

Teaching articles: Some cognitive approaches for university EFL learners

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Overview

- Learner difficulties
- Oddities of article / determiner system
- Qualitative survey data
- Pedagogical system (based on cognitive grammar)
- Implications

Problems

Does the count/non-count noun distinction work very well?

Can you say:

- A water, a coffee ?
- The feminism ?

Can you start a new topic with *the*?

Can we use *a/an* for a previously mentioned noun?

Problems

- Please give me a latte / a coffee / a water
- The feminism of the 19th century abolitionists
- Exemplar *the*: In the jungle the mighty lion sleeps tonight.
- Definitions: Now a first mover is a creative person who ...

Problems

- Obligatory *the* for instruments?
 - Mary plays the piano
- Prep. Phrases
 - The satellite is in orbit.
 - The children were speaking in dialect.
 - I stopped by the office and then the store.

Problems

- Inapplicability of textbook rules
- Count / non-count noun distinctions – too simplistic

Current study

- Qualitative survey data
- 71 first-year Korea University students (Academic English II)
- Grammaticality judgment surveys, pre-test & post-test (quantitative data)
- One-week teaching unit

In-class unit

Basic patterns

A/an

The

∅ sg. - bare singular nouns

∅ pl. - bare plural nouns

In-class unit

Basic patterns

A/an indefinite

The definite

∅ sg. - material

∅ pl. - group, set

Instructional methods

- Short sample sentences & paragraphs illustrate determiner patterns
- Student group discussion
- Activities connected to thematic unit
- Full-class teacher-led discussion
- Basic patterns, then metaphorical extensions

Patterns: *A/an* = indefinite

- First mention
- Hypothetical uses
 - I want a man who knows what love is – a man who can cook and have an intelligent conversation.
- Definition style
 - A first mover is a person who develops a new product for a new market.

Patterns: *The* = definite

- Linguistic context
 - 2nd / subsequent mention
 - Specifiers
 - The first, the last, the nearest, the very thing ...
- Physical context
 - You can take the red pill, or the blue pill.

Patterns: *The* = definite

- Extended contexts
- Part-whole
 - Open the computer and you'll see the SATA cable between the motherboard and the hard drive
- Background scene
 - On my way to work the weather was bad and the sun was hidden behind the clouds.
 - At the office, the secretary was gone and the photocopier was broken.

Patterns: *The* = definite

- Context
- Post-modifiers: relative clause, reduced relative, participle, prep. phrase
 - The satellite that the ESA launched failed to deploy.

Patterns: *The* = definite

- The = exemplar
 - In the jungle the lion sleeps tonight.
- Vivid description
 - The cheetah is the fastest land animal on earth.
- Regular, habitual activity
 - After stopping at the office, I went to the store to buy some chocolate. I then took the bus home.
 -

Patterns: Singular bare nouns

- Materials, substance
 - Water, coffee
- General activities
 - Bungee jumping, jogging, theft
- Abstract nouns
 - Love, peace, war
- Generalized nouns
 - The satellite is in orbit.
 - The children were speaking in dialect.

Patterns: Plural bare nouns

- Set, group of things
 - I need to buy eggs and tomatoes.
- Categories, generalizations (incl. encyclopedic descriptions)
 - Penguins are aquatic birds; penguins have adapted using their wings for swimming.

Student data: Previous contents

First mention = <i>a/an</i> , previous = <i>the</i>	15
Specific = <i>the</i> , general / generic = <i>a/an</i>	12
Count versus non-count nouns	2
<i>A/an</i> before consonant / vowel	5
<i>A/an</i> for singular nouns, <i>the</i> for plurals	7
Comparatives & superlatives = <i>the</i>	4
Special referents, e.g., <i>the sun</i>	2

Student data: Previous contents

Use a/the "according to context"	1
Did not learn determiner rules	9
Cannot remember the rules learned.	3

Student data: Previous contents

Helpful or useful?

- unique referent rule (2 students)
- comparative / superlative rule (2)
- generic nouns (1)
- previous mention (1)
- pronunciation (1)
- singular patterns (1)
- US versus UK differences (1)
- real examples used (1)

Student data: Previous contents

Unhelpful:

- Generally unhelpful (10)
- "we learned a lot of grammar that was not helpful"
- Rules were difficult to learn or apply (7).
- *the* for previous mention (1)
- Using 'the' for musical instruments (2)
- *the* versus bare nouns (2)
- *a/an* versus bare nouns (1)

Student data: Previous contents

Unhelpful:

- Learning strict rules with no exceptions (1)
- exceptions to rules (1)
- count nouns (1)
- *the* for comparatives (1)
- No using *a/an* with nouns like "a water"

Current unit: Helpful?

- 46 positive responses
- count and non-count nouns can be interchangeable (3)
- nuances of *a/an* versus *the* (6)
- abstract nouns (1)
- bare noun uses (5)
- bare nouns for general activities, e.g., "theft" or "bungee jumping" (1)
- contextual uses and nuances (2)
- specialized uses of *the* (5)
- specialized noun patterns like "at school" (3)

Current unit: Helpful?

- *the* not necessarily used for plural nouns (1)
- *a/an* and *the* with comparatives (2)
- expressions like "a water" are possible (1)
- useful (4) - no specific reasons
- Examples presented in the book contents

Students: Difficulties

- 'the' versus bare nouns (3)
- 'the' vs. abstract nouns (1)
- material nouns like "water" (1)
- unique references like 'moon / the moon' (1)
- contextual nuances (1)
- bare nouns (7), bare singulars (1), bare plurals (1)
- indefinites (1), definite versus indefinite nouns (3)
- post-modified nouns (2)
- object versus material nouns (1)

Students' difficulties

- specialized uses of 'a/an' (1)
- specialized uses of 'the' (4)
- the range of "specific" is not clear (1)
- patterns in the unit overall (2)
- exceptions (3)

Students' suggestions

- providing some explanations in Korean (2)
- easier explanations (1)
- more examples (5)
- more common or relatable examples (1)
- summary of principles or patterns (3), chart, graphic or table to illustrate the patterns (3)
- more exercises, such as editing or practice with a written article (2).

Error-prone items

- Abstract singular \emptyset noun
 - culture, communication, literature,
- Generic plural incl. PPs
 - \emptyset contemporary works of art

Error-prone items

- Definitions
 - A first mover is a creative person who first develops an idea and brings it to market.
- Post-modified NPs
 - the impact that it had on ...
 - the presence of a human voice
- But: \emptyset contemporary works of art

Native speaker variability

- Definitions
- Hypothetical
- Prepositions / generalized NPs: e.g., in (a) dialect
- Post-modified items (e.g., specifier vs. generic)

Improvements

- 6 basic patterns
 - Bare nouns vs. marked nouns (*a/an/the*)
 - *A/an* indefinite = unknown
 - *The* definite = known, context
 - \emptyset sg. – material
 - \emptyset pl. – group, set
 - Compound patterns

Compound nouns

- Head noun determines pattern
 - According to the computer manual, RAM chip installation should be easy.
- Also abbreviations
 - The CIA and the NSA read my emails, not the FBI.
- Place names
 - The Congo = The Congo region
 - The Amazon = The Amazon river

Patterns

Pattern 1: Indefinite

 **A/an:** Indefinite =

- New or unfamiliar
- Singular item / thing

Patterns

Pattern 1: Indefinite

 **A/an:** Indefinite =

- New or unfamiliar
- Singular item / thing

Pattern 1: Indefinite

 **A/an:** Indefinite =

- New or unfamiliar
- Singular item / thing
- First mention
- Hypothetical example
- Definition (via hypothetical example)

Patterns

Pattern 2: Definite

 **The:** Definite =

- Familiar / known entity or thing(s)

Patterns

Pattern 2: Definite

 **The:** Definite =

- Familiar / known entity or thing(s)

Pattern 2: Definite

 **The:** Definite =

- Familiar / known entity or thing(s)
- Second / subsequent mention
- Special contexts:
 - Physical context
 - Specifier *adj./phrase*
 - Whole-part context
 - Background scene
 - Specialized background knowledge
 - Scene / topic shift
- Post-modifier / post-specifier (specific example / type / instance)
- Exemplar / typical example
 - Definition by exemplar
 - Habitual / typical activity

Patterns

Pattern 3: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)

A/an/the =

- Object or thing



Patterns

Pattern 3: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)

A/an/the =

- Object or thing

Pattern 3: Singular marked nouns (a/an/the)

A/an/the =

- Object or thing
- Object / thing
- Specific type or batch (of material)
- Specific event / instance (of abstract noun)



Patterns

Pattern 4: Singular bare noun (Ø)

Ø bare noun (singular) =

- Material, mass, substance



Patterns

Pattern 4: Singular bare noun (Ø)

Ø bare noun (singular) =

- Material, mass, substance

Pattern 4: Singular bare noun (Ø)

Ø bare noun (singular) =

- Material, mass, substance
- Material
- Collective category noun (e.g., "equipment")
- General activity
- Abstract nouns
- Generalized nouns (general function, type of place, situation, etc. e.g., "in orbit")



Patterns

Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns (Øs)

Plural bare nouns (Øs) =

- Indefinite – unfamiliar / new
- Group or set of things



Patterns

Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns (Øs)

Plural bare nouns (Øs) =

- Indefinite – unfamiliar / new
- Group or set of things

Pattern 5: Plural bare nouns (Øs)

Plural bare nouns (Øs) =

- Indefinite – unfamiliar / new
- Group or set of things
- Group, set of things
- Category, type of things
- Generic description



Patterns

Pattern 6: Compound nouns

N	C	U	N
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- Compound nouns
- Determiner pattern depends on final noun
- Compounds
- Abbreviations
- Place names

Implications for theory & pedagogy

- Cognitive grammar can complement other theoretical approaches
 - Esp. constituent structure (syntactic & prosodic trees, relations, hierarchies)
- Articles / determiners do not submit to traditional grammar rules
- Dependent on natural categories, context, nuance

Implications for theory & pedagogy

- Pattern + metaphorical extension
- Natural transfer to pedagogy
- Can be tied in to thematic units, activities, contents

Future work

- L2 Corpus research
- Error correction research
- Pedagogical methods

Conclusion

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Student data

What I learned from previous classes (high school, hagwon, etc.) about this was helpful or useful.	5.9
What I learned from other books (textbooks, test preparation books, grammar books, etc.) about this was helpful or useful.	5.5
The determiner unit in this course was useful or helpful.	6.9
I learned something useful from this unit.	7.1
I understood all of the principles / patterns in this unit.	5.7
I understood most of the principles / patterns in this unit.	6.5
This unit was difficult.	6.7
This unit was practical.	7.3
This unit was helpful.	7.2

Student data

The principles or patterns in this unit are clear.	7.0
The principles or patterns in this unit are useful.	7.3
Discussing the unit with classmates was helpful.	6.7
The class discussion and lecture about the unit was helpful.	6.6
The shorter exercises in the book were helpful (grocery list, office items).	6.6
The movie exercise was helpful for understanding and practicing determiners.	6.0