countable noun, \emptyset (the zero article) for a plural or uncountable one. This first view of the noun is also used in describing general characteristics or situations, for which there are several sentence patterns. For example:

3a. It's *a plant*.

It has *leaves*.

3b. This is *an ant*.

That was *a cockroach*.

3c. There's *a book* on the table.

Here is *a pencil*.

3d. *A watch* is an instrument that measures time.

This is a formal definition of the form „An X is a Y that Z,” where X = a species, Y = a general class word, and Z = the characteristics that make X different from other Ys. The definitions represent both postmodification and generic usage.

Second mention makes *the* the correct article for both countable and uncountable nouns. For example:

4. *A growing plant* requires *water* and *minerals*. *The plant* must also have sunlight. *The minerals* must include nitrates and *the water* must not be salty.

Teaching and practicing first mention vs. second mention is the best way to give students the feeling that mastery is not out of their reach. It is obvious that first or second mention can only be determined in discourse, i.e. a series of sentences in a paragraph. Discrete single-sentence exercises are inappropriate for teaching this point because a noun is seldom reintroduced in the same sentence. The following exercise allows students to practice the first/second mention distinction plus the already learned countable/uncountable distinction [3, p. 209].

Directions: Fill the blanks with *a(n)*, *the*, or \emptyset .

_____ simple experiment demonstrates how alkali acts on _____ grease or _____ oil. Put _____ spoonful of _____ washing soda with _____ water in _____ greasy frying pan. Boil _____ mixture. In _____ short time, _____ washing soda and grease become _____ particles. _____ particles unite to form _____ new substance that we call soap. _____ soap can be washed out, leaving _____ frying pan clean.

Notice that we have only removed the articles that we know the students will understand at this point. All other articles are left in the passage.

So far we have considered first and second mention of the nouns in the context. Sometimes the

second mention exists without the first mention.

Second-mention status can be attained without previous mention. This is the case when the noun is preceded by certain adjectives or when shared knowledge short-circuits the previous-mention requirement. Such adjectives are appropriately called "*ranking*" adjectives by Marcella Frank [1, p. 141].

There are three types:

- a. superlatives (*the best, the most beautiful, the largest*)
- b. sequence adjectives (*the first, the next, the following, the last*)
- c. unique adjectives (*the same, the only, the chief, the main, the principal, the one*)

Shared knowledge, perhaps the most difficult aspect of the article system for EFL students to master because of the seeming arbitrariness of the concept, states that if we know the referent, it automatically takes on second-mention status.

Shared knowledge can be divided into three classes, with an additional "special" class.

- a. word (*the general, the ocean, the sun, the weather*)
- b. cultural (*the telephone, the capital, the theater*)
- c. regional/local (*the university, the city, the door*)

World. The world classification of shared knowledge is the easiest of the classes for students to grasp: *the sun, the moon, the stars, the air, the universe* are clear. *The ocean* is difficult because students know that there are several oceans, each with its proper name. However, in this context we mean *any representative portion of the whole united body of water we call the ocean*. The same is true of the word *beach*. Students typically ask at this point why we can't say *the nature* in the same way, requiring an explanation that the word *nature* must be uncountable to mean *the natural world* (e.g. *nature studies, Mother Nature*). The countable form means *inherent manner or essence* (e.g. *the nature of man, a warlike nature*).

Cultural. The cultural classification of shared knowledge is usually fairly obvious to students as, for the most part, they share the same basic cultural knowledge as the teacher.

- 5a. Use *the (tele)phone*.
- 5b. Take *the bus*.
- 5c. I heard it on *the radio*.
- 5d. We went to *the movies*.

The italicized words in sentences 5a-5d all presume shared knowledge of the nature of these items. We would be shocked if someone in our culture responded, „What's a telephone?" or „What's a movie?"

An exception occurs with the noun *television*.

- a. There's a movie on television.
- b. There's a clock on the television.

This differentiates television broadcasting (uncountable) from the television as a piece of furniture (countable). However, this is true only in American English.

Regional/Local. The regional/local classification of shared knowledge is easier for students who have been in the same area for a while such that they hear or have heard references to *the post office, the school, the bookstore, the station*, etc. In other words, if one were to ask, „Which school?" the student would readily answer, „Of course, this school" or if one asked, „Which post office?" the student would answer something like, „Of course, the post office that is located near the school."

Another aspect of this classification applies to items that actually lie in plain view:

- 6a. Shut *the door*.
- 6b. Open *the window*.
- 6c. Put it on *the board*.

In instructions for the use of a device, one can imagine that the item is in plain view.

- 7a. Open *the box* carefully.
- 7b. Lift *out the machine*.
- 7c. Plug in *the black power cord*.

This "plain view" aspect can be used to artificially create a sense of "being there". Imagine a story

opening with „*The beach* is quiet after the sun goes down, and *the old pier* seems sturdier in silhouette.”

Special. The special classification is really the most difficult aspect of shared knowledge, as it presupposes the most information on the part of the listener/reader.

8. I was driving home yesterday when *the radiator* burst.

The radiator presumes the shared knowledge that cars usually have radiators and that there is usually only one.

It is also possible for the speaker/writer to indicate the *expectation* that the listener/reader shares his or her knowledge:

9a. Malaria is an unhealthy side effect of *the green revolution*.

9b. Many researchers are investigating *the new unified field theories*.

In other words, the writer presumes that the reader knows what *the green revolution* is or *the new unified field theories* are, whether or not the reader actually knows these terms.

The following exercise allows students to practice the articles associated with shared knowledge along with the countable/uncountable and the first/second-mention distinctions that have already been learned. Notice how we are trying to gradually build up the students' article competence.

Directions: Fill the blanks with *a(n)*, *the*, or \emptyset .

There are many _____ creation myths in _____ folklore. The formation of _____ sun, _____ moon, _____ stars, _____ ocean, and _____ whole realm of _____ nature all have _____ beautiful stories. _____ world does not have such stories about _____ modern inventions such as _____ telephone, radio, and _____ television, perhaps because they are too closely related to _____ science. However, the story of the formation of the Hawaiian Islands is exactly parallel to _____ modern geological account. If you are interested, _____ library or _____ local school or university has more _____ information.

References

1. Frank, Marcella, *Modern English: Part I*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, N.J., 1972.
2. Master, Peter, *Science, medicine, and technology: English grammar and technical writing*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, N.J., 1986, pp. 8-35.
3. Master, Peter, *Teaching the English Article System*, English Teaching Forum Anthology, 1989, vol. IV, pp. 208-215.