

TEACHING THE ENGLISH ARTICLE

Elena ROTARU, senior lecturer

Rezumat

Utilizarea corectă a articolului în limba engleză prezintă dificultăți pentru majoritatea studenților care o studiază ca o limbă străină. Chiar și acele limbi care folosesc articolele, se deosebesc de limba engleză prin regulile aplicate. Una din dificultăți constă în faptul că articolul implică cunoașterea caracteristicilor substantivului la care se aplică. În acest articol ne vom limita la studierea diferențelor în utilizarea articolului în limba engleză pentru substantivele numărabile/nenumărabile.

Mastery of the article in English is no easy matter for most EFL students. Even those languages that have an article system differ from English in the application of the rules. One difficulty lies in the fact that the article implies a certain view of the noun to which it applies. To the surprise of speakers of those languages that do not have an article system, the failure to keep this view in mind in English can lead to confusion and sometimes even anger on the part of the listener or reader.

The view of the noun that the article implies contains information of an either/or kind that can be represented as a photographic close-up versus a distance shot. It tells us whether the noun is supposed to be (a) known or identified (close-up) or (b) unfamiliar, vague, or generalized (distance). A second piece of information that articles convey is whether the noun refers to (a) actual examples or (b) a representative of a whole class of nouns. A noun that acts as a class designator is called *generic*. On the other hand, a noun that refers to an actual example is called *specific*. Of the specific nouns, an identifiable noun that is known to the listener/reader is called *definite* and an unidentifiable noun is called *indefinite*. To establish the correct view of any noun in English, six questions must be answered [3, p. 208]:

1. Is the noun generic or specific?
2. Is the noun definite or indefinite?
3. Is the noun countable or uncountable?
4. Is the noun post-modified or not?
5. Is the noun common or proper?
6. Is the noun part of an idiomatic phrase?

One way to teach the intricacies of the article system is to break it down into its simpler components and to proceed step by step, over a great period of time, and with maximum re-cycling, in order to give students a sense of confidence that they can at least apply the major rules. To this end, among the six questions to be addressed and ranked according to their relative difficulty (from easier to more difficult) question number 3 appears to be the easiest and will be discussed first.

The countable/uncountable distinction should be reviewed thoroughly before you begin to teach the articles. The linkages of this distinction to other aspects of grammar (e.g., subject-verb agreement, adverbs of quantity, and other aspects of quantification) can serve as a basis for such a review.

The simple identification of a noun as permanently countable (e.g., *desk*, *star*, *idea*) or uncountable (e.g., *milk*, *gold*, *equipment*) is only part of the countable/uncountable distinction. Certain nouns (sometimes called dual, double-duty, or two-way nouns) can be either countable or uncountable with distinct differences in meaning [3, p. 209].

- 1a. *An iron* is used for pressing clothes (countable).
- 1b. *Iron* is used in making steel (uncountable).
- 1c. There's been *a change* in the weather this year (countable).
- 1d. I need some *change* for the cigarette machine (uncountable).

Many uncountable nouns can be made intentionally countable to indicate a particular type of the noun.

- 1e. Many people drink *wine* (uncountable).
- 1f. A connoisseur carefully selects appropriate *wines* (countable).

Changing a normally uncountable noun like *wine* into the plural countable form *wines* is very

common, especially in English for Science and Technology (EST). The countable form is usually an ellipsis of *kinds of* or *amounts of* [2, p. 17].

2a. *Wheat* is usually made into flour (uncountable).

2b. Several *wheats* [kinds of wheat] have been developed (countable).

2c. *Pressure* is a function of volume and temperature (uncountable).

2d. Different *pressures* [amounts of pressure] produce different effects (countable).

Having students change nouns from their countable to their uncountable forms, and vice versa, is a good way to instill the concept of countability. It should also help students to see that the uncountable form always has a more generalized meaning, whereas the countable form has a more specified meaning, as in the difference between *stone* (the generalized material) and *a stone* (a specified object). Changing uncountable nouns into countable form usually requires some kind of container or package or unit measure. Frequently a unit-word plus *of* is used before the uncountable noun [1, p. 33].

3a. *water* ~ *a glass of water*, *a liter of water*, *a molecule of water*;

3b. *advice* - *a piece of advice*, *a word of advice*.

Shifting a mass noun directly to its countable form can signal „an instance or embodiment” of an abstract noun;

3c. *life* (life in general) is hard. Joan of Arc had *a* difficult *life* (an individual life);

3d. *time* (time in general) is a human concept. The children had *a* good *time* at the circus (a definite period of limited duration);

3e. *education* (education in general) is important for all societies. Becoming a doctor requires *a* lengthy *education* (the education of a single individual).

On the other hand, changing countable nouns into their uncountable forms usually requires changing them into a more abstract or generalized form;

4a. a chair – furniture;

4b. a book - literature, printed matter;

4c. a fact - knowledge, data.

It is helpful, particularly for those students whose languages do not have an article system, to mention the historical derivation of the article *a* or *an* (the distinction is purely phonetic) from the Old English word *one*. *A(n)* maintains the sense of *one* as a single object. It is therefore impossible to use *a(n)* with a plural or an uncountable noun; we use the zero article (that is, no article) instead. Those students who speak languages that have an article system will have less difficulty assigning the correct article once they know whether the noun is countable or uncountable. What they need to practice is the English distinction between *a(n)* and *one*, as these two words are often identical in their own language. The following exercise gives students practice in making this decision [2, p. 19].

Directions: Fill the blanks with *a(n)* or *one*.

Since there are many fascinating fields in science and technology, it is sometimes difficult to decide on ____major. Should ____ student study ____subject that is really interesting or should the student study____subject that will pay____ high salary? What if the student is interested not just in____subject but in two or three? ____solution is to study combined____major (e.g., biology and engineering). Many people believe that if ____ student studies for ____reason only – money – his or her career will not be so successful.

It is advisable to review all the aspects of countable vs. uncountable nouns before introducing the concept of “definite.” In other words, count/noncount exercises can be devised with *a(n)* and the zero article as the only choice.

Bibliography

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