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## Teacher Reflections: Teaching Article Use to Graduate Students

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### Abstract

Many studies have highlighted students' problems with article use among international students, particularly students from China (Chuang, 2005; Deng et al., 2010; Milton, 2001; Papp, 2004). This paper reports on the impact of an approach to teaching article use to post graduate students (mainly students from China) at the National University of Singapore. The study had several objectives. Firstly, it set out to explore the extent to which article usage was a problem for these doctoral students. Secondly, having decided to experiment with a "learner-centred" approach to article use, it also set out to assess the impact of such an interventionist approach on students' learning. Towards this end, the study also obtained information about students' perceived self-efficacy about their ability to use articles before and after the training. A careful analysis of both numerical and descriptive data showed that the approach used resulted in improvement in students' understanding of article use although the extent of improvement was varied across students. The outcomes from the study augur well for "learner-centred" approaches. It clearly showed that getting students to take responsibility for their learning was a good pedagogical practice.

### Introduction

There has been a steady increase in the number of international students coming to the National University of Singapore (NUS) to undertake post graduate studies from 842 students in 2005/2006 academic year to 1977 in the last academic year 2010/2011. This paper reports on the impact of an approach to teaching one of the grammatical items, namely article use, to these students. Two graduate writing modules that I taught at the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC), NUS, have revealed to me that international students have problems with using articles 'a', 'an' and 'the' correctly.

### **Literature Review and Rationale for the Study**

Many studies have highlighted students' problems with article use among students, particularly those from China. Milton (2001), in his study involving Hong Kong university students' interlanguage, found article errors the most frequent in the top ten errors in his corpus. Similarly, Papp (2004), in his analysis of Chinese students' writing, found the article system to be highly problematic for these students. Chuang (2005) identified that the top three errors made by students were all concerned with the English article system, while according to Swan (1995), "The correct use of articles (*a, an, the*) is one of the most difficult points in English Grammar" (p. 54). The study by Deng et al. (2010) among international graduate students at the NUS also revealed that article use was one of the three most frequent errors among these students.

There could be several reasons for article use being a challenge to these students. One reason could be that articles are not prevalent in their first language. For example, there is no article in both the Chinese and Japanese languages. Secondly, students may know the rules, but they may not know how to apply these rules. This is because the use of articles in English is complex and EFL students need to know how to select the right article for the noun that is modified. They also need to know whether the noun is countable or uncountable and whether it is being mentioned for the first time. Again, it must be remembered that countable and uncountable nouns do not exist in some Asian languages. It is not surprising that Swales and Feak (2004) state that "article use is a problem for many non-native speakers" (p. 113).

Other researchers and language educators have also indicated that the English article system is both complex and problematic for English language learners (Berry, 1993; Master, 1990, 1917, 2002; Swan, 1995). Though it is accepted that students have problems with using articles correctly and confidently, teachers seldom perceive the need to explicitly deal with this problem. Chuang (2005) claims that though teachers found that students encountered problems with using articles, they ignored teaching this part of speech as their perceived attitude was that article errors did not greatly affect communication. However, Sinclair (1991) points out in his frequency-based study that 'the' is the most common word in English and that 'a' is the fifth most common word. In fact, these two words constitute 8.5% of all texts (Sinclair, 1998). Therefore, problems with article use are bound to emerge and affect students' writing. Informal checks with my own students revealed that article use did indeed

pose a problem in their writing. More importantly, these errors could become entrenched in students' writing, making them difficult to be eradicated.

### **Research Questions**

As a teacher-researcher, I was interested in exploring the extent to which article use was a problem for my doctorate students. I was also interested in experimenting with a learning-centred approach for article use and to assess its impact on students' learning. In keeping with this aim, the first question that this classroom-based study sought to address was:

*-To what extent are students able to correct errors in article use before and after the learner-centred intervention training?*

I also decided to obtain information on students' perceived self-efficacy before and after the training. Perceived self-efficacy is believed to influence students' learning outcomes, according to Yang (2004) and Wong (2005). Bandura (1994, p. 71) defines self-efficacy as "people's beliefs about their capabilities...." With these objectives in mind, I decided to obtain students' perceptions about their awareness of article use before the intervention training and about their performance in terms of their improvement after the training. This, I believed, could provide insights into students' "beliefs about their capabilities" and about how they perceived their improvement. To some extent, this could also attest to the effectiveness of the training from the students' point of view. So the second research question this study addressed was:

*-What are students' perceptions about their understanding of article use before and after the intervention training?*

### **Methodology**

#### ***Subjects***

24 EFL students across two tutorial groups participated in this study. The students were mainly from China, two were from India and one was from Sri Lanka. They were varied in their disciplinary backgrounds, but most of them were from engineering-related disciplines.

### ***Design***

As this was an exploratory classroom-based study and not an experimental one, there was no control group. Besides the twelve-week tightly packed curriculum time did not allow for experimenting with the two types of groups: experimental and control. Since it was a classroom-based study which evolved from this teacher's reflections, the main purpose of the study was to examine the impact of a "learner-centred" approach to teaching article use and to obtain input about students' perceptions about their improvement after the intervention training.

The study consisted of three phases: the pre-test, intervention training and the post-test phases. In phase one, at the pre-test phase in Week 4, students were required to rate their perception of their understanding of article use on a scale of 5 to 1, with a score of 5 representing "very good" understanding and a score of 1 representing "very poor" understanding. Next, a pre-test consisting of six sentences taken from students' writing of the previous semesters was conducted. There were 23 article errors, in total. See Appendix A for a sample of the test and details of the rating scale used. The same activity was given to the students for their post-test in Week 11.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis was both quantitative and qualitative. Completed pre- and post-training data were corrected for the right answers and percentage scores for each student for both the pre- and post-test were calculated to identify the extent of improvement. Questionnaire data collected on students' perception of their understanding of article use before and after training in terms of self-rated scores before and after the training were coded. Students' qualitative comments were also examined. To analyse the data, a paired t-test based on the null hypothesis that there was no change in students' understanding of article use was computed.

## **Teacher Reflections and Intervention Training**

### ***Teacher Reflections***

I had tried the traditional "teacher talk, teacher teach" method with students in the intermediate-level writing module, which involved the traditional "present, practise and produce" method with the teacher-initiated explanation of article use followed by some

practice exercises and ending in students being tested on their understanding of article use. However, this time, as opposed to this teacher-centred approach, I was keen to involve the students in the learning process and to also have them take responsibility for their own learning about article use. In other words, I wanted to experiment with an approach which was more “learner-” and “learning-centred” rather than “teacher-” or “teaching-centred”.

When I was assigned to teach the advanced-level writing module on thesis writing, it took me two semesters to confirm that most of the students, mainly students from China, still encountered difficulty with the use of articles, ‘a’, ‘an’ and ‘the’ and this was reflected in their writing as well. This set me thinking about how I could remedy this problem in the classroom, preferring a more “learning-” and “learner-centred” approach this time.

### ***“Learning-centred” Approach***

The terms “learning-centred” and “teaching-centred” mainly represent orientations to teaching in the classroom and have been variously defined. According to Vermunt (2003), “learning-centred” orientation implies transferring the responsibility for the learning processes from the instructional agent (the teacher) to the students themselves. Such classrooms are generally “learner-centred” as they place students at the centre of classroom organization. On the other hand, the “teaching-centred” orientation to classroom teaching is associated chiefly with the transmission of knowledge. In such classrooms, teachers are more concerned with meeting accountability standards and often sacrifice the needs of the students to conform to these standards. The focus is more on content than on student processing and control remains in the hands of the teacher. The “learner-centered” approach, however, places more of the responsibility for learning on the student, with the teacher focused on facilitating the learning process. The classroom activities would be learner-led, self-directed with students actively involved in the learning process. Such students are also intrinsically motivated (Pan, 2000).

### ***A “Learning-centred” Approach to Intervention Training***

Based on the above-mentioned learning and teaching philosophy/paradigm, the following intervention procedure was followed: As a first step, “Appendix One on Articles,” a chapter in the book *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* by Swales and Feak (2004) was given to students as assigned reading for several reasons. This was a chapter that most of the students

would have been quite familiar with as the book was the assigned textbook for the intermediate-level writing module, which most of the students had completed. Secondly, the chapter provides a very comprehensive coverage of all the rules related to article use and in the context of academic writing. For example, it provides the contexts for the use of the definite article in relation to superlatives, shared knowledge, the names of theories, generic and specific nouns, to mention a few. The rules are explained in simple terms and examples are taken from academic contexts that students can relate to. These are followed by relevant tasks for students to apply the rules based on their understanding of the explanation and examples.

Students were assigned the following instructions in relation to the chapter:

- read and identify the rules for article use and then write them down
- bring these rules to class
- do not do any of the tasks in the appendix

The rationale for the above instructions was for students to decipher the rules on their own, instead of having the teacher give them the rules, so that they could then discuss their reasons for their choices.

In class, in Week 7, classroom discussion centred on the rules that the students had identified. The discussion also provided opportunities for students to clarify their doubts. The handout reproduced in Appendix B was used to demonstrate an application of the rules to the examples in the book. This hand-out shows in clear logical steps how students can apply the rules, especially when in doubt.

Next, students were asked to do the exercises from Swales' book, using their derived rules and the hand-out in Appendix B. Answers were provided online as we did not have time to discuss them in class.

In class, in Week 11, for the post-test, students were given the same activity that they were given for the pre-test.

## Findings

Out of the 24 students who took the module, the pre- and post-test scripts of only 18 students were analysed as the other six students were absent for either the pre- or post-test. The numerical and descriptive outcomes of the intervention training are provided in Tables 1 and 2.

Students' pre- and post-test scores and the percentage figures represented in Table 1 address the first research question in the study:

*-To what extent are students able to correct errors in article use before and after training?*

**Table 1: Results of Pre- and Post Tests (N=18)**

Student No	Pre-Intervention Scores	Post-Intervention Scores	Post-Pre Improvement
	Upon 23 and % Scores	Upon 23 and % Scores	
1	17 (83)	21 (92)	4
2	9 (39)	21 (91)	12
3	15 (65)	20 (87)	5
4	14 (61)	17 (74)	3
5	14 (61)	18 (78)	4
6	15 (65)	18 (78)	3
7	15 (65)	19 (83)	4
8	14 (61)	20 (87)	6
9	17 (83)	21 (91)	4
10	14 (61)	19 (83)	5
11	6 (26)	18 (78)	12
12	15 (65)	17 (74)	2
13	8 (35)	17 (74)	9
*14	15 (65)	11 (48)	-4

15		12 (52)	19 (83)	7
16		15 (65)	20 (87)	5
17		11 (48)	14 (61)	3
18		7 (30)	18 (78)	11
<b>Ave</b>		13.1	18.1	4.94
<b>Std Dev</b>		3.53	2.65	4.35
<b>Paired t-test value</b>				7.86485E-05
<b>Critical value at the 0.0005 level</b>				3.9651

As Table 1 shows, the average improvement score after the training is 5. However, there is variation in students' improvement scores at the individual level. Individually, three students (Students 2, 11 and 18) show significant improvement in terms of two digit scores after the training, as revealed by the pre-post scores, while six students show a score improvement of 5 or greater than 5. It is possible to say that 50% of the students have made significant improvement after the training. Eight students show some improvement by getting scores between 2 and 4. Using the paired t-test (degree of freedom=17), we can say with 99.95% confidence that the intervention had a positive impact on students' understanding and application of the use of the articles 'a', 'an' and 'the'. It can be seen from the above table that in terms of percentage scores, all students have shown improvement after the training, except for Student 14. A check of Student 14's attendance record revealed that he had missed some of the classroom discussion and assigned exercises, which perhaps explains his failure to show improvement.

Students' pre- and post- percentage scores, improvement in rating scale after the training and their descriptive comments represented in Table 2 address the second research question in the study:

*-What are students' perceptions about their understanding of article use before and after training?*

**Table 2: Students' self-rating scores and comments (N =18)**

<b>Student No</b>	<b>Pre-Post Test % Scores</b>	<b>Improvement by Rating Scale</b>	<b>Students' Perception Comments</b>
1	83 to 92	4 to 4 good to good	After reading the materials and some practice I did improve.
2	39 to 92	2 to 3 poor to average	Yes I feel I have improved. Now at least I'm able to find article errors in the sentence.
3	65 to 87	2 to 4 poor to good	Now I understand the rules. Hence I'm more confident.
4	61 to 74	3 to 4 average to good	The rules in the handout were very helpful.
5	61 to 78	4 to 4 good to good	Yes improved. I pay more attention to articles now.
6	65 to 78	4 to 4 good to good	Yes, I have improved. The rules in the handout are useful. I think I inflated my rating last time.
7	65 to 83	2 to 4 poor to good	Yes, I understand more about the rules now and am more decisive when I correct these errors.
8	61 to 87	2 to 4 poor to good	I have a better idea of how to apply the rules.
9	83 to 91	3 to 4 average to good	Clearer with the rules
10	61 to 83	2 to 3 poor to average	Improved a little bit
11	26 to 78	3 to 4 average to good	My rating has improved after reading the article 'Articles in Academic writing' by Swales and Feak. The article gave me a better understanding on using articles.
12	65 to 74	3 to 4 average to good	Improved a little bit. But for some nouns, because I'm not sure whether they are countable or not, so I made the same mistakes.
13	35 to 74	4 to 4*	Yes, it has. I know the rules better than before and that helps me. But I'm sometime still confused about these rules.
14	65 to 48	3 to 3 average to average	I'm not sure if my understanding of article use has improved or not. I rewrote the sentence based on my

			feeling of writing. After which I tried to find out which article use rules it fits into.
15	52 to 83	2 to 4 poor to good	I have a better understanding of the rules now.
16	65 to 87	3 to 4 average to good	Yes, improved! Now I'm very careful about article use. Even though there are some rules, they are not applicable to all types of sentences.
17	48 to 61	3 to 4 average to good	Was able to write the rules after reading the handout
18	30 to 78	4 to 4*	My rating has not improved. But I think I have a better understanding now.

If we take students' perceptions about their improvement into account by looking at their rating scales, five students, i.e. Students 1, 5, 6, 13 and 18, state no improvement at all as they rated themselves as "good" before and after the training. However, a close examination of their percentage scores and their descriptive comments shows that they have made progress. Phrases like "...i did improve; ...pay more attention to articles; ...pay more attention to rules now" attest to the fact that their awareness of article use and the associated rules had been raised. Student 6 in fact admits "I inflated my rating last time" and Student 18 confirms that his rating has not improved, but that his understanding has. As for Student 14, it can be seen that this student was not in sync with this exercise for reasons mentioned earlier, which explains the lack of improvement level. Student 13 frankly admits that she/he is "still confused about the rules," which has implications for the "learner-centred" approach advocated in this study. It must also be added that since a rating of 5 is indicative of "very good" understanding of article use, these students perhaps felt that they could not claim to have reached that level of understanding as yet.

Another four students (Students 3, 7, 8 and 15) perceive that they have improved by two levels (2 to 4) from a "poor" to "good" understanding of article use. Phrases like "...more confident; ...more decisive; ...better idea; ...better understanding" and their improved percentage scores show that they perceive their improvement as being very positive.

Of the rest of the eight students, two perceive that their understanding of article use had improved by just one level from 2 to 3 i.e. from a "poor" understanding to an "average"

understanding. One indicates with a sense of achievement that “...now at least I’m able to find article errors’ (Student 2). This student’s pre-post percentage score from 39% to 92% respectively shows that he/she fared very well. Another student (Student 10) diffidently states of his/her improvement as “a little bit”, but this student’s pre-post percentage scores from 61% to 83 % respectively show that he/she fared quite well.

The final six students who perceive their level of improvement as being from 3 (average) to 4 (good), state that they understood the rules better after the training. However, two of them write that they still encounter problems with countable and uncountable nouns and were confused about the rules sometimes (Students 12 and 13 respectively).

Careful analysis of both numerical and descriptive data shows that the approach used has resulted in improvement in students’ understanding of article use although the extent of improvement has been varied as can be expected since it is partly dependent on how motivated and engaged students were in the learning process. Nevertheless, the outcomes augur well for “learner-centred” approaches. Additionally, the study has helped identify areas on which to be further improved.

### **Implications for a “Learning-centred” Approach**

It is possible to draw two implications for teaching. Some students obviously need help with countable and uncountable nouns, which perhaps needs to be explicitly addressed in the classroom and integrated into the intervention training. Secondly, the student who is still confused about the rules perhaps needs more practice with applying the rules in a systematic manner, based on the diagram in Appendix B. Thirdly, more classroom time could be allocated for students to be engaged in the learning process. For example, answers to the practice exercises which were given to students online could have been assigned as a group activities in class where students could have explained the right answers and their underlying rules to their group members. It would have also provided opportunities for logical application of the rules found in Appendix B. This would have also given more time for peer work, discussion, clarification and correction. It implies that the curriculum constraints need to be re-examined and relevant modifications made. Finally, it is an accepted reality that a mastery over article use cannot be attained within a short span of a few weeks. Students need to be aware of the rules and constantly remember to apply them in their writing even after

they have finished the module. Ultimately, the onus is on the students to address this problem in their writing.

### **Evolving Teaching Philosophy**

From the above classroom-based study, I have become more convinced that getting students to take responsibility for their learning is good pedagogical practice. Secondly, asking students to rate the perception of their understanding perhaps motivated them to be more focused.

### **Further Reflections**

The exercise described above also made me aware of some of the shortcomings I encountered during the course of this informal study.

I realized the constraints of time as the curriculum was well-designed and lesson plans were tightly packed with very little time for extra work. I need to reflect and act on how I can make some time for grammar lessons, as this need for focus on grammar also emerges in students' feedback. However, there is also a group of students who think that at such an advanced level, doctoral students should be able to address their own language problems.

The six sentences I gave them for the pre- and post-test activity were isolated sentences and as such, de-contextualized. It may have been better to give them a continuous text, wherein the context could give them a better idea of how articles function in context. This, I believe, can further enhance their understanding of article use.

All these reflections can form the basis for the next phase of the study.

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### Appendix A

All the sentences have errors in article use. Identify and underline the error. In the explanation, state your reason for the correction.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Group No: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

On a scale of 1-5 how would you rate your understanding of use of articles in your writing?  
5 = very good 4 = good 3 = average 2 = poor 1 = very poor

Circle the appropriate number below:

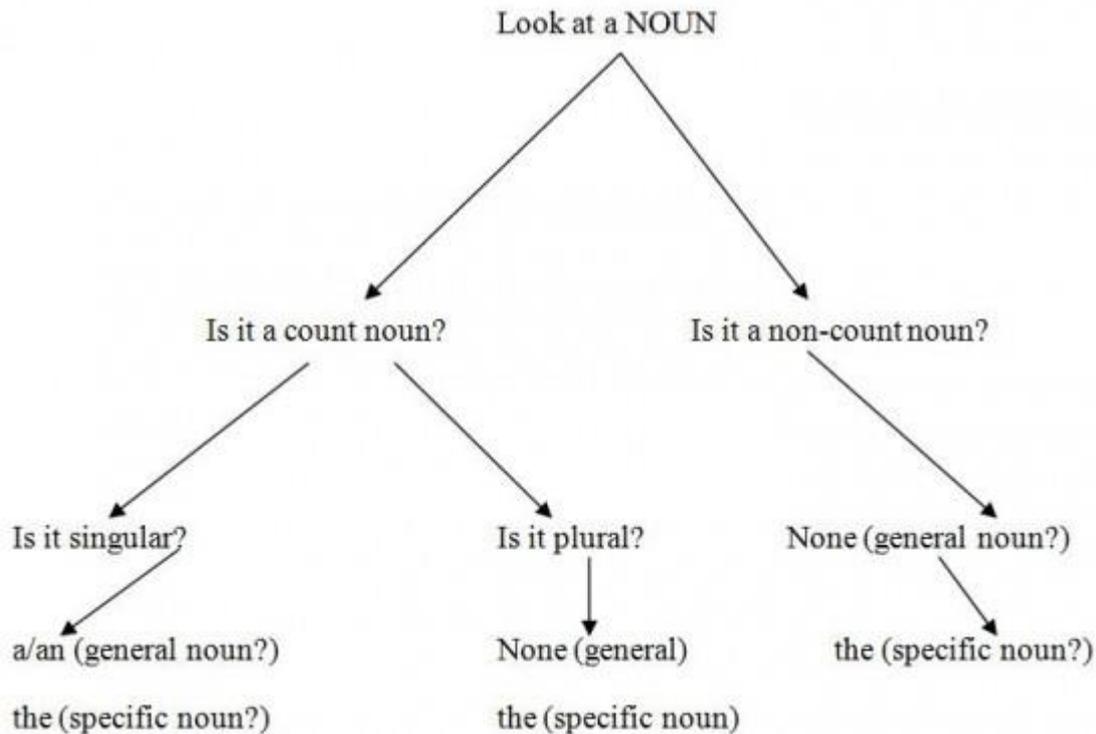
5            4            3            2            1

No	Errors	Sentences
1	Identifying and underlining of errors Error correction Article use rule	In this study, we investigated application of metabonomic platform in diagnosing bladder cancer patients using.....
2	Identifying and underlining of errors Error correction Article use rule	Application of two dimensional GC/TOFMS further increased number of metabolites detected and improved.... One major advantage of application of GCxGC-TOFMS is that.... Therefore, GCxGC_TOFMS is used in current study.
No	Errors	Sentences
3	Identifying and underlining of errors Error correction Article use rule	However, when the same amount of HCl solution was added to all precursor solutions, all catalysts showed same performance. This study is first to report role of HCl in interaction of Pd and Ni in Pd-Ni catalyst.
4	Identifying and underlining of errors Error correction Article use rule	Measurement of metal particle size also showed same trend with catalyst performance. This indicates that metal particle size is major factor in this study.
No	Errors	Sentences
5	Identifying and underlining of errors Error correction Article use rule	This is great discovery in field of deoxyribozyme and it points out the new direction and provides new method to find other deoxyribozymes. But finding is not in real organism and reaction needs the heavy metal to assist.
6	Identifying and underlining of errors	On other hand, Person correlation coefficient is well-known simple feature selection criterion. It measures importance of a feature by the normalized covariance between centred feature variable and centred target variable.

## Appendix B

### Summary of Article Use

Use the figure below to help you decide which articles to use with nouns.



*From Eye on Editing 2 P 28*

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### About the Author

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