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Article Errors and Article Choices

■ **Many writing teachers desire to know which article errors need to be corrected because they are unacceptable in all circumstances (and which may prejudice the reader against the writing), and which "errors" reflect a choice that the speaker or writer has made that must be incorporated into the meaning of the utterance. This article describes the available choices in different categories, discusses the perception of those choices by teachers as editors, and presents a possible explanation of certain erroneous choices based on an analysis of the lexical choices made.**

In the volume dedicated to Marianne Celce-Murcia upon her retirement, Patricia Porter (2005, p. 190) cites her colleague Dorothy Lindsay's extensive teaching of collocation as part of the vocabulary component of her academic integrated skills class for university freshmen. For example, Lindsay helps her students to learn that the verb *strive* is collocated (or linked in usage) to an infinitive structure (e.g., *strive to succeed, strive to get good grades, strive to get ahead*) or a preposition + noun (e.g., *strive for success, strive against the odds*). The linguistic notion of lexicogrammatical collocation is not new, but the fact that it is mentioned in the context of successful teacher habits seems to indicate that, at last, grammar has found its place in the classroom in its rightful guise as language tool rather than subject of study. Furthermore, corpus studies suggest that "[i]nsofar as different words appear to have distinctive collocational, colligational, semantic, pragmatic and generic associations, … every word may have its own grammar in these respects, a grammar which can only be acquired through experience of its typical contextual patternings" (Aston, 2001, p. 15).

The use of collocation as an aspect of vocabulary presentation recalled to me a presentation I gave at the 1996 TESOL convention titled "Article Errors and Article Choices." In that paper, I suggested that collocation might explain certain erroneous uses of the English article system by nonnative speakers. My focus was not on the development of vocabulary but on learning the article that occurred as part of a collocation. In the examples cited above, the prepositional phrase following the verb *strive* contains two articles, *strive for* <u>Ø</u> (the indefinite zero article) *success*, and *strive against* <u>*the*</u> (the definite article) *odds*.

The phrase requires the article shown in each case; we do not usually say *strive for the success* or *strive for a success*, though scenarios might be fabricated in which they would be allowable, for example, *strive for the success of his new policy*, *strive for a success that was beyond his reach.* Similarly, we do not usually *say strive against Ø odd,* though we can say *strive against all Ø odds* (**an odds* being disallowed by the plural noun). Thus, with the addition of a word or two, an article error can be construed as an article choice.

The notion of collocation can be contrasted with the notion of lexical phrase. In Master (1997), I mistakenly used the term *lexical phrase* as a synonym for *collocation.* However, Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) distinguish between the two as follows: "Prefabricated phrases are collocations if they are chunked sets of lexical items with no particular pragmatic functions; they are lexical phrases if they have such pragmatic functions." (p. 37). The crux of the distinction thus lies in the perceived pragmatic function of the phrase, though I would argue that such a function is not always transparent. Nevertheless, I will adhere to the superordinate term *collocation* in this revision of my 1996 presentation.

The use of the three articles *a(n)*, *the*, and Ø (the zero article)[1] can be understood in terms of a binary distinction between classification and identification (Master, 1990b and 1996). Classified noun phrases use the articles *a* and Ø to place a noun into a category, as in *I have a dog* or I *prefer (Ø) red wine;* the categories *dog* and *red wine* can be determined by the question *What?* (e.g., *What do you have? What do you prefer?*). Identified noun phrases use the article *the* to single out one or more nouns, as in *The dog with the floppy ears won the prize*, or *The red wine we had last night comes from California*; the specific instances of *dog* and *red wine* can be determined by the question *Which?* (e.g., *Which dog won? Which wine did you have?*). Interacting with the classification/identification distinction is the notion of countability. Singular count nouns, such as *book*, generally require either *a(n)* or *the* (*a book*, *the book*), but not Ø; plural count nouns, such as *books*, generally require either Ø or *the*, but not *a(n).* Noncount nouns, such as *air*, generally require Ø or *the*, but not *a(n).*

Article errors rarely lead to outright misunderstanding in the spoken language. This is because pragmatic clues, such as pointing or a knowledge of the situation, can usually communicate the intent of the speaker; it is also perhaps why most learners do not spend much time trying to acquire the system (this is also perhaps why they learn prepositions and third-person singular *-s* so late). However, many writing teachers desire to know which article errors need to be corrected because they are unacceptable in all circumstances (and which may prejudice the reader against the writing), and which "errors" reflect a choice that the speaker or writer has made that must be incorporated into the meaning of the utterance. I will discuss the perception of those choices by teachers as editors and present a possible explanation of certain errors as deriving from overgeneralization from similar patterns based on a collocational phrase analysis of original student work.

Teacher Perceptions

Within the constraints of countability, the possibility of a choice among the three articles is more common than not in most environments. However,

that choice has semantic consequences that speakers must be aware of in order to correctly express their meaning or to sound nativelike. Reflecting a rather extreme, though deeply humanistic, acceptance of article errors in the writing of his students, Lunberry (1994) describes those errors as "para-poetic" and encourages the teacher to try to enjoy what is produced rather than simply to label them as errors. He provides the following example from a 19-year-old Japanese college student's description of a dream:

> I was studying in room. I was using dictionary to look up word meaning. Suddenly, word disappeared. I was surprised and I turned over two or three pages. All page's word disappeared. Then, red spot appeared in the white pages. It became bigger and bigger. At that time I woke up. (p. 102)

While Lunberry acknowledges that "the absence of an article is immediately, almost physically, felt by the native speaker" (p. 103), he describes another possible reaction to this text:

> To say *word* but not *a word* or *the word* is to evoke an odd, generalized image possessing for the native speaker subtly different connotative potential. Using a dictionary to "look up word" could suggest a possible search for all words, words-in-general, an abstract condition of *word*-ness that transcends the particular and evokes the idealized. Granted, such bizarre implications are generally not seriously, consciously considered by the native speaker, but on an unconscious level they strike a note that inevitably generates fragments of image and moments of meaning. If only for a fraction of a second, error is not read as error but is registered in the mind as a possibility, received, imagined, and then quickly—too quickly—dismissed as technically incorrect and therefore undeserving of consequence or attention. The logic of linguistic organization reaffirms itself, and the aberrant English soon dissipates into nonsense. However, it is from this darker realm of language's excess, in that fleeting, imaginative moment prior to the restoration of order, that errors and inconsistencies merge and the para-poetic is born. (p. 103)

This rather fanciful interpretation would lie at one end of a continuum of article acceptance, though one may question the interpretation of (presumably unintended) error as art. Nevertheless, to his credit, Lunberry uses the term "para-poetic" to qualify his claim.

At the other extreme, Yoon and Bailey (1988) found that teachers as editors often correct article usage in ways unintended by the original author. In their study, 20 native-speaking (NS) subjects (not further described) were given one of two essays by NS authors from which all the articles had been deleted and asked to supply the missing articles. The results showed that 63% of the definite articles and 36% of the indefinite articles were not supplied by at least 25% of the subjects. They found that teachers as editors tended to underidentify (especially with plural and noncount nouns), as shown in the following examples from Yoon and Bailey (1988):

1a. Yet the essential attitudes toward women are so different today. (90% of the subjects chose Ø for the underlined article)
1b. ... the expectations of what a respectable or beautiful woman is ... (90% of the subjects chose Ø for the underlined article)
1c. ... they regard the incoming data as an untidy assortment ... (100% of the subjects chose Ø for the underlined article)

They conclude that, when in doubt, teachers may generalize the sense of the author. Their solution to this problem is remarkably similar to that implied by Lunberry (1994):

> What teachers need to do for their students is to look at the larger context of what they are saying and see if they can find a plausible meaning for their article choice, giving them a little more benefit of the doubt when they choose to differentiate and the teacher is tempted to generalize. (Yoon & Bailey, 1988, pp. 21-22)

The above quotation underscores the intent of this paper, which is to differentiate those instances when no article choice is allowed from those cases in which the writer has the option to choose within the constraints of countability and semantic interpretation.

Overgeneralization From Similar Patterns

In Master (1997), I suggested that articles in collocational phrases (as opposed to article rule application) may be the most promising way for advanced learners to gain control of the article system. To investigate the potential relationship between collocational phrases and article choice, data were gathered from a single class set of timed (50-minute) essays on the topic of aging in America written by 20 nonnative speaking (NNS) freshmen students of low-advanced English proficiency in a pre-English 1A writing class at a large urban university. The subjects consisted of speakers of Vietnamese (15), Chinese (2), Farsi (2), and Arabic (1). Seventy-five sentences containing 67 article errors and 24 article choices were identified in these essays. *Article errors* are mistakes that any native speaker would be able to identify, as shown in the following examples (the L1 of the writer is shown in parentheses):

2a. She does not even bother to go to Ø backyard (Chinese).
2b. Once in Ø while, they read a newspaper (Vietnamese).
2c. The only thing that can make him kill *the* time is his dairy business. (Arabic)
2d. Diseases are not under my control, nor is the weakness of my body to do the physical activity (Farsi).

Article choices, on the other hand, are article usages that might not be the first choice of a native speaker, but which could conceivably be correct, such as the following:

3a. My grandparents are afraid to die because they have a bad dream all the time (Vietnamese).
3b. In addition, Ø financial problems of the elderly is a major problem that we can't ignore (Chinese).
3c. It is also called an age of loneliness. (Arabic)
3d. Women are much more likely to use skin care products to maintain their appearance, much more so than the men. (Vietnamese)

The greatest source of both errors and choices was the use of *the* in place of Ø, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Distribution of Article Errors and Article Choices (n = 83)

L1	***Usage***	***UtheRØ***	***UØRthe***	***UtheRa***	***UaRthe***	***UØRa***	***UaRØ***
Arabic	Errors	3(27.3%)	2(18.2%)	1(9.1%)	0	3(27.3%)	2(18.2%)
Arabic	Choices	0	0	0	1(100)0	0	0
Chinese	Errors	2(16.7)	2(16.7)	3(25)	3(25)	2(16.7)	0
Chinese	Choices	1(25)	2(50)	1(25)	0	0	0
Farsi	Errors	2(50)	1(25)	0	1(25)	0	0
Farsi	Choices	0	1(100)0	0	0	0	0
Viet.	Errors	11(31.4)	8(22.9)	5(14.3)	1(2.9)	8(22.9)	2(5.7)
Viet.	Choices	9(52.9)	1(5.9)	2(11.8)0	0	4(23.5)	1(5.9)
Total errors	16(26.7)	13(21.7)	9(15.0)	5(8.3)	13(21.7)	4(6.7)	
Total choices	10(43.5)	4(17.4)	3(13.0)	1(4.3)	4(17.4)	1(4.3)	
Total choices + errors		26	17	12	6	17	5
Choices as % of total (Average = 27.7%)		38.5%	23.5%	25%	16.7%	23.5%	20%

Note. *U = used; R = required for errors, preferred for choices.*

Nearly half (43.5%) of the choices made were of this type, supporting Yoon & Bailey's (1988) finding that teachers as editors tended to underidentify, in other words, believed that Ø was required when the ESL writer used *the*. Choices were made with all six permutations of the three articles, averaging 28% of the total number of errors and choices combined. This means that more than a quarter of the article "errors" were actually viable choices that should have been honored.

Sentences were selected from the data set to represent three kinds of structures: (a) noun phrase structure (including the count/noncount distinction, the generic/specific distinction, and idiomatic structures), (b) modification structure (premodification, i.e., ranking adjectives; and postmodification, i.e., modified/unmodified, unlimited/limited quantity, partitive/descriptive *of* -phrases, and intentional vagueness), and (c) discourse structure (first and subsequent mention). Several samples are shown below:

4a. When we went to visit him he was in a terrible shape. (Farsi) [Correct: Ø]

4b. She does not even bother to go to Ø backyard. (Chinese)
[Correct: *the*]

4c. My grandparents wake up very early in Ø morning. (Vietnamese)
[Correct: *the*]

4d. Ø Few days later my uncle passed away to our relief. (Arabic)
[Correct: *a*]

The article errors, such as those underlined, were classified according to the structures listed above (for a complete description of the three structures and the categories of article usage under each, see the Appendix). Each error was then categorized according to what other collocational phrase(s) the student could have been thinking of in choosing the article. This was to show that article selection may have been the product of overgeneralization from an already learned collocational phrase rather than from the misapplication of a rule.

Noun Phrase Structure

The Count/Noncount Distinction

The count/noncount category presented four different possibilities: (a) the article would have been correct if the phrase pattern had been used with other lexical items, (b) the noun used allows both count and noncount usage, (c) the article used would have been correct if the noun had been plural, and (d) the article used would have been (superficially) correct if the noun had been another part of speech.

(a) *The article would have been correct if the phrase pattern had been used with other lexical items.*

1. He was in such a misery that it was inhuman to keep him alive. (Arabic)

He was in such a state that ...	He was in such Ø misery that ...
a bad mood	*Ø pain*
a boring job	*Ø confusion*

2. During this time, her father also developed Ø bad temper since he lost his bodily functions, which is understandable since he felt useless and nonproductive. (Vietnamese)

Her father developed *Ø cancer.*	Her father developed *a bad temper.*
Ø Alzheimer's disease	*a cold*
	a headache

3. [My mother-in-law] has to depend on us for Ø living. (Vietnamese)

She depends on us for *Ø money.*	She depends on us for *a living.*
Ø support	*a home*
Ø love	*a source of income*
Ø food	*a decent meal*

4. My grandparents wake up very early in Ø morning. (Vietnamese)

They wake up very late. | They wake up early
in Ø² winter. | *in the morning.*
at Ø² night | *in the day*

(b) *The noun used allows both count and noncount usage.*

1. When we went to visit him he was in *a* terrible shape. (Arabic)

He is in *Ø terrible shape.* / *Ø terrible physical condition* / *Ø terrible form*

That dress has *a terrible shape.* / *an awful design* / *an ugly outline*

2. He was in such a misery that it was inhuman to keep him alive. (Arabic)

Her diary revealed *a misery* that he had never thought possible. / *a malaise* / *a confusion*

He is in such *Ø misery* that he cannot sleep. / *Ø pain*

3. During this time, her father also developed Ø bad temper since he lost his bodily functions, which is understandable since he felt useless and nonproductive. (Vietnamese)

Ø Bad temper is sometimes caused by dyspepsia.

He has *a bad temper.*

4. I think old age is Ø wonder in disguise. (Arabic)

The child was full of *Ø wonder.* / *Ø hope* / *Ø trust*

Old age is *a wonder* in disguise.

5. She takes no advice from anyone and tries to keep her hair Ø natural color by dying her hair. (Vietnamese)

Ø Natural color is preferable to artificial color.

A natural color would look better.

(c) *The article used would have been correct if the noun had been plural.*

1. Those symptoms had been going on for years and that added up to Ø serious problem. (Vietnamese)

That added up to *Ø serious problems.*

That added up to *a serious problem.*

2. It's typical of Ø older couple to depend on their family for support. (Vietnamese)

It's typical of *Ø older couples* to communicate with few words.

It's typical of *an older couple* to communicate with few words.

3. Once the elderly have moved into Ø nursing home, they are just like a prisoner who is locked in a prison with many other strangers. (Vietnamese)

The elderly move into *Ø nursing homes.*

They moved into *a nursing home.*

4. She does not even bother to go to Ø back yard. (Chinese)

She does not go into *Ø back yards.*

She would never go into *a back yard.*

(d) *The absence of an article would have been correct if the noun had been another part of speech.*

1. [My mother-in-law] has to depend on us for Ø living. (Vietnamese)

She depends on us *to live.*
to survive
to eat

She depends on us *for Ø money.*
for Ø survival
for[her] life

2. [Old people] are not going to be productive but rather Ø burden for the family. (Vietnamese)

Old people are not productive but rather *burdensome to* the family.
difficult for
problematic in

Old people are not productive but rather *a burden to* the family.
a difficulty for
a problem in

3. Most old people have Ø tendency to be afraid of death. (Vietnamese)

Most old people *tend* to be afraid of death.

Old people *have a tendency* to be afraid of death.

4. n 1970 there were just about three million of them *the* making up about 4 percent of the total population. (Vietnamese)

The make up of the population was mostly white Americans.

In 1970, there were three million of them *making up 4 percent of the population.*

The Generic/Specific Distinction

The generic/specific category presented three different possibilities: (a) the article would have been more acceptable if the situation had been specific, (b) the article would have been correct if the situation had been generic, and (c) the article would have been correct if a more typical generic noun phrase had been used.

(a) *The article would have been more acceptable if the situation had been specific.*

1. These incidences are a grim reminder that the old age is approaching us, too. (Arabic)

The old age of his grandparents had been harder than that of his parents.

Ø Old age is everyone's concern.

2. Elder abuse does not attract the public concern. (Vietnamese)

The public concern of the mayor was evident in his last speech.

Elder abuse does not attract *Ø public concern.*

(b) *The article would have been correct if the situation had been generic.*

1. For example, a couple in my neighborhood, who are about 60 years old now, have become the quiet couple these days. (Vietnamese)

The quiet couple is a rarity in today's world.	They have become *a quiet couple.*

2. At home, my parents could not take care of my aunt. Therefore, my parents had to put her in the nursing home. (Vietnamese)

The nursing home is the last abode of many elderly people.	They put her in *a nursing home.*

(c) *The article would have been correct if a more typical generic noun phrase had been used.*

1. When Ø elderly reach a certain age, they start to have problems sleeping. (Vietnamese)

When *Ø old people* reach a certain age, they can't sleep.	When *the elderly* reach a certain certain age, they can't sleep.

Idiomatic Structures

The idiomatic structures category presented four possibilities: (a) the article could have been correct if the idiomatic phrase had been paraphrased, (b) the article would have been correct if the opposite syntactic environment had been intended, (c) the article would have been (superficially) correct if the word it preceded had not been part of an idiom, and (d) the article would have been correct with certain other time expressions.

(a) *The article would have been correct if the idiomatic phrase had been paraphrased.*

1. They do not talk as much as in Ø old days. (Vietnamese)

They do not talk as much as they did in *Ø olden days.* *Ø days of yore.*	They do not talk as much as they did in *the old days.* *the past*

2. Many elderly people are isolated because of Ø generation gap. (Vietnamese)

Elderly people are isolated because of *Ø differences between the generations.* *the younger generation.*	Elderly people are isolated because of *the generation gap.*

3. He doesn't know how to kill his time. The only thing that can make him kill *the* time is his dairy business. (Arabic)

He doesn't know how to *fill his days.*	He doesn't know how to *kill Ø time.*

(b) *The article would have been correct if the opposite syntactic environment had been intended* (i.e., *few* suggests a negative while *a few* suggests a neutral or

positive disposition toward the quantity).

1. <u>Ø</u> Few days later my uncle passed away to our relief. (Arabic)

<u>*Ø Few*</u> days remained for my uncle.	<u>*A few*</u> days later my uncle passed away.

(c) *The article would have been (superficially) correct if the word it preceded had not been part of an idiom.*

1. Once in <u>Ø</u> while, they read a newspaper. (Vietnamese)

While we cooked, they read a newspaper.	<u>*Once in a while*,</u> they read a newspaper.

(d) <u>The article would have been correct with certain other time expressions.</u>

1. My grandparents wake up very early in Ø morning. (Vietnamese)

[Good] <u>*Ø morning*</u>!	They wake up early in <u>*the morning*</u>.
They work at <u>*Ø night.*</u>	They worked during <u>*the night.*</u>
They were born in <u>*Ø 1908.*</u>	They were born in <u>*the last century.*</u>

Modification

Modification includes premodification and postmodification. The premodification category includes only ranking adjectives.

Premodification: Ranking Adjectives

The ranking adjectives category presented two different possibilities: (a) the article would have been correct if the adjective had not been a ranking adjective, and (b) the article would have been correct if the adjective had been a ranking adjective.

(a) *The article would have been correct if the adjective had not been a ranking adjective.*

1. He was so unconscious of his surroundings and our presence that <u>Ø</u> only thing that matters to him is his terrible suffering. (Farsi)

He was <u>*only*</u> thinking of himself.	<u>*The only*</u> thing that matters is his suffering.

(b) *The article would have been correct if the adjective had been a ranking adjective.*

1. Many old people have <u>the</u> similar problem. (Vietnamese)

Many old people have <u>*the same*</u> problem.	Many old people have <u>*a similar*</u> problem.

Postmodification

The postmodification category includes modified/nonmodified, unlimited/limited quantity (a special kind of postmodification; see Master 1990a), partitive/descriptive *of*-phrases, and intentional vagueness.

Modified/Nonmodified. The modified/nonmodified category presented five possibilities: (a) the article would have been correct if the noun had been postmodified, (b) the article would have been correct if the noun had been a premodifier, (c) the article would have been correct if there had been no pre-

modifier, (d) the article would have been correct if there had been a different premodifier, and (e) the article would have been correct if intentional vagueness had been meant.

(a) *The article would have been correct if the noun had been postmodified.*

1. For example, all the models that you see in the advertisement are young ladies and young men. (Vietnamese)

The models in *the advertisement on this page* are unattractive.

Models in *Ø advertisements* are well paid.

2. Diseases are not under my control, nor is the weakness of my body to do the physical activity. (Farsi)

My health is improved by providing *the physical activity that it requires.*

Health is improved by *Ø physical activity.*

(b) *The article would have been correct if the noun had been the adjectival first element in a noun compound.*

1. She does not even bother to go to Ø backyard. (Chinese)

She does not go to *Ø back yard barbecues.*

She doesn't even go to *the back yard.*

2. [My mother-in-law] is too old for work and she has been waiting for assistance from Ø government. (Vietnamese)

She gets help from *Ø government agencies.*

She gets help from *the government.*

(c) *The article would have been correct if there had been no premodifier.*

1. He lost his wife Ø long time ago. (Arabic)

Ø Time moves slowly sometimes.

He lost his wife *a long time* ago.

(d) *The article would have been correct if there had been a different premodifier.*

1. When the elderly reach Ø certain age, they start to have problems sleeping. (Vietnamese)

When they reach *Ø old age,* they can't sleep.

When they reach *a certain age,* they can't sleep.

(e) *The article would have been correct if intentional vagueness had been meant* (i.e., the deliberate use of Ø instead of *the* before a noun postmodified with an *of*-phrase).

1. Ø Lack of social gathering is another thing that we have to keep in mind. (Farsi)

Ø Lack of money caused his downfall.

A lack of social opportunities hurt her self-image.

Unlimited/Limited Quantity. The unlimited/limited quantity category presented one possibility: The article would have been correct if the noun phrase had represented a limited quantity.

(a) *The articles would have been correct if the noun phrase had represented a limited quantity.*

1. People prefer to accept the younger workers. (Vietnamese)

People prefer *the younger workers in the program.*

People prefer *Ø younger workers.*

2. *The* financial problems do peak in old age because you have a lesser income. (Arabic)

The financial problems of elderly people peak 10 years after retirement.

Ø Financial problems peak in old age.

3. All the models that you see in advertisements are the young ladies and *the* young men. (Vietnamese)

The young ladies and young men in the advertisements are well paid.

All the models are *Ø young ladies and young men.*

Partitive/Descriptive *Of*-Phrases. The partitive/descriptive *of*-phrase category presented two possibilities: (a) the article would have been correct if the noun phrase had been inverted into an *of*-phrase, and (b) the article would have been correct if the premodifier had been in a descriptive *of*-phrase.

(a) *The article would have been correct if the noun phrase had been inverted into an of-phrase.*

1. Elder abuse does not attract the public concern. (Vietnamese)

Elder abuse does not attract *the concern of the public.*

Elder abuse does not attract *Ø public concern.*

(b) *The article would have been correct if the premodifier had been in a descriptive of-phrase.*

1. Other people are afraid because it is the last stage of the human life. (Vietnamese)

It is the last stage of *the life of a human.*

It is the last stage of *Ø human life.*

Discourse

First/Subsequent Mention

The first/subsequent mention category presented two different possibilities: (a) the articles would have been correct if the first and subsequent mention had been reversed, and (b) the articles would have been correct if they had been specific first/subsequent mention (which does not apply to generic NPs).

(a) *The articles would have been correct if the first and subsequent mention had been reversed.*

1. I will describe four kinds of the problem that I believe people face as they get old. Ø Problems include diseases, lack of physical activity, etc. (Farsi)

I will describe four kinds of <u>*Ø problem(s)*</u> that I believe people face as they get old. <u>*The problems*</u> include diseases, lack of physical activity, etc.

(b) *The articles would have been correct if they had been specific (as opposed to generic) first/subsequent mention.*

1. Most <u>Ø</u> aging people have trouble living because <u>the</u> old people have many problems with illness and loneliness. (Vietnamese)

<u>Ø</u> Mr. and Mrs. Smith have trouble living because <u>the</u> old people have many problems with illness and loneliness.

DISCUSSION

The examples in the above categories underscore the collocational nature of many article problems. They suggest that learners may learn articles in noun phrase chunks, and the examples show that the noun phrase would allow the article chosen under other, often closely related, circumstances. In other words, learners may make article choices by trying out parallel noun phrases that they already think to be correct rather than by applying an abstract rule of article usage. This strategy may be especially prevalent with the English articles since they interact with many other features (countability, genericness, etc.), making rule application onerous. In learning German as a second language, for instance, I based novel utterances not on article rules but on what I knew to be correct, such as *auf dem Tisch (on the table).*

Wood (1981) describes a cline that extends from lexical phrases to collocations to free combinations. The infelicitous examples in the sentences analyzed above, with the exception of the idiomatic phrases, are collocations rather than lexical phrases. Nevertheless, some aspects of lexical phrases may apply to the processes NNSs use in producing noun phrases that are new to them. Peters (1983, cited in Cowie, 1988, p. 132) suggests that the usefulness of multiword units in adult language is that they allow for economy.

> Storage of ready-made expressions (those already in general use) and the creation ("fusion") of new expressions serves as a short-cutting device: it enables the speaker, for example, to focus on social (as opposed to linguistic) aspects of interaction, or to concentrate on the organization of longer stretches of discourse. (p. 3)

It may be that NNS learners, especially when required to produce timed essays for a writing class (the source of the sample sentences analyzed), also resort to an economizing strategy (i.e., trying out related noun phrases they think they already know rather than applying rules of article usage) in order to be able to concentrate on the discourse of the essay.

Pedagogical Implications

The categories of article usage allow choices under many circumstances and not under others, but in most cases the choice has a definite semantic effect, which may or not be the one intended by the NNS writer. Teachers need to help students to learn those aspects that are highly constrained (e.g.,

the use of *the* with *same* under all circumstances) and those in which the choice will affect the reader's understanding in a certain way and how (e.g., the use of *few* versus *a few* in *She has few/a few friends*). At the same time, teachers must be careful not to steamroll over the students' intended meaning in editing their written work. To this end, it may be helpful for teachers to look for the (real or imagined) collocational pattern on which the students' choice of articles was based and to explain the consequences for the student's meaning on a phrase-by-phrase basis.

To show how such an analysis might be conducted either in the classroom or in a one-on-one office consultation, I return in Figures 1 and 2 to two examples I provided earlier.

Figure 1
Pedagogical Example: Ø for *a*

Student sentence: "During this time, her father also developed Ø bad temper since he lost his bodily functions, which is understandable since he felt useless and nonproductive." (Vietnamese)

Her father developed	Her father developed
Ø cancer	*a cold.*
Ø Alzheimer's disease	*a headache*

Lexicogrammatical explanation: In this case, a temper is "developed" like a cold or other bodily condition. Lesser ailments, such as colds, always require *a*, whereas serious diseases in almost all cases require Ø. A few intermediate illnesses can take *the* (*the flu, the mumps, the measles*).
Problem: If the student has heard phrases describing serious bodily conditions, she or he may be overgeneralizing that phrase into noun phrases describing lesser bodily conditions and states.
Possible solution: Show the difference in article usage for serious bodily conditions in contrast to lesser ones and explain that a temper is not a serious disease.

Figure 2
Pedagogical Example: *the* for Ø

Student sentence: "Elder abuse does not attract the public concern." (Vietnamese)

Elder abuse does not attract	Elder abuse does not attract
the concern of the public.	*Ø public concern.*

Lexicogrammatical explanation: *Public concern* is a category of the noncount meaning of *concern*, meaning "interest or worry." Like any noncount noun, it can occur with *the* only if a limited quantity is intended.

Problem: Students commonly believe that the addition of an adjective to a noncount noun makes it definite (e.g., they will correctly assign Ø to *water*, but mistakenly assign *the* to *salt water*). The student is probably also used to hearing *the* with the noun *public* and not considering the effect of the head noun *concern* on the article (a common problem, as noted in Master, 1995).
Possible solutions: 1. Show students that inverting an ADJ + ABSTRACT NOUN into a descriptive *of*-phrase (e.g., *elder abuse* becomes *the abuse of elders*, *water pollution* becomes *the pollution of water*) changes the article from Ø to *the*.
2. Show students that it is always the head noun that controls the article, not its modification, and demonstrate the effect of adding another noun to a noun phrase (e.g., *Ø blood* becomes *a blood sample*) .

Support for the pedagogical solutions provided in Figures 1 and 2 is provided in recent research that suggests the efficacy of metalinguistic description in learning the article system. Sheen (2007), focusing on the single article rule of first and subsequent mention, found that written corrective feedback with metalinguistic descriptions was superior to written corrective feedback consisting only of the simple correction of the error. The broadening of grammatical explanation to include contextual patterns, as also suggested by Aston (2001), may help to increase the student's repertoire to allow for more native-like usage of the article system.

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Endnotes

[1] I ignore the definite null article discussed in Master (1997) and Master (2003) and use here only the zero article (Ø). There is, in any event, only a single example of null (see Footnote 2).
[2] This is the single example of the null article mentioned in Footnote 1.

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Appendix
The Articles in Noun Phrase, Modification, and Discourse Structures

Noun Phrase Structure

With the focus on noun phrase structure, the emphasis is on some feature of the noun phrase that affects article choice. The categories of article usage

affected include the count/noncount distinction, the generic/specific distinction, and idiomatic structures.

The Count/Noncount Distinction

Some nouns in English are almost always count, others almost always noncount. The following list includes nouns that have a relatively permanent count or noncount status (for the sake of brevity, plural count nouns with Ø are not included):

1.

Count	***Noncount***
a star	Ø gold
a book	Ø furniture
an idea	Ø news
a pencil	Ø linguistics
a molecule	Ø equipment
a tree	Ø clothing

With words such as these, the writer has only one choice of classifying article, either *a(n)* or Ø, but the use of *a* with *furniture* is generally ungrammatical as is the use of Ø with *star*. Since countability applies only to classified nouns, it is of course possible to use *the* with all the words in the list. Whether the result is grammatical or not depends on the discourse.

Sometimes the same word may be either count or noncount, but each has a different meaning. These comprise the so-called "dual" nouns in English. For example, the word *air* may take either Ø (e.g., Ø *Air* is composed of nitrogen and oxygen) or *a(n)* (e.g., There was *an air* of hostility in the room). Other examples of dual nouns include the following:

2.

Count	***Noncount***
a football (an object)	Ø football (a game)
a glass (a container for liquid)	Ø glass (a clear hard silicate)
an iron (a pressing device)	Ø iron (an element)
a light (a source of light or flame)	Ø light (part of the electromagnetic spectrum)
a man (a male human being)	Ø man (all human beings, now somewhat dated)
a wood (a small forest)	Ø wood (a construction material)

ESOL students would no doubt be delighted if countability were always so clearly signaled in this way. Unfortunately, the majority of nouns can be count or noncount, depending on the context. In all cases, the noncount form has a more general sense than the count form, but the semantic differences are often subtle, making the process difficult for learners, especially those who do not have articles in their L1s. For example, sometimes the count/noncount distinction indicates an object versus a material or ingredient, as shown in the following examples:

3.	*Object*	*Material*
	a stone	Ø stone
	a brick	Ø brick
	a paper	Ø paper
	a chicken	Ø chicken
	a wire	Ø wire

Sometimes, the count/noncount distinction may represent a measured quantity versus an abstract notion, as shown in the following examples:

4.	*Measured quantity*	*Abstract notion*
	a pressure of 400 psi	Ø pressure
	a height of 20 meters	Ø height
	a resistance of 220 ohms	Ø resistance
	a loudness of 100 decibels	Ø loudness
	a velocity of 220 km/sec	Ø velocity

Sometimes, the count/noncount distinction may represent "a kind or type of" versus a more general category:

5.	*"A kind or type of"*	*General category*
	a steel	Ø steel
	a grain	Ø grain
	a wine	Ø wine
	a paint	Ø paint
	a cheese	Ø cheese

But in many cases, the count/noncount distinction simply represents a specific instantiation versus the name of a concept, as shown in the following example:

6.	*Specific instantiation*	*Concept*
	a fire	Ø fire
	a love	Ø love
	an infection	Ø infection
	a philosophy	Ø philosophy
	a beauty	Ø beauty

In all but the first of the above categories, writers thus have the choice of using the article *a* or *Ø*. The grammaticality of the result depends entirely on the context in which it occurs, as shown in the following examples (one from each category):

7a. He walked through a wood (*Ø wood).
7b. The walls are made of stone (*a stone).
7c. They measured a resistance (*Ø resistance) of 200 ohms.
7d. Steel (*a steel) is the basis of an industrial economy.
7e. That horse is a beauty (*Ø beauty).

At the same time, the number of different categories defies easy learning. It is probably better to teach the count/noncount status of individual lexical items as they arise. This can easily be shown by calling attention to the article *a* or Ø attached to the noun right from the moment a new vocabulary item is introduced in a lesson, such as *a* + *banana* versus Ø + *spaghetti.*

The Generic/Specific Distinction

Closely related to the count/noncount distinction is the generic/specific one. Unlike countability, however, genericness may be signaled by all three articles. In the case of definitions, it is possible for the articles to be interchangeable. A classic example (Langendoen, 1970, p. 125) is:

8a. The elephant (is an animal that) never forgets.
8b. Ø Elephants (is an animal that) never forget.
8c. An elephant (is an animal that) never forgets.

In this case, the writer may indeed choose any article, as long as the number is also correct. However, there are two other cases where the generic articles are restricted (Master, 1987). If the sentence indicates a generalized instance, the article *the* is ungrammatical.

*9a. Every family has the automobile.
9b. Every family has Ø automobiles.
9c. Every family has an automobile.

On the other hand, if the sentence concerns an agent of change, the article *a* is ungrammatical:

10a. The computer is changing the way we live.
10b. Ø Computers are changing the way we live.
*10c. A computer is changing the way we live.

Generic *the* is further restricted in that it must occur with a singular count noun, which thus serves to identify a class, as shown in the following example:

11a. The squirrel is a tree-dwelling rodent.
?11b. The squirrels are tree-dwelling rodents.
11c. The squirrels are eating all the bird seed.

Some grammarians (e.g., Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 285) maintain that the second example can also count as generic, but, like Hewson (1972, p. 105), I maintain that it represents a total or indefinite indication of all squirrels and that it is more likely to be uttered in describing a specific subset of squirrels (e.g., the ones I can see on the lawn) than making a generic statement about them.

Thus, although the writer may choose to use any of the three articles generically, the nature of the sentence in which it occurs limits the grammaticality of the result.

Idiomatic Structures

By their very nature, idiomatic structures are not variable. Many different types of idiomatic structures that include articles exist, but only a few examples can be included here.

One idiomatic structure pertains to the names of diseases. The classic diseases tend to have formal names with Ø, common sicknesses take *the*, and minor ailments take *a*, as shown in the following examples:

12.	***Diseases with Ø***	***Sicknesses with the***	***Ailments with a***
	cancer	the flu	a headache
	hepatitis	the measles	a sore throat
	yellow fever	the mumps	an ingrown toenail

Some idiomatic structures may be contrasted to their nonidiomatic counterparts, as shown in the following examples:

13.	***Idiomatic structure***	***Nonidiomatic structure***
	to be on Ø edge (nervous)	to be on the edge (of a cliff or a discovery)
	to be on Ø fire (alight)	to be on the fire (e.g., fuel)
	to play the fool (be foolish)	to play the part of an unhappy housewife
	to be under a cloud (angry)	to be under the cloud (in an airplane)

If a choice is available (which is usually not the case), the options are to use the idiomatic or a nonidiomatic structure (as in *being on Ø edge* versus *being on the edge*, or *being on Ø fire* versus *being on the fire*). However, it is generally safe to say that idiomatic structures do not allow a choice and are usually ungrammatical without the exact articles that comprise the idiomatic phrase.

Modification Structures

In this section, the emphasis is on how some aspect of modification affects article choice. The categories of article usage affected include premodification (ranking adjectives) and postmodification (modified/nonmodified, unlimited/limited quantity, and partitive/ descriptive *of*-phrases).

Premodification

The only category of premodification that affects article choice is the ranking adjectives.

Ranking Adjectives. In general, premodifying adjectives have no effect on article choice, as shown in the following examples:

14a. <u>The moon</u> was shining brightly.
14b. <u>The full moon</u> was shining brightly.
14c. <u>The cold, uncaring, stony moon</u> was shining brightly.
15a. <u>Ø Water</u> is necessary for life.
15b. <u>Ø Salt water</u> fills the world's oceans.

15c. Ø Unpurified river water may contain dangerous bacteria.
16a. Griselda was wearing a hat.
16b. Griselda was wearing a new hat.
16c. Griselda was wearing a huge, florid, rather ungainly yet certainly unique hat.

A major exception is ranking adjectives. Ranking adjectives serve either to rank nouns vertically (superlative) or horizontally (sequence) or to single them out (unique). In so doing, they identify those nouns, which thus require *the*, as shown in the following examples:

17a. Paris is a beautiful city. (nonranking)
17b. Paris is the most beautiful city. (ranking: superlative)
18a. Ø First impressions are often powerful. (nonranking)
18b. The first chapter introduces the topic. (ranking: sequence)
19a. Ralph is an only child. (nonranking)
19b. Ralph is the only 6-year-old in the class. (ranking: unique)

In the case of ranking adjectives, no choice of article is allowed: It must always be *the*. The most difficult ranking adjective appears to be *same* (Master, 1995), for which many NNS writers mistakenly select *a* (e.g., *I have *a same* problem as many foreign students). The choice of *a* or Ø is possible with certain sequence and unique adjectives cases, as examples (18a) and (19a) show, but the result is not a ranking adjective. The exception occurs with Ø + *last/nex*t, which still signifies sequence but must do so in relation to the present moment (see also Yoo, 2007).

Postmodification

Postmodification, on the other hand, does affect article choice. It includes the categories of modified/ nonmodified, unlimited/limited, partitive/descriptive *of*-phrases, and intentional vagueness.

Modified/Nonmodified. Nouns may be modified or nonmodified. Postmodification (usually in the form of an adjective clause) may serve either to classify or to identify a noun, as shown in the following examples.

20a. We need a car.
20b. We need a car that gets at least 30 miles per gallon. (classified)
21a. Did you find a black wallet?
21b. Did you find the black wallet that I left in my office yesterday? (identified)

In (20a) and (20b), the article remains the same whether the noun is modified or not; in the second, the article changes. The direct object in (20b) is a generic noun phrase: *a car that gets at least 30 miles per gallon.* If the writer used *the* in (20b), the effect would be to describe one of an identified set, as shown in the following example:

22. Car salesman: This car gets 20 miles per gallon, this one gets 25 miles per gallon, and this one gets 30 miles to the gallon.
    Customer: We'll take *the* car that gets 30 miles per gallon (i.e., the last one).

In (21b), the speaker might be addressing a colleague or a secretary. If the writer used *a*, the effect would be to suggest that the speaker has reason to believe that there may be several such items, such as at a lost-and-found counter:

23. Loser: Did you find *a* black wallet that I left in my office yesterday?

Thus, the effect of the choice is to label the noun classified (and hence "any") or identified (and thus "a certain one"). In the examples shown, Ø is not an option because the nouns concerned are singular count nouns (i.e., *wallet* and *car*).

An important category of identified nouns is that in which postmodification is implied rather than stated. This includes the three types of shared knowledge: universal (e.g., *the sun, the ground*), local (e.g., *the city, the post office*), and immediate (*the phone, the door*). Nouns in this category always imply some sort of postmodification, as shown in the following examples:

24a. Universal: The sun (which provides the planet Earth with light) is out today.
24b. Local: We drove to the city (of San Francisco, near which I live).
24c. Immediate: Could you answer the phone (which is ringing in the next room)?

The use of a classified article with these nouns would be appropriate only in generic contexts, where shared knowledge is not presumed, and is otherwise an error:

25a. A recently discovered planetary system may have a sun.
25b. She wants to live near a city.
25c. A phone is a necessity for many people.

Descriptive/Limited. When a noncount or a plural count noun is postmodified (with a prepositional phrase or an adjective clause), a classified NP is generally interpreted as a description, as shown in the following examples:

26a. I hate Ø schnapps. (unlimited)
26b. I hate Ø schnapps that is made from pears. (descriptive; unlimited quantity)
27a. The government distributed Ø leaflets.
27b. The government distributed Ø leaflets with attractive pictures. (descriptive; unlimited quantity)

However, an identified NP is interpreted as a limited quantity, as shown in the following examples:

28a. Let's drink Ø wine. (unlimited)
28b. Let's drink the wine that you made last autumn. (limited quantity)
29a. We need books. (unlimited)
29b. We need the books on the top shelf. (limited quantity)

Thus, the effect of the choice is to label the noun classified descriptive or a limited quantity. In the examples shown, *a* is not an option because the nouns concerned are noncount or plural count nouns (i.e., *schnapps, wine,* and *leaflets, books*). Many NNS writers make statements such as the following:

*30. Let me see Ø books that you bought yesterday.

The reason the sentence is erroneous is that the postmodifying adjective clause *that you bought yesterday* indicates a limited quantity and could not be applied to all books. However, if the subject of the clause is generalized, it may become descriptive, as shown in (31) below:

31. [Conversation in a used bookstore between the boss and a new clerk] Okay, Ø books that were delivered have a green invoice while Ø books that were ordered have a pink one.

Partitive/Descriptive. When a noun is postmodified with a prepositional *of*-phrase, a classified NP is partitive (i.e., indicating part of a whole), whereas an identified NP is descriptive, as shown in the following examples:

32a. I would like a cup of tea. (partitive)
32b. Sally measured the circumference of the table. (descriptive)

Partitives can take *the* only in limited postmodification or subsequent mention contexts, and they can take Ø only when they are plural, as shown in the following examples:

33a. The cup of tea (that you gave me) is horribly weak.
33b. Ø Cups of tea were poured down the waiting gullets of the British soldiers.

Descriptive *of*-phrases, on the other hand, can generally not take *a* as it would suggest that there were more than one, which is not usually possible:

34a. *Sally measured a diameter of the round table. (a circle has only one diameter)
34b. *Roy visited a present capital of Italy. (a country has only one present capital)

The choice of articles is thus quite constrained when an *of*-phrase is present.

Intentional Vagueness. The definite article in abstract identified postmodified noun phrases is frequently dropped (i.e., classified with Ø), which

has a generalizing effect on the scope of the noun phrase, as shown in the following examples:

35a. Ø Duplication of effort wastes resources.
35b. "Dappled light, soft and blue, ripples across the floor. Ø Unidentifiable, abstract sound of an organic mood drifts through the air" [describing the interior of the Monterey Bay aquarium] (Goepel, 1996, p. 34)
35c. "The grammar of Dionysius Thrax is sometimes seen as the first codification of part-of-speech distinctions, but it benefited from a long tradition of Ø study of logic and language by philosophers." (Odlin, 1994, p. 7)

In both cases, *the* would be expected, but intentional vagueness allows the choice of Ø, with the resulting generalizing effect.

Discourse Structures

With the focus on discourse, the emphasis is on how information in adjacent or nearby sentences affects article choice. The only article category at this level is first and subsequent mention.

First and Subsequent Mention

First mention nouns are often introduced with classifying Ø or *a* (the choice dependent on the countability of the noun) but take identifying *the* when the same referent is mentioned again.

36. The afternoon sun streamed through *an open window*. Leticia was enraptured to find that *the window* looked out upon a shimmering sea.

However, authors sometimes deliberately exploit this rule by using *the* with first mention nouns in the opening sentence of a story to create a sense of "being there."

37a. The afternoon sun streamed through the open window.
37b. "Castle, ever since he had joined the firm as a young recruit more than thirty years ago, had taken his lunch in a public house behind St. James's Street, not far from the office." (Greene, 1978, p. 3)

In (37a), while *Ø open window* is an error, *an* or *the open window* is a choice. In (37b), while *Ø firm* is an error, *a* or *the firm* is a choice.

First and subsequent mention also applies to proper nouns, as shown in the following example:

38. "'The containment' theory, with its cold-war overtones, is particularly resented by *a* China whose self-confidence is growing rapidly." (*World Press Review*, *42*(10), p. 8, from *Asiaweek*, July 21, 1995)

In (38), *a China* implies a particular instantiation or current political entity.

Berry (1991) reminds us that the second mention of a noun does not automatically require identification with *the* if that noun is generic and thus still classified.

39a. "Johnny wants a bike for Christmas, but I'm not sure a bike is such a good idea." (Berry, 1991, p. 255)
39b. The house was beautiful even though it was not an old house.

In (39a), the use of *the* with the second mention of *bike* is not an option since it represents a generalized instance (see Example 9 above). (39b) shows that, for the same reason, *the* may appear with the first instance of an NP and *a* with the second.