**The use of English articles**

What are the difficulties in evaluating the use of English articles in the English Second Language Classroom?

1. General information on the data

   - 15 written exams
   - Learners from year 9, i.e. fifth year of learning
   - Task: "The students work as tourist guides for American high school students and give them a tour to Freiburg's top five sights."
   - Most common errors: the use of prepositions (1), articles (2), singular and plural forms of verbs and demonstratives (3), choosing the right tense (4), the use of modal verbs (5) and relative pronouns (6):
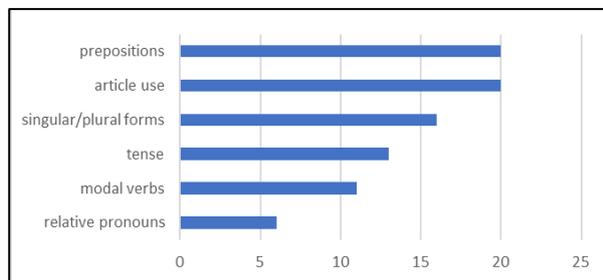
(1) *Now we are <u>on</u> the Martinstor.*
(2) *But when you fall in, <u>the people</u> say you will marry <u>an Freiburger</u>.*
(3) *<u>This little creek</u> were used for […].*
(4) *At luck, <u>I never falled</u> into one.*
(5) *At last <u>I tell you</u> sth. about […].*
(6) *The Dreisam is a river <u>who</u> goes to Freiburg.*

Figure 1: Comparison of numbers of most common errors.

2. Theoretical background: Why do advanced students use English articles erroneously? (see Saville-Troike & Barto 2017)

   - Morpheme order studies:
     - Brown (1973) provided the first baseline information on an L1 acquisition sequence of English morphemes
     - Claim that there is a "natural order" in the grammatical development of L2 learners as well (Dulay and Burt 1974)

Table 1: English L1 and L2 Morpheme Acquisition Order (Saville-Troike & Barto 2017:46)

English L1	Morpheme	Example	English L2
1	Progressive *-ing*	He is talk*ing*.	3
2	Plural *-s*	There are two cat*s*.	4
3	Past irregular	We *ate*.	7
4	Possessive *-s*	The child*'s* toy	8
5	**Articles *a/the***	***A*** **sunny day/*The* cat**	1
6	Past regular *-ed*	They *talked*.	6
7	Third person *-s*	He sing*s*.	9
8	Copula *be*	He*'s* tall.	2
9	Auxiliary *be*	She*'s* singing.	5

   - Order was the same in English L2 despite the different L1 background of the children
   - Dulay & Burt's conclusions: transfer from L1 is not necessarily an issue; more important for language acquisition: creating a mental grammar

- Influence by L1:
  - Interference (or negative transfer): use of an L1 structure or rule in an L2 utterance considered as an error

- Diversity in learning and learners:
  - What is learned? How is it learned? Learning situation?
  - Individual aptitude, personality, motivation, learning strategies
  - Facilitating conditions, such as feedback

3. Some grammar background: When to use which type of article?

- The definite and indefinite articles determine the reference of the nouns they precede
- Semantic information of the nouns important for the choice of the articles
  - Specificity of noun: reference to a specific, individual entity → *a* or *the*
  - Definiteness of a noun: asserts that a noun is identifiable from the context → *the*
    - Anaphoric reference: hearer knowledge based on preceding text
    - Cataphoric reference: reference established through something following
    - Situational reference: reference to something which reflects the shared situational context
  - Generic noun: when a noun phrase refers to a whole class → zero article or *the* (examples from Biber et al. 2000)
    - Zero article:
      - With uncountable nouns: *Beer is Britain's favorite Friday night drink* With plural countable nouns: *Horses are intelligent animals*
    - *the* or a:
      - Less commonly: *A doctor is not better than his patient*; *Trees are alive but not alive as animals are. // What is the difference? // First, the tree is more accessible*.
- Other common uses of articles (Foley & Hall 2003)
  - Indefinite article with jobs, nationalities, beliefs, numbers…
  - Definite article with some geographical names, the media, in front of superlatives…
  - Zero article with proper names, substances, liquids and gases, transport, times and seasons…

4. Methods

- Comparison of the frequency of occurrences for *fire*, *people* and proper nouns with and without an article
- Counting the numbers of occurrences with and without an article in 30 randomly chosen sentences
- More detailed look at these sentences

5. Findings

- Types of constructions where most errors occurred in the use of articles:

  a) *fire*: e.g. *It was important for fire*
  b) *people*: e.g. *Today the people love them in summer.*
  c) Proper nouns, here *Lange Rote, Green City*: e.g. *There you can eat a sausage which called Lange Rote.*
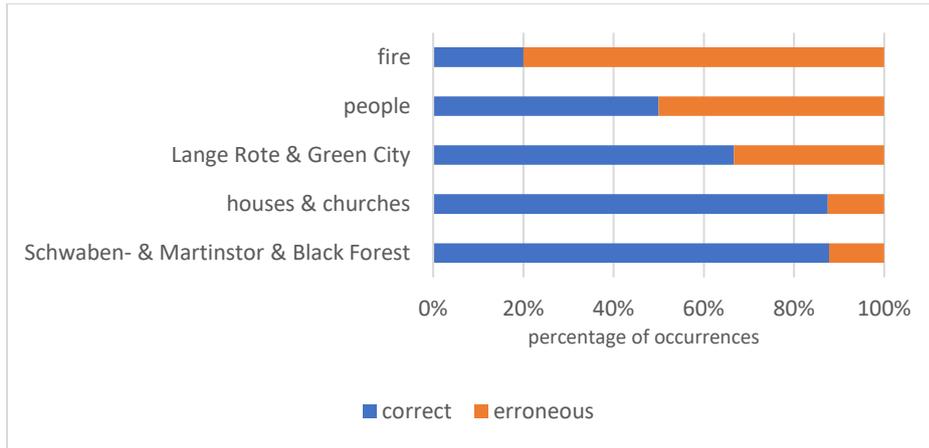
- 44 occurrences of errors in total

Figure 2: Number of errors in the use of articles made per construction.

a) fire

Table 2: Numbers of correct and erroneous use of articles per type of article with *fire*.

| Types of articles	Correct	Error	Sentences from the data
Zero article	1	3	✓ *were used **for fires**.* ✗ *were used to **stop fire**; help to **fought against fire**; important **for fire**.*
Indef. article	0	1	*have been used to **contra a fire**.*
Def. article	0	0	--
Alternative	0	0	--

- A few numbers from the British National Corpus (BNC) for comparison:

  - *fire* with or without an article?
    - *fire*: **10,245 hits**
    - any article + *fire*: **4,902 hits** → **47.85%** of all hits for *fire* include an article
  - Let's take a closer look at the phrases from the data:
    - *stop fire*: **0 hits** vs. *stop the fire*: **3 hits**
    - *against fire*: **18 hits** = *better protection against fire, safety against fire*
    - *against the fire*: **6 hits** = *Miriam crouched against the fire*
    - *put out fire*: **0 hits** vs. *put out the fire*: **19 hits**, *put out a fire*: **5 hits**
- From comparing the different numbers of occurrences for the different constructions with *fire*, it can be concluded that native speakers tend to use *fire* with the definite article more frequently than without any article, whereas German learners tend to use *fire* without an article more frequently.

b) people

Table 3: Numbers of correct and erroneous use of articles per type of article with *people*.

Types of articles	Correct	Error	Sentences from the data
Zero article	0	0	
Indef. article	0	0	
Def. article	1	2	✓ *a lot of work for **the people in that time**.* ✗ *today **the people** love them in summer; when you fall in, **the people** say […].*
Alternative	1	0	***All people** love them.*

- A few numbers from the BNC:
  - *people* with or without an article?
    - *people*: **121,591 hits**
    - *the people*: **10,854 hits** → **8.93%** of all hits for *people* include a definite article
  - Cases where *the people* is used with no further specification?
    - Analysis of 30 randomly selected hits for *people*
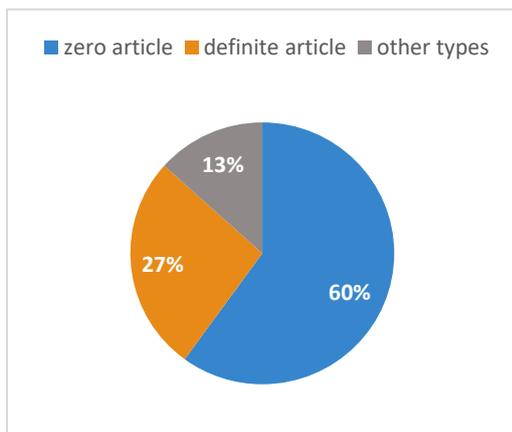
Examples from the corpus:

- ❖ *People criticize Ronnie for… / And when you see her talking to people…*
- ❖ *the people in the high Pennies…*
- ❖ *a commitment was made to respect the will of the people*
- ❖ *dealing with those people*

Figure 3: Numbers of uses of different articles for people in the BNC. Analysis of 30 hits.

- From comparing the different numbers of occurrences for the different constructions with *people*, it can be concluded that native speakers tend to use *people* with the zero article more frequently than with an article, whereas German learners tend to use the definite article more frequently.

c) proper nouns (*Lange Rote* and *Green City*)

Table 4: Numbers of correct and erroneous use of articles per type of article with <u>proper nouns</u>.

Types of articles	Correct	Error	Sentences from the data
Zero article	0	5	*Freiburg **is called Green City**; a sausage which **called Lange Rote***
Indef. article	4	0	*Freiburg is **a green city**.*
Def. article	5	0	*Freiburg is also **called the green city**; you have to try **the Lange Rote**.*
Alternative	3	1	✓ *got a great view of **our green city**; Freiburg is **very green**; eat **one of the long red sausages**.* ✗ *Freiburg is **very green city**.*

- A few numbers from the BNC:
  - *(to) be called* - with or without an article?
    - BE + called XY: **534 hits**
    - BE + called + article XY: **67 hits**
  - Let's take a closer look at the sentences from the corpus:
    - BE + called XY: *a man*, *he*, *grandfather Lowson*, *an avenue*, *the store*, *the shop*
    - BE + called + article XY: *the hotel*, *an itching powder*, *a pop group*, *a pier*, ***a city nickname***
- From comparing the different numbers of occurrences for the different constructions with *is called*, it can be concluded that native speakers tend to use the noun following *is called* without an article more often than with an article.
- This result is contrary to what is suggested in grammar for proper nouns that relate to a unique and individual object in the real world.
- Many of the sentences that included *is called XY* without any article refer to different types of proper nouns, most of them being names of people or of shops.
- In other sentences in the BNC *is called the* XY with an article refers to proper nouns that were mostly names of inanimate objects.

6. First conclusions

- According to the morpheme order studies, the use of the articles is among the first things that learners of English as a second language acquire.
- The students of an intermediate level of English from my data did well in choosing the indefinite or the definite article.
- They did, however, make more errors when applying the zero article in cases where the definite article would be more appropriate and the definite article where the zero article would be the most appropriate choice.
- This difficulty could be explained by interference; students might transfer the article use from their L1 into English (*Die Menschen lieben die Freiburger Bächle*, *die Wurst wird Lange Rote genannt*).
- Although compared to other problems in the realm of grammar, the use of articles is a less important error category, the right choice of the article is crucial for achieving a more native-like language competence.

References

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