

“When being specific is not enough”: Discrepancies between L2 learners’ perception of definiteness and its linguistic definition —

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Abstract

This paper explores the sources of difficulties that second language (L2) learners encounter when using English articles. Eighty-four Korean college students completed a forced-choice elicitation task before and after receiving instruction on article use and provided written accounts of article choices. The analysis of the task performance and written accounts indicated the participants’ noticeable tendency to prioritize specificity over definiteness, resulting in the overuse of *the* with specific indefinites. Not infrequently, the participants estimated a “nonspecificity hierarchy” for nonspecific definites, often leading to the infelicitous use of *a(n)*. The overuse of *the* with modified noun phrases suggests that L2 learners attempt to construe semantic context (i.e., \pm definite) on the basis of the syntactic structure. Furthermore, the participants’ correct use of *a(n)* for singular count indefinites sometimes stemmed from assuming the number of a target noun to be single rather than considering its multiple existence and, thus, its indefinite nature. These findings underline the necessity of teaching the specificity feature to indicate to learners that (1) English articles are prototypical realizations of encoding definiteness, which requires the mutual identifiability of a unique referent, and (2) specificity, which presupposes identifiability assumed by the writer/speaker alone, is not marked by articles in English.

Keywords: English articles, specificity, definiteness, article errors, L2 learners

Resumen

Este trabajo explora las dificultades que los estudiantes de una segunda lengua (L2) encuentran en el uso de los artículos en inglés. Un total de ochenta y cuatro

estudiantes universitarios coreanos completaron una tarea escrita de elección forzada antes y después de recibir clases sobre el uso del artículo, y proporcionaron informes con las razones de su elección de las distintas formas de los artículos. El análisis de los resultados de la tarea y de los informes escritos mostró una tendencia notable de los participantes a priorizar la especificidad sobre la definitud, de lo que resultó el uso excesivo de “the” con indefinidos específicos. No pocas veces tuvieron en cuenta una “jerarquía de no especificidad” para definidos inespecíficos, que con frecuencia determina el uso infeliz de “a(n).” El uso excesivo de “the” con sintagmas de sustantivos modificados sugirió que los estudiantes de L2 intentan interpretar el contexto semántico (es decir, \pm definido) sobre la base de la estructura sintáctica. Además, el uso correcto de los participantes de “a(n)” para indefinidos de recuento singular se produjo en ocasiones por suponer que el número de un sustantivo objetivo es único en lugar de considerar su existencia múltiple y, por lo tanto, su naturaleza indefinida. Estos resultados ponen de manifiesto la necesidad de que en las clases se llame la atención sobre la característica de especificidad para indicar a los alumnos que (1) los artículos son realizaciones prototípicas de la codificación de definitud, que requiere la identificación mutua de un referente único, y que (2) la especificidad, cuya identificación es asumida sólo por el escritor/hablante, no es marcada por los artículos en inglés.

Palabras clave: artículos en inglés, especificidad, definitude, errores de artículo, estudiantes de L2

1. Introduction

Extensive empirical evidence indicates that correct article use is difficult for second language (L2) learners to master, especially for those whose mother tongue (L1) does not have functional equivalents (e.g. Korean, Japanese, Russian, and Turkish) (Butler, 2002; Ionin, 2006; Ionin et al., 2004, 2008; Kim & Lakshmanan, 2009; Ko et al., 2010; Master, 1997). Research on L2 writing, for instance, has noted that inaccurate article use is one of the most frequent errors (Bitchener et al., 2005) and that even highly advanced student writers often fail to exhibit native-like article use (Lennon, 1991; Spada & Tomita, 2010). L2 learners’ infelicitous article use is undoubtedly attributed to the rules governing the system, which are notoriously unwieldy (Dulay et al., 1982) and lack one-to-one correspondence between an article and its semantics—i.e., whether the noun phrase is (in)definite, (non)specific, or generic in reference (Kachru, 2010).

In written discourse, articles create an understanding between the writer and reader, and their misuse easily causes ambiguity because different articles lead to different interpretations. As Halliday & Hasan (1976:74) noted, “Whenever the

information is contained in the text, the presence of an article creates a link between the sentence in which it occurs and that containing the referential information.” Given that article use cannot be avoided irrespective of the genre and that English article errors continue to plague the compositions of L2 writers, the importance of identifying features that influence article misuse and providing proper pedagogical solutions cannot be overstated.

In the almost three decades since Master (1990:461) suggested the necessity of providing “a coherent grammar for teaching the articles as a system,” such attempts have been few and far between. Of course, the relative dearth of research might be attributable to the trend in which most language education studies have moved beyond methods that emphasize discrete grammar teaching, instead prioritizing lesson content and contextualization for students (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). However, learners need to be equipped with language awareness—or “explicit knowledge about language and conscious perception [of] . . . language use” (Garrett & James, 2000:330)—so that they can use such knowledge independently while engaging in the encoding process. Regardless of one’s position on the usefulness of focus on form or forms, it is indisputable that both teachers and learners look for help in pedagogical grammar or reference books that address the article system in a manner that clarifies how meaning is mapped onto forms (Young, 1996).

2. Pedagogical frameworks for teaching the English article system

Drawing upon McEldowney’s (1977) suggestion to produce a simplified framework for teaching English articles, Master (1990) introduced a binary system in which four features of article use—definiteness, specificity, countability, and number—are reduced to a meaning contrast between “classification” (marked by the indefinite or zero article) and “identification” (marked by the definite article). The system obscures the distinction between generic and specific uses of a noun, which basically requires the same encoding, and collapses them into a single feature—identification. Although the notion of specificity is useful in establishing a discourse referent, it was set aside “as a red herring” in explaining the article system (Langacker, 1991:104), presumably because English does not mark specificity but selects articles on the basis of definiteness.

Master (1997) suggested another pedagogical framework for students at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of proficiency. Following Little (1994), he proposed that in the teaching of beginners, sustained attention should not be directed to article usage rules, except for teaching words that commonly take articles. When students advance to the intermediate level, cognitive methods such as Master’s (1990) binary schema can be implemented, providing sufficient time for learners to practice

a single distinction at a time. When students attain an advanced level, teaching rules governing article usage is not as appropriate as allowing them to learn the articles as lexical items in context. He emphasized the importance of encouraging learners to keep a record of their own errors, enabling errors to become “an essential part of the learning process” (Lewis, 1993:6).

Master (2002) proposed yet another pedagogy based upon a canonical information structure in which new information is mentioned last (or to the right of the main verb) and marked with the indefinite or zero article, whereas given information is mentioned first (or to the left of the main verb) and marked with the definite article (Yule, 1998). After confirming that given information adheres to a canonical structure most of the time and new information does approximately half of the time, he experimented with the applicability of an information structure as a framework to teach English articles. The results showed that the experimental group, taught with the suggested pedagogy, made noticeable improvement compared to the other two groups of students who received either traditional instruction on article use or no instruction.

The effectiveness of dictionary use for making target-like article choices was tested in Miller’s (2006) study with advanced L2 learners. A comparison of scores on the pre- and posttests, which consisted of gapped and non-gapped exercises, indicated that the overall increase in correct article use was larger for learners in the experimental group, who were requested to use the dictionary for the posttest. However, the experimental group outperformed the control group only in the gapped exercise, suggesting that dictionary use facilitates participants’ ability to identify the correct article but not to determine whether and where an article is needed. More recently, Kim (2018) evaluated the effectiveness of a lexicographic approach to teaching the English article system using an English–Korean bilingualized dictionary—*Naver Dictionary*. She showed that dictionary consultation helps L2 learners determine nominal countability and associated article use, although the way the dictionary provides countability information is not always explicit and/or sufficiently user-friendly (e.g. inadequate labeling or the absence of nominal countability information).

Compared with the number of research articles investigating English learners’ understanding of the article system (e.g., Chan, 2016), actual use of articles (e.g., Mizuno, 1999), underlying reasons for article errors (e.g., Ionin et al., 2004, 2008; Chan, 2017), or sources of difficulty (e.g., Sarker & Baek, 2017), fewer experimental studies have been conducted to delineate a pedagogical framework for teaching English articles. Amid reports attesting that L2 learners seem to use articles without a clear understanding of them (e.g., Butler, 2002), theoretical research in the domain has not influenced teaching practice on the whole (Lopez & Sabir, 2019). The present study was conceived in an attempt to link research and pedagogy by first examining whether there

is insufficiency in the way the article system is taught and then addressing the problem area(s) identified. Specifically, this study addressed the following research questions:

- (1) Does focused instruction on English article use improve L2 learners’ ability to use articles correctly?
- (2) Are there particular types of difficulties that L2 learners encounter even after receiving focused instruction on English article use?

Drawing upon the answers to these questions, this paper suggests a systematic approach to teaching the article system in a manner that does not overwhelm learners with an immense volume of information. A quasi-experiment was conducted using a within-subjects design in which each participant is tested under the control condition first and then under the treatment condition (Price, 2012).

3. Method

3.1. Participants and research setting

The participants were a homogeneous group of 84 Korean college students at a major research university in Seoul, Republic of Korea. They were first-year female students (aged 18 to 19) taking a mandatory freshman English course. The course was designed to improve all four language skills with a primary focus on academic literacy development, encompassing the general features of college-level English reading and writing. The class met twice a week for 75 minutes each time over a 15-week semester. Judging from the scores of the placement test—the TOEFL ITP (Institutional Testing Program) test—which is administered by the school and scored by ETS (Educational Testing Service) to determine the level of English courses they should take, the participants could be collectively described as upper-intermediate to pre-advanced learners of English, corresponding to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) C1 level. The language background survey results indicated that the participants had studied English for an average of 10.5 years before entering college and that none had lived in English-dominant countries.

3.2. Instruments

A 32-item forced-choice elicitation task was designed to be used as both a diagnostic test (pretest) and a posttest. Targeting the use of English articles, the task contained sentences from various sources, such as online newspaper and magazine articles, Ionin et al. (2004), and Yoo (2004). Effort was exerted to ensure that items of

varying specificity–definiteness value combinations and noun types, such as concrete and abstract nouns used in countable and uncountable forms, were included in random order because the literature has consistently identified making countability judgment errors (e.g., Tsang, 2017) and equating specificity with definiteness (e.g., Chan, 2016; Ionin et al., 2004) as major obstacles to achieving target-like article use among L2 learners. According to Brown’s dichotomy (as cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999), specificity crucially differs from definiteness in that specificity refers to the shared knowledge from the writer/speaker’s viewpoint within the knowledge base of the writer/speaker and reader/hearer, irrespective of the latter’s knowledge status. Since revisions were made to the original sentences by shortening sentences, changing the sentence structure, or simplifying vocabulary, three English native-speaking professor colleagues—all of whom had a PhD in applied linguistics or English literature—were asked to evaluate the naturalness of the revised sentences and confirm the correctness of article use in these sentences. Of the 40 initially prepared test items, eight were removed because there were discrepancies among the professors regarding article use for the target noun in the given context. The finalized elicitation task is presented in Appendix 1, and the correct answers are marked in bold.

3.3. Procedure

This study employed a one-group pretest–posttest design. To estimate the current understanding of English article use, the participants were pretested in Week 1 and were required to choose the correct article for each item without using a dictionary. In Week 15, they took a posttest with the same elicitation task, with an approximately 3-month interval between the two tests to minimize possible practice effects (Bachman, 1990). One week prior to the posttest, the participants received focused instruction on article use for two consecutive sessions. In all other weeks, the curriculum included no direct grammar instruction.

During the first session, the 14-page chapter about the rules concerning English article use from *Top 20: Great Grammar for Great Writing* (Folse et al., 2008)—hereafter abbreviated as *Top 20*—was used as the instructional material. As is customary for most English grammar books written for international students, *Top 20* explains the rules based on nominal countability and definiteness, such as the use of *a(n)* to introduce or classify a singular count noun (see example 1 below), the use of either *a(n)* or *the* for a general truth regarding a singular count noun (see examples 2 and 3), and the use of *the* with specific noun references (see example 4).

(1) Jambalaya is **a** rice dish that is native to south Louisiana.

(2) **A** piano has 96 keys. (= Pianos have 96 keys.)

- (3) **The** tiger is native to India. (= Tigers are native to India.)
- (4) **The** title of this course sounds interesting.

Regarding the use of no article, it does not differentiate between the zero article (Ø1) occurring with noncount and plural nouns (e.g., *water* and *cats*) and the null article (Ø2) occurring with certain singular count and proper nouns (e.g., *lunch* and *Chicago*) (Chesterman, 1991) because singular nouns preceded by Ø2 are currently interpreted as either noncount nouns or set phrases (e.g., *on edge* or *to save face*) (Master, 1997). Therefore, the distinction between Ø1 and Ø2 was not made during the instruction; instead, both were collectively referred to as the zero article (Ø), indicating that no salient article is used.

Table 1: Binary schema for English article use

Purpose (definiteness)	Countability		Noncount noun
	singular	plural	
classification (–definite)	<i>a(n)</i>	Ø	Ø
definition (–definite)	<i>a(n), the</i>	Ø	Ø
identification (+definite)	<i>the</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>the</i>

The second session took place in a computer lab. During the session, the students were introduced to the binary schema (see Table 1) onto which the English article usage rules covered in *Top 20* were simply tabulated. The rules for proper nouns and nouns in idiomatic or conventional expressions were excluded because the use of articles for these nouns is affected by factors beyond whether the noun is (un)countable or whether it takes a singular or plural form. Following Master (1990), the purposes of article use were classified as “classification” or “identification” for the indefinite or definite use of a target noun. Unsurprisingly, the schema turned out to be largely identical to that of Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999). The only difference was that the purpose “definition” was added to refer to a noun used for referencing an entire class as a whole, satisfying the description inherent in the noun (Lyons, 1999). (Whether and how meanings differ according to different article use in generic contexts is outside the scope of this study. See Chesterman (1991) for a detailed discussion.) Employing the binary schema, the participants worked through the exercise questions in *Top 20* as guided in-class practice. As a reference for countability, the participants used *Naver Dictionary*—the most popular bilingualized online dictionary among Korean students. Countability is indicated in *Naver Dictionary* using the codes [C] for count nouns, [U]

for uncount nouns, and [U, C] or [C, U] for nouns that can be used in both count and noncount contexts.

After the second session was completed, the participants took the posttest the following week. The posttest was administered in the computer lab so that the participants could consult the online dictionary for countability information as needed. As with the pretest, the participants chose the correct answer(s) for each item on the posttest. This time, they were additionally asked to provide full written explanations for their article choices in either English or their L1, Korean, to shed light on what specifically causes Korean learners of English to misuse articles. Before administering the posttest, the instructor demonstrated how to give a written account of article selection and provided guidelines on what to report after completing each question.

3.4. Data Analysis

To examine whether using the binary schema can effectively teach L2 learners the English article system (Research Question 1), the participants' pre- and posttests were scored by checking whether the answer given was correct, incorrect, or partially correct. When the respondents chose either *a(n)* or *the*—not both—for singular count nouns used for definition purposes, the item was scored as partially correct with a half point awarded. The posttest scores were compared with the pretest scores by a paired-samples *t*-test with a significance level set at .05. In addition, mean correct answer rates for each of the specificity–definiteness value combinations were calculated to examine whether specificity affects detection of the semantic context (i.e., ±definite).

To investigate the difficulties the participants encountered in their article use (Research Question 2), the number of responses for each option—*a(n)*, *the*, and \emptyset —was counted for all items. The written accounts of article choices were classified according to Butler's (2002) classification scheme, which first classifies reasons for article use as specific or nonspecific depending on whether learners “were able to identify rules of grammar or other reasons for selecting the articles they chose” (p. 458). (Nonspecific reasons such as plausible choice, elimination, and no clue will not be discussed in detail in this paper). Cases in which the participants left no written comments were categorized separately as “blank answers.” Following Chan (2017), both reasons for non-target-like article use and incorrect hypotheses for target-like article use were examined. Then, the written accounts pertaining to “non-target-like article use” or “erroneous theories inadvertently leading to target-like article use” were analyzed to identify particular types of difficulties that the participants had encountered in attempting to use English articles correctly. They were coded thematically using “paradigmatic analytic procedures to produce taxonomies and categories out of the

common elements across the database” (Polkinghorne 1995:5). Comments offered in Korean were translated verbatim into English.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Performance on the pre- and posttest

To answer the first research question of “whether focused instruction on English article use improves L2 learners’ ability to use articles correctly,” the pre- and posttest means were compared using the paired-samples *t*-test. The results are summarized in Table 2 (the mean pre- and posttest scores of each item are provided in Appendix 1).

Table 2: Performance comparison according to purpose and specificity

Purpose (definiteness)	Specificity	Item number	Test	M	SD	P	
classification (-definite)	-specific	1, 2, 9, 18, 20, 24, 25, 28	Pretest	58.2%	29.76	.040*	
			Posttest	63.7%	29.99		
	+specific	3, 10, 12, 15, 26, 27, 31	Pretest	40.5%	19.60	.232	
			Posttest	42.0%	19.17		
			subtotal	Pretest	49.9%		27.01
			Posttest	53.6%	27.72		
definition (-definite)	-specific	4, 16, 21	Pretest	65.3%	14.98	.039*	
			Posttest	99.6%	.56		
identification (+definite)	-specific	6, 23, 29, 32	Pretest	65.8%	14.07	.289	
			Posttest	71.7%	18.38		
	+specific	5, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 19, 22, 30	Pretest	89.6%	10.66	.018*	
			Posttest	99.4%	1.22		
			subtotal	Pretest	82.8%		15.94
			Posttest	91.5%	15.94		
total		Pretest	65.8%	26.82	.000*		
		Posttest	74.5%	29.36			

* $p < .05$.

The overall means increased from 65.8% on the pretest to 74.5% on the posttest. The p -value was far less than the preselected alpha ($p < .001$), confirming that formal instruction exerts a positive effect in helping L2 learners acquire the English article system (Master, 1997). For the nouns used for definition purposes, such as Items 16 and 21, the pre- and posttest means were 65.3% and 99.6%, respectively; the mean difference was statistically meaningful ($p = .039$).

Item 16: *A/The paper clip is handy when holding several sheets of paper together.*

Item 21: *Typically, Ø dandelions bloom in both the spring and the fall.*

The fact that no respondents correctly chose both *a* and *the* in Item 16 on the pretest clearly indicates their lack of knowledge of the relevant grammar rule (Chan, 2016). However, the posttest mean increased by more than 34% and reached almost 100%, suggesting that being introduced to the descriptive rule was sufficient to enable the participants to apply it correctly.

Table 3: Performance comparison of the nouns used for identification purposes

Purpose (definiteness)	Reference type	Item number	Test	M	SD	P
identification (+definite)	anaphoric	5, 7, 11	Pretest	100.0%	.00	1.000
			Posttest	100.0%	.00	
	associative	8, 13, 14, 23, 29, 32	Pretest	68.5%	12.61	.062
			Posttest	81.0%	19.91	
	cataphoric	6, 17, 19, 22, 30	Pretest	89.8%	6.88	.044*
			Posttest	99.0%	1.39	

* $p < .05$.

Table 3 describes the results for the nouns used for identification purposes broken down by reference type—*anaphoric*, *associative anaphoric* (hereafter shortened to “*associative*”), or *cataphoric* reference. An *anaphoric* reference occurs when a word/phrase in a text refers back to other ideas in the text for its meaning (Lyons, 1999), as exemplified in (5) below. An *associative* reference means that first mentions of new referents within a discourse can be identified via another already present referent (Allan, 2009), as shown in (6). A *cataphoric* reference, or *backwards anaphora*, occurs when a word/phrase refers to ideas later in the text (Chesterman, 1991), as in (7).

- (5) An elegant, dark-haired woman entered the compartment, and I immediately recognized **the woman**.
- (6) They’ve just got in from New York. **The plane** was five hours late.
- (7) I remember **the beginning** of the war very well.

As shown in Table 3, all participants correctly chose *the* for the anaphoric references on both tests. The pretest means for the associative and cataphoric references were relatively lower—68.5% and 89.8%, respectively. The posttest means increased to 81.0% for the former ($p = .062$) and 99.0% for the latter ($p = .044$), and the mean difference was significant only for the latter.

Considering the several different ways of classifying nouns, Table 4 compares the participants’ performance on the concrete and abstract nouns used in their singular forms for classification purposes. Nouns used for identification or definition purposes are excluded because their native-like article usage—*the* for the former and both *a* and *the* for the latter—often makes it impossible to conjecture about the respondents’ determination of countability.

Table 4: Distribution of article choices for concrete and abstract nouns

Noun type	Item number	Test	M	SD	P	Average number of responses (%)		
						<i>a(n)</i>	<i>the</i>	∅
Concrete	3, 9, 10, 12, 18, 20, 25, 27, 28, 31	pretest	49.8%	28.39	.089	42 (49.8%)	40 (47.9%)	2 (2.4%)
		posttest	51.8%	29.79		44 (51.8%)	41 (48.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Abstract	2, 15, 24, 26	pretest	39.3%	10.99	.057	33 (39.3%)	33 (39.3%)	18 (21.4%)
		posttest	46.4%	7.97		39 (46.4%)	44 (52.4%)	1 (1.2%)

Note. Cells for the correct answers are shaded.

The pre- and posttest means for the concrete nouns were 49.8% and 51.8%, respectively, and their difference was not significant ($p = .089$). Most participants who made an article error on the items concerning concrete nouns, such as Item 18, incorrectly chose *the* (47.9% on the pretest and 48.2% on the posttest), not ∅ (2.4% on the pretest and 0.0% on the posttest), on both the pre- and posttests. This

result suggests that the single greatest obstacle they faced was identifying the context suggested by the text.

Item 18: *I'm having some difficulties with my visa application. I think I need to find a lawyer with lots of experience. I think that's the right thing to do.*

The pre- and posttest means for the abstract nouns were 39.3% and 46.4%, respectively, and the mean difference was not statistically meaningful ($p = .057$). For the items concerning abstract nouns, such as Item 26, the pretest correct answer rate (39.3%) was approximately 10% lower than the rate for concrete nouns (49.8%) possibly because the participants had to overcome the obstacle of definiteness distinction coupled with the countability judgment. As shown in Table 4, approximately two-thirds of the participants made pretest errors on either the former (39.3%), leading to the misuse of *the*, or the latter (21.4%), resulting in non-target-like \emptyset .

Item 26: [The first line of a magazine article]

The night before he died, Michael Jackson ran through a six-hour dress rehearsal of his concert.

After the participants received the instruction, the posttest mean of abstract nouns increased by approximately 7%, and the problem areas were more or less narrowed down to context detection, adding support to Kim's (2018) proposal for a lexicographic approach to teaching articles. During the instruction, deliberate attention was devoted to informing the participants that (1) abstract nouns can be used in countable forms without substantially changing the meaning (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999) and (2) countability is a "variable, context-sensitive feature that should be checked" in a dictionary (Kim, 2018:217). Regardless of whether they performed correctly or incorrectly on the task, mention of dictionary consultation was made mostly for these abstract nouns, as in "The dictionary marks the countability status of *rehearsal* as [C, U] or [C]. Countable and first mentioned, thus [the correct answer is] *a*" or "According to the dictionary, *rehearsal* is countable. Nonetheless, *the* is correct because of the modifier" for Item 26. Presumably because of the newly acquired awareness of the noncount-to-count shift that many abstract nouns undergo (Greenbaum & Nelson, 2009) accompanied by dictionary consultation for countability status, the average number of respondents who made errors in judging the countability of abstract nouns decreased considerably from 18 to 1.

In sum, the t -test confirmed that teaching the English article system using the binary schema facilitates L2 learners' overall ability to use English articles correctly. However, the participants' performance on the nouns used for classification or

identification purposes differed substantially depending on whether the plus/minus designation of specificity coincided with that of definiteness.

4.2. Reasons behind non-target-like article choices

To answer the second research question of “whether there are particular types of difficulties that L2 learners encounter even after receiving focused instruction on English article use,” the participants’ written accounts of article choices on the posttest were analyzed according to the classification schemes of Butler (2002) and Chan (2017). The analysis showed that for target-like article use, 83.2% of the reasons were specific, 8.1% were nonspecific, and 8.7% were blank answers. Of the specific reasons, inappropriate hypotheses accounted for 26.3% of the target-like article use. For non-target-like article use, specific and nonspecific reasons constituted 72.4% and 22.2% of the reasons underlying article misuse, respectively, and blank answers constituted 5.4%. Of the specific reasons, 88.3% concerned problems with referentiality (i.e., \pm definite), 0.5% involved the misdetection of countability, and 11.2% reflected nongeneralizable or idiosyncratic hypotheses. The thematic analysis of the written accounts pertaining to non-target-like article use or erroneous theories inadvertently leading to target-like article use identified three inappropriate hypotheses that the participants frequently applied in attempting to use English articles correctly. In the following subsections, these inappropriate hypotheses are discussed in detail.

4.2.1. Prioritization of specificity over definiteness

Consistent with previous research findings (e.g., Chan, 2017; Kim & Lakshmanan, 2009), a vast majority of the participants tended to fluctuate between specificity and definiteness—a regular pattern discerned in English article use among article-less L1 groups. Their inability to distinguish the two semantic features and the false prioritization of specificity over definiteness induced misuse of *the* in indefinite contexts (Ionin et al., 2004) or misuse of *a(n)* in indefinite contexts, suggesting that specificity affects L2 learners’ article use in both definite and indefinite environments. As shown in Table 2 in the previous section, the participants’ performance scores were notably lower when these two semantic features were in conflict, and both the pre- and posttest means for the specific indefinites were by far the lowest of all context types.

Table 5: Distribution of article choices for specific indefinites and nonspecific definites

Noun type	Item number	Test	Average number of responses (%)		
			<i>a(n)</i>	<i>the</i>	∅
specific indefinite	3, 10, 12, 15, 26, 27, 31	pretest	34 (40.5%)	45 (53.6%)	5 (5.8%)
		posttest	35 (42.0%)	49 (58.0%)	0 (0.0%)
nonspecific definite	6, 23, 29, 32	pretest	21 (25.3%)	55 (65.8%)	8 (8.9%)
		posttest	16 (19.0%)	60 (71.7%)	8 (9.2%)

Note. Cells for the correct answers are shaded.

As illustrated in Table 5, more than half of the participants incorrectly chose *the* for specific indefinites on both the pre- and posttests. The participants' lack of understanding of what denotes definiteness was clearly attributable to a significantly strong overuse of the definite article. The rationale behind such selections was almost the same across the specific indefinite items—the target noun is “specific.” The participants' performance on these items was almost impervious to the explicit instruction; most participants remained resistant to considering contexts as indefinite on the posttest. One of the participants who was in the top decile of her class applied the specificity feature almost exclusively to determine article use, commenting that “[the correct article is] *the* because the target noun is specific” or “*a* because it's nonspecific” for most of the task items.

Likewise, approximately 20% of the participants falsely chose *a(n)* for nonspecific definites on the posttest for a similar reason that “the target noun is *nonspecific*” in the given context. Other adjectives frequently used to explain their choices included *unknown*, *undecided*, and *not previously mentioned*.

An interesting observation emerged regarding the definiteness distinction: Not infrequently, L2 learners assess the “hierarchy of nonspecificity” and determine the context accordingly. For example, although the uniqueness—or identifiability—presupposition for the definite (Heim, 1991) is satisfied for both Item 32 and Item 23, the posttest mean of the former was 63.1%, while that of the latter was more than 13% higher at 76.2%.

Item 32: [Announcement on the International Manga Awards home page]

*Submissions for the 28th International Manga Awards are now closed. All entries will be reviewed by our judging panel, and **the** winners of each category will be announced at the awards ceremony next month.*

Item 23: *Several days ago, Mr. James Peterson, a famous politician, was murdered. Police are trying to find **the** murderer of Mr. Peterson.*

For Item 32, more than one-third of the respondents chose \emptyset (misinterpreting the context as indefinite) in place of *the*, stating that “winners of each category are undecided since the review process has not even started yet” or something similar—i.e., the target noun is almost *completely* nonspecific. For Item 23, approximately 23% incorrectly chose *a*. Their reasons were largely identical: “Although we don’t know who the murderer is because (s)he is still at large, the murderer is out there anyway”—i.e., the target noun is *partially* nonspecific. Of course, whether this “nonspecificity hierarchy” theory can account for some L2 article errors requires further confirmation. However, the number of respondents who incorrectly interpreted the context as indefinite on the posttest for Item 23 ($n = 20$) was markedly lower than that for Item 32 ($n = 31$).

A highly plausible explanation for L2 learners’ fluctuation between specificity and definiteness might relate to the inadequate—or even misleading—descriptions used in most English teaching materials, in which the term “specific” is employed to explain (in)definiteness. *OxfordDictionaries.com*, for instance, defines the indefinite article as “a determiner that implies that the thing referred to is *non-specific*” (emphasis added); for the definite article, *Top 20* explicitly directs learners to use it “to refer to a *specific* thing or person” (emphasis added). The fact that specificity and definiteness are two distinct semantic features and that “the specificity distinction cross-cuts the definiteness distinction” (Ionin et al., 2008:557) is almost never introduced. This practice might well have led L2 learners to believe that “a specific reference requires *the*” (Butler, 2002:464). Most of these learners are ignorant of using nouns in the [+specific, -definite] condition, which inevitably results in the overuse of *the* with specific indefinites. The participants’ performance on Item 31 exemplifies how persistent this misconception can be: The posttest means were a scant 1.2%, ranking the lowest of all items.

Item 31: *A man we both know proposed to me last night, but I’m too embarrassed to tell you who it was.*

In line with Chan (2016:74), the term *specific* was “predominantly used by the respondents to explain definiteness.” This finding indicates that most L2 learners experience difficulty in distinguishing between specificity and definiteness and, consequently, between definiteness and indefiniteness (Ionin et al., 2004).

4.2.2. Construal of semantic context on the basis of syntactic structure

While article use essentially depends on semantic context, L2 learners commonly distinguished articles on the basis of the coexistence of modifying information

(syntactic structure) (Butler, 2002; Chan, 2017). For Item 3, for instance, 44% of the respondents incorrectly chose *the* on the posttest.

Item 3: [A memo declining an invitation to dinner]

*I'm sorry, but I will be out of town for the weekend. I am visiting **a** classmate from my English class. Her name is Samantha Brown, and she lives in Boston.*

Analysis of their reasons suggested that most of these students held the misconception that modification functions to “uniquely identify a specific subset and indicate definite reference” (Chan, 2017:25). They made a similar comment that “*classmate* is used in its specific sense because it is modified,” which is correct, “and so it should take *the*,” which is incorrect.

Most English teaching materials elucidate that the definite article is used to refer to a specific thing or person, including those made specific by so-called “structural information” (Hawkins, 1978)—e.g., prepositional phrases or relative clauses—that helps locate the referent. *Top 20* shows examples such as **The window** *in the kitchen has been closed all day* and **The pilots** *who work for that airline will go on strike at midnight*, in which the boldfaced definite noun phrases are modified by a prepositional phrase or a relative clause (marked with an underline). Most L2 learners seem preoccupied with the phrase “made specific by prepositional phrases or adjective clauses” and falsely equate “being modified” with “being definite.”

Compared with specific indefinites, the nouns used as nonspecific definites did not seem to pose as serious a problem; both their pre- and posttest means were approximately 25% higher than the means for the specific indefinites. For Item 32, for example, 63% of the participants chose the correct answer on the posttest, and most participants cited “*winners* is modified” as their reason for selecting *the*.

Item 32: *All entries will be reviewed by our judging panel, and **the** winners of each category will be announced at the awards ceremony next month.*

The propensity of associating modification with definite contexts must have had a favorable influence in this case because there always exists descriptive content modifying the definites used for cataphoric references. Given that cataphoric use accounts for 40% of all instances of *the* (Yoo, 2009), it appears necessary for teachers and writers of materials to explicitly indicate that the cataphoric use of *the* does not cover those occasions in which modification occurs for classification purposes.

4.2.3. Numerical approach to understanding indefiniteness

Approximately one-third of the participants chose an article at least once on the posttest on the basis of the number of the target noun. Regardless of the context suggested by the text, they chose *a(n)* for most singular count nouns, stating that “the number of the target noun is *one*.” Adopting this numerical approach led to the correct answer for singular nouns used for classification purposes, although their understanding of indefiniteness was completely opposite of what it should be. That is, the indefinite article is used when the reader/hearer does not know exactly which one is referred to and thus refers to *multiple* possibilities, whereas the definite article denotes the existence of a *single* entity.

For instance, the posttest mean of Item 31 was the lowest (1.2%), and only one student chose the correct answer. The student, who achieved the highest score on the posttest (91% out of 100%), briefly outlined her reason as follows: “Because *one* man proposed.”

Item 31: *A man we both know proposed to me last night, but I’m too embarrassed to tell you who it was.*

Similarly, for Item 25, which had the second lowest posttest mean (4.8%), all four students who selected the correct article were found to have adopted the single-entity strategy. They all similarly commented that “we are talking about *one* city, not many, thus *a*.”

Item 25: *Among many cities in Asia, Hong Kong is also frequently described as a place where East meets West.*

Expectedly, applying the numerical approach for singular nouns used for identification purposes led to erroneous article choices. For Item 29, for instance, almost half of the participants incorrectly selected *a* on the posttest. The application of the numerical approach was accountable for 19% of such misuse (and the prioritization of specificity over definiteness was accountable for 81%).

Item 29: *Chris went to a newly opened café near his office for a relaxing cup of coffee. To his disappointment, there were screaming kids running around. He wanted to talk to **the** manager, although he didn’t know who he or she was. . .*

Of the 84 participants, only two appeared to understand the concept of indefiniteness correctly. These participants cited the reason “[there can exist] unspecified *many*” at least once when choosing *a(n)* for a singular count noun used for classification purposes—such as Items 3, 9, 12, 18, 25, 27, 28, and 31. Unfortunately,

accurate conceptualization of the semantic feature of indefiniteness did not correlate with posttest performance on these items.

5. Conclusions and implications

The comparison of the participants' mean pre- and posttest scores using the paired-samples *t*-test confirmed that focused instruction on English article use improves L2 learners' ability to use articles correctly in a statistically meaningful way (Research Question 1). However, most participants had trouble grasping the context suggested by the text even after receiving focused instruction on article use. The analyses of the participants' written accounts of article selection and the pattern of options chosen for each item identified three inappropriate hypotheses that the participants frequently applied in attempting to use English articles correctly (Research Question 2)—prioritization of specificity over definiteness, construal of semantic context on the basis of syntactic structure, and numerical approach to understanding indefiniteness. The findings of this study suggest the possible shortcomings of teaching English articles as a binary system based on nominal countability and definiteness. The participants' performance on the posttest showed that they exhibited traceable, nonrandom error patterns of incorrectly associating the definite article with specific contexts (Ko et al., 2009). Such observations were supported by the analysis of reasons, which revealed that a great portion of article errors were constrained by specificity, which most L2 learners erroneously equated with definiteness. Further, most participants (mis)used *the* with modified noun phrases regardless of the definiteness of the target noun (Ionin et al., 2004) on the grounds that they are made specific by modifying information.

The problems identified in this study have bearing on how we can help L2 learners construe the semantics of English articles. First, it is considered necessary to bring the specificity feature into focus because the binary schema does not seem sufficient to decipher the abstruse meanings of English articles. Supporting Ionin et al.'s (2004) Fluctuation Hypothesis, it was obvious that [+specific] triggers overuse of *the* independent of definiteness. To provide input regarding which feature—specificity or definiteness—is appropriate in making an article choice, specificity needs to be incorporated into instruction on the English article system to demonstrate how [+specific] is not necessarily related to [+definite] and vice versa (Master, 1990). Given that most L2 learners already employ the specificity feature in the distinction of definiteness, teachers may consider explaining the definite-indefinite dichotomy in relation to specificity to resolve discrepancies between learners' perception of definiteness and its linguistic definition. For specific infinites, such as a first-mentioned referent in an introductory sentence (Thomas, 1989), learners can be guided to understand that specificity, which assumes “unilateral” identifiability by the writer/

speaker alone, does not satisfy the presupposition of being definite. In this regard, pedagogical strategies might elucidate that (1) the determination of identifiability, which is associated with the definite article (Yule, 1998), depends on both the writer/speaker’s and the reader/hearer’s “mutual” identifiability of a unique referent within the discourse context and that (2) whether the writer/speaker has one salient referent in mind is completely irrelevant to article use. Additionally, the (in)definiteness of a nonspecific noun needs to be accounted for in terms of whether there exists only one or a multiple of the noun.

Although the findings of the present study have important pedagogical implications, several limitations should be acknowledged. One of the major limitations concerns the representativeness of the sample. The small number of homogeneous participants did not provide sufficient data for broader generalization of the findings. Future research might be pursued on a larger scale with participants with a wide range of proficiency levels. Further, a longitudinal study is suggested to analyze L2 learners’ article use in the actual context of use rather than by a one-shot test with a small number of test items to examine the lasting benefit accrued from conceptualizing the article system as a formulated rule. It would be equally meaningful to administer a retention test after the posttest to measure whether the knowledge acquired is internalized. Another limitation may be found in the qualitative data collection method. Due to time constraints, the participants’ accounts of article choices were elicited in the form of written documentation, not in interviews, which would have facilitated richer description of their article use. Last, in the absence of a control group, one cannot completely rule out the possibility that the participants implicitly acquired the article rules during the three-month period between the pre- and posttests.

Despite these limitations, this study suggested the primary causes of English article misuse among upper-intermediate to pre-advanced Korean learners of English. To help L2 learners better grasp the article system, it is essential to provide them with explicit, well-defined instructions appropriate for their proficiency levels. Given that learner errors stem from a range of sources, it might be an elusive goal to devise a pedagogy that meets the needs of diverse learners. However, it is feasible to help them overcome specific types of difficulties they commonly encounter by answering a question “generated by [a target learner’s] interlanguage” (Swan, 1994:51). To this end, teaching the specificity feature is deemed essential to impart the simple facts that English articles are realizations of encoding definiteness (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) and that there is no morphological indicator for marking specificity in the English article system.

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Appendix 1

Forced-choice elicitation task and pre- and posttest means

Circle the correct answer for each question. If there is more than one correct answer, you can select multiple choices.

No.	Item	pretest M	posttest M
1-2	[The first line of a magazine article] A / The / Ø creative ideas need a / the / Ø special climate to grow.	94.0% 28.6%	100.0% 45.2%
3	[A memo declining an invitation to dinner] I'm sorry, but I will be out of town for the weekend. I am visiting a / the / Ø classmate from my English class. Her name is Samantha Brown, and she lives in Boston.	59.5%	56.0%
4	A / The / Ø lions are almighty creatures.	79.8%	100.0%
5	Julian ordered a cup of coffee and a dessert, but he didn't touch a / the / Ø dessert.	100.0%	100.0%
6-8	At a gallery, I saw a beautiful landscape painting. I really wanted to meet an / the / Ø painter of a / the / Ø painting, but a / the / Ø gallery owner said he didn't know who painted it.	81.0% 100.0% 84.5%	98.8% 100.0% 100.0%
9-10	[A text message to a friend who lives nearby] My cat suddenly started to drag his back legs. Do you know a / the / Ø good veterinarian in our neighborhood who specializes in treating cats? As you know, I am keeping a pet for the first time and I don't know what to do!	58.3% 28.6%	66.7% 32.1%
	[A reply from her friend] I know a / the / Ø veterinarian but I am not sure whether he specializes in cats. I will ask around and get back to you soon!		

11	Robert was discussing an interesting book in his class. I went to discuss a / the / Ø book with him afterwards.	100.0%	100.0%
12	Susanna works in a “Lost and Found” in an airport. Early this morning, a man approached her and said he was trying to find a / the / Ø red-haired girl who must have flown in on Flight 703. Since Susanna was unable to help him, she took him to the nearest check-in desk.	50.0%	50.0%
13-15	We have just arrived from New York. A / The / Ø plane was five hours late. After waiting nearly an hour for a bus at the airport, we decided to get a taxi. While driving, a / the / Ø driver told us that there was a / the / Ø bus strike in downtown Chicago.	70.2% 73.8% 57.1%	97.6% 100.0% 59.5%
16	<u>A</u> / The / Ø paper clip is handy when holding several sheets of paper together.	44.6%	98.8%
17	A / The / Ø happiness that I felt when Charlene became pregnant was beyond description.	86.9%	96.4%
18	I’m having some difficulties with my visa application. I think I need to find a / the / Ø lawyer with lots of experience. I think that’s the right thing to do.	76.2%	79.8%
19-20	A / The / Ø fact that you’ve known them for years cannot be an / the / Ø excuse to not ask them first.	100.0% 60.7%	100.0% 70.2%
21	Typically, a / the / Ø dandelions bloom in both the spring and the fall.	71.4%	100.0%
22	A / The / Ø tea that I received for my birthday is high-quality.	95.2%	100.0%
23	Several days ago, Mr. James Peterson, a famous politician, was murdered. Police are trying to find a / the / Ø murderer of Mr. Peterson.	71.4%	76.2%
24	It is important to draw a / the / Ø distinction between what you want and what you need.	39.3%	42.9%

25	Among many cities in Asia, Hong Kong is also frequently described as a / the / Ø place where East meets West.	8.3%	4.8%
26	[The first line of a magazine article] The night before he died, Michael Jackson ran through a / the / Ø six-hour dress rehearsal of his concert.	32.1%	38.1%
27-28	[In-flight announcement] Ladies and gentlemen, a / the / Ø passenger requires medical attention. If there is a / the / Ø doctor on board, please identify yourself to one of the cabin crew immediately.	54.8%	57.1%
29	Chris went to a newly opened café near his office for a relaxing cup of coffee. To his disappointment, there were screaming kids running around. He wanted to talk to a / the / Ø manager, although he didn't know who he or she was. He looked around but there was none looking like one, so he had to hurriedly finish his coffee and leave the place.	42.9%	48.8%
30	An / The / Ø anger he felt after the accident nearly ended his career.	85.7%	100.0%
31	A / The / Ø man we both know proposed to me last night, but I'm too embarrassed to tell you who it was.	1.2%	1.2%
32	[Announcement on the International Manga Awards home page] Submissions for the 28th International Manga Awards are now closed. All entries will be reviewed by our judging panel, and a / the / Ø winners of each category will be announced at the awards ceremony next month.	67.9%	63.1%