

ELL Grammar Key 7: Articles



Most English speakers recognize three articles: the indefinite articles **a** and **an** and the definite article **the**. Articles are problematic because some languages have no articles (Chinese, Japanese, Malay, Polish, Russian, Thai, Vietnamese), some have only the definite article (Arabic), and others have the same articles as English but their usage does not overlap exactly (French, German, Spanish). For ELLs, these little words can wreak havoc with their English, but there is another article problem that occurs as well: the use of no article, as in *I don't like coffee*.

7.A. Typical ELL Errors: Noticing the Gap

Can you identify and explain these five common ELL errors with this grammar point?

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| 1. <i>*Every family dreams about comfortable and luxurious house. For this goal, some people try to save a sufficient amount of money to buy a great place to live.</i> |
| 2. <i>I like this grammar book because it explains everything so well. *After reading this book, I can understand the nouns and the verbs much better. I still need help with the adjectives.</i> |
| 3. <i>*There are many reasons for being homeless, including the low education, the natural disaster, and the alcoholism.</i> |
| 4. <i>*The light is an important factor in how much people enjoy working in their offices. Offices should have lots of windows to allow as much sunshine in as possible.</i> |
| 5. <i>Thank you so much for the document that you sent me. *I will read it carefully and then send you a feedback about its content as well as its format.</i> |

7.B. Grammar Explanation

7.B.1. Indefinite Articles *a* and *an*

We use the indefinite articles **a** and **an** only before singular count nouns. We use **a** and **an** with singular count nouns that are not specific and are being mentioned for the first time.

A penguin is **a** small black and white bird.

A simple computer serves many purposes.

An igloo is **a** dwelling that is made of ice.

A common error for some language groups learning English is to omit all articles because their languages have no articles. An especially common but serious error is the omission of an article of any kind before **a singular count noun**: **I have cat and two dogs. *If you get pet, you will be happy. *I think the best pet is cat because it can be very affectionate.* This type of error is particularly common among speakers of Chinese, Japanese, and Russian.

Indefinite Articles: <i>a</i> , <i>an</i>	
Rule	Example
1. Use <i>a</i> before a noun or an adjective (+ noun) that begins with a consonant sound.	a feather, a gray feather
2. Use <i>an</i> before a noun or an adjective (+ noun) that begins with a vowel sound.	an idea, an absurd idea
3. Remember that words beginning with the letters <i>h</i> or <i>u</i> can be problematic. The use of <i>a</i> and <i>an</i> depends on the beginning sound of the word.	<p>a hat, an hour The word <i>hat</i> begins with the consonant sound /h/, but <i>hour</i> begins with a vowel sound because the letter <i>h</i> is silent.</p> <p>a university, an umbrella The word <i>university</i> begins with the consonant sound /y/, but <i>umbrella</i> begins with a vowel sound. The use of <i>a</i> or <i>an</i> is determined by the next word's initial sound, not its spelling.</p>

7.B.2. The Definite Article *the*

There are several different situations in which we use the definite article **the** in English.

Definite Article: <i>the</i>	
Rule	Example
1. Use <i>the</i> when you are talking about something specific.	<i>general:</i> All of us have an umbrella. <i>specific:</i> The umbrella next to the door is not mine.
2. Use <i>the</i> when the speaker and the listener are talking about the same specific item.	<i>general:</i> Every kitchen has a refrigerator. <i>specific:</i> William, don't forget to close the refrigerator!
3. Use <i>the</i> for the second and all other references to the same noun.	<i>first reference:</i> James and I bought a new computer last month. <i>second reference:</i> The computer lets us access the Internet really quickly.
4. Use <i>the</i> with the superlative form of an adjective, which means with the word <i>most</i> or with the ending <i>-est</i> .	<i>comparative:</i> In a jewelry store, gold is more expensive than silver. <i>superlative:</i> In a jewelry store, diamonds are the most expensive item.
5. Use <i>the</i> for the names of countries that look plural, including countries that end in <i>-s</i> or have the words <i>united</i> , <i>union</i> , <i>republic</i> , or <i>kingdom</i> .	the Philippines, the Netherlands the United States, the Soviet Union the Dominican Republic, the Republic of Angola the United Kingdom, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
6. Use <i>the</i> for the parts of something. (Exception: In general, we do not use <i>the</i> for body parts.)	<i>general:</i> In a kitchen, there is a stove, a refrigerator, and a clock. <i>parts:</i> I went to Mary's new house last night. Her kitchen is beautiful. The refrigerator is silver, the stove is black, and the clock above the door has really big numbers on it.
7. Use <i>the</i> with most bodies of water except individual lakes.	the Mississippi River the Pacific Ocean the Mediterranean Sea the Great Lakes (but Lake Michigan)
8. Use <i>the</i> with geographic parts of the globe and geographic areas, deserts, and peninsulas.	the equator the Middle East the Gobi Desert the South

Many ELLs tend to **overuse the** when they want to refer to the whole category of something. Common errors include **The basketball is my favorite sport* and **I think the basketball players are the great athletes*. In addition, it is not common to use any article with abstract nouns, so we do not say **People need the patience*, **The absence makes the heart grow fonder*, or **The silence is golden*. We call this usage the **null article** (∅).

7.B.3. No Article

In English, there are a few situations in which we do not use any article with a noun. In these cases, many other languages require the use of **the**, so a common ELL error is overuse of **the**.

No Article: (∅)	
Rule	Example
1. When you want to talk about a category or group in general, use no article.	<i>general:</i> Cats can be great pets. <i>specific:</i> The cats in the pet store are expensive.
2. Use no article before abstract nouns such as feelings or ideas.	<i>wrong:</i> A person's future success depends on the education. <i>correct:</i> A person's future success depends on education. <i>wrong:</i> The patience is a virtue. <i>correct:</i> Patience is a virtue.

Common ELL Mistakes: What Your ELLs Should Know

- Do not use a singular count noun without an article (or other determiner).
wrong: job, apple, reason, best choice, delicious sandwich
correct: a job, an apple, the reason, the best choice, a delicious sandwich
- Do not use a with a noun that begins with a vowel sound.
wrong: a hour, a heir, a honorable colleague, a hourly rate
correct: an hour, an heir, an honorable colleague, an hourly rate
- Do not use **the** with a plural count noun that refers to the whole category.
wrong: I don't trust the politicians. They are an ornery bunch of people.
correct: I don't trust politicians. They are an ornery bunch of people.
- Do not use **the** with abstract nouns or ideas.
wrong: The education is the most important thing in my life.
correct: Education is the most important thing in my life.

7.C. Native Language Interference: Compare English with Other Languages

Language	Notes on Articles
Arabic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Arabic has a definite article. 2. Unlike English, Arabic requires the definite article with abstract nouns: <i>*The honesty is important.</i> 3. The definite article is used for specific things as in English, but it is also used in Arabic when referring to the whole group. In Arabic, you must say, <i>*My favorite sport is the tennis</i> and <i>*I am afraid of the spiders.</i> 4. Arabic has no indefinite article.
Chinese Japanese Korean Russian	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. These languages have no articles. Some of these languages have a word for <i>this</i> and/or <i>that</i>, so students may overuse these two words in lieu of articles. 2. ELLs who speak these languages exhibit persistent errors with articles. (Articles and prepositions are two of the last grammatical areas that all ELLs acquire.)
French Spanish	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. These languages have indefinite and definite articles. 2. The definite article is used for specific things as in English, but it is also used when referring to the whole group. In these languages, you must say, <i>*My favorite sport is the tennis</i> and <i>*I am afraid of the spiders.</i> 3. The definite article must be used with abstract nouns: <i>*The honesty is important for the nice trips.</i> 4. Indefinite articles are not used when talking about professions: <i>*My mother is teacher.</i> 5. Unlike English, both French and Spanish have singular and plural forms of their indefinite and definite articles. ELLs of these languages may ask you about the plural of <i>the</i> in English, a question that may seem strange until you consider this grammar in these languages.

FIND OUT

Ask students of different first languages to translate the following sentences into their native language. Compare differences in article usage. Can you predict any ELL errors with articles?

- 1 I have a brother. He is the best brother in the world.
- 2 Politicians are corrupt in many countries.
- 3 I lived in Colombia before I moved to the United States.
- 4 I don't like cookies or chocolate. I prefer things that are not sweet.
- 5 If you buy a car, you need to take care of it.

7.D. Ideas for Teaching

Like prepositions, articles take a great deal of time to be acquired by ELLs. On the surface, the learning load does not appear to be so great with articles. While there are more than 150 prepositions in English, there are only two common kinds of articles in English: indefinite (*a, an*) and definite (*the*). From an ELL point of view, there are times when we use no article, but ELLs are inclined to use something. Thus, even if we count everything here, there are only four articles (*a, an, the, Ø*). Because there are only four, each article has to do many different tasks.

In planning a class on articles, it is important to know how articles are used within the native language of your students. Some languages have no articles at all, including Chinese, Japanese, and Russian. Arabic has a definite article. Some languages have articles that appear to be equivalent to ours, but the usages do not overlap exactly: French, German, Spanish.

At beginning level, ELLs learn (1) a singular count noun must have something in front of it, and this is usually *a* or *an*, (2) *the* for more specific usages, (3) *the* or \emptyset with geographical terms, and (4) \emptyset for general meaning. The first point applies mainly to languages that have no articles at all. If your students speak languages that have indefinite articles, like Spanish or French, you do not have to worry about (1). Teach your Chinese, Japanese, or Russian students that every time they learn a new noun, they should write down the noun with *a* or *an* in front. They should write down *a book, a cat, and an excuse*. They need to get used to including *a* or *an*. ELLs will never have any reason to write *book, cat, or excuse* as bare nouns, so learning them as bare nouns is useless and counterproductive. You should have separate lessons on each of the usages of these articles. One reason that article instruction is difficult for ELLs is that lessons on articles naively present several usages on one or two pages as if they were just one small issue. This would be the equivalent of teaching seven or eight distinct verb tenses all at one time, something that no grammar book would ever advocate.

At the intermediate level, ELLs consolidate information on articles. At this point, *a* or *an* is no longer a problem, but definite articles may still cause some problems. Common errors in intermediate writing include overuse of *the*, as in **I think the honesty is the most important human characteristic*.

At the advanced level, instruction no longer deals with global rules. Instead, teacher instruction on articles, if it occurs, takes place in the form of feedback on individual expressions or idioms, such as *once upon a time, not once upon the time*.