Vietnamese learners mastering English articles
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Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter, we will restate in a more condensed form the central issues discussed in this book. The chapter is organized in three sections. The first reviews the process of ascertaining why it is important to look at articles in particular and reports on the results of the experiments. The second provides some limitations that this research encounters. The third presents some implications for the new approach and gives an overview of the areas that could benefit from additional research.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The dissertation set out with the objective to find a solution to help Vietnamese learners address problems in using English articles. However, in order to ascertain that English articles are indeed an area of difficulty for Vietnamese students of EFL, we conducted an exploratory study. The results in Chapter 2 show that articles are a pervasive problem for Vietnamese learners and that they do not decrease as proficiency increases. Because even advanced students still make these errors—even though they do not seem to affect essay grades—we find that the issue is worth pursuing because errors may undermine a student’s ‘integrity’ if s/he has to write professionally for an international public.

To find a solution, we first analyzed the article errors. To do so, we needed to categorize the errors into different types. Hence an exploration of meanings and uses of English articles was made in Chapter 3. Definiteness
is considered the main property distinguishing the articles. Four features of definiteness that different research traditions have advocated are uniqueness, familiarity, identifiability, and inclusiveness. We argued that these features can be amalgamated into two: identifiability and inclusiveness. However, difficulty arises when these meanings intersect with specificity and referentiality. As such, issues have been raised relating to whether or not there is a difference between specificity and referentiality and whether or not definite noun phrases are non-specific and non-referential. We argued that the only prerequisite for definiteness is Langacker’s (1991) notion of mental contact, which is based on insights by Fauconnier (1985). If a speaker and hearer achieve mental contact, then they can uniquely identify an entity, and factors such as referentiality and specificity are redundant. Awareness and nothing else is sufficient.

Also, in discussing definiteness, genericity is often mentioned. This is a notion that is not easy to capture. From a cognitive grammar perspective, it can be said that each article still retains some of its prototypical sense when it is used generically. The article the can denote a type (e.g. genus, species, etc.) as a unique instance. The article a may be used to profile an arbitrary instance which is independent from the reality of discourse. And a maximal construal (i.e. a full generic sense) is obtained when a noun phrase is used with the zero article.

Although different research traditions have afforded different explanations on definiteness and genericity, we believe the cognitive grammar framework is the more useful in language teaching because only a few principles are needed to explain the many uses of articles coherently. Therefore, we chose cognitive grammar as the basis for our taxonomy in describing the usage of English articles in Chapter 4, but useful insights from ‘objective’ research traditions are not excluded. They are used in
explanations either when cognitive grammar does not explicitly state solutions or when cognitive grammar insights are too theoretical to be understood by a non-linguist language learner.

Insights obtained in Chapters 3 and 4 into the intricate English article system provided a basis for the error analysis of Vietnamese learners using English articles. Chapter 5 shows results from L2 acquisition studies focusing on article-less language learners and an overview of the Vietnamese determiners because we wanted to know which article forms and which noun phrase environments in which the articles occur students have problems with. We hypothesized that students would have more problems in using the than using a because definiteness is not overtly marked in Vietnamese. We did not believe that mid-level Vietnamese learners would have more problems using a as reported by some researchers because the English and Vietnamese systems partly overlap here in that an indefinite article is used in Vietnamese to indicate a specific or non-specific reference (e.g. I bought a book; I want to buy a book). However, in arbitrary instances the systems differ in that Vietnamese does not use an article in a sentence such as He is a teacher. Once we identified where errors occurred, we also wanted to know what the sources of confusion might be. The results show that students have most problems using the articles the and zero. As far as NP-environments are concerned, students have difficulty with “unique type” and “maximal set” environments and the overuse of zero and the more so than a. Even though there is some systematicity in the errors, students clearly have problems with all articles. We can conclude from the evidence that there is some influence of the Vietnamese language, an L1 transfer as claimed by researchers. Such an influence can be seen through the overuse of the zero or null article and the students’ inability to distinguish definiteness from non-definiteness and non-count from count.
nouns. Similarly, the notion of maximality construed either semantically (i.e. a whole mass can be unique) or conventionally (i.e. plural nouns marked by *the* to express inclusiveness) is difficult to grasp for Vietnamese learners.

The error corpus shows that Vietnamese students make errors in using English articles and suggests that the methods students have used so far have not been very effective. Therefore, Chapter 6 surveys pedagogical studies on the teaching of articles and some current grammar-cum-practice books on the use of English articles to identify problems in current teaching methods.

The survey of the pedagogical studies indicates that there has been an attempt to produce a simplified framework for teaching the articles with a focus on one form for one function. However, what teachers do not obtain from these studies is an understanding of the general meanings of the articles based on the distinguishing property: definiteness. Also, the studies suggest that proper names, especially what we term pseudo-names should be treated as item-learnt chunks without underlying principles given to help students memorize these chunks. Also little empirical evidence has been reported, and no suggestions are given to adapt a pedagogical approach to the needs of a particular student population.

We expected the suggestions in pedagogical studies on the teaching of articles to have some impact on grammar textbooks. A survey of the four textbooks described in Chapter 6 reveals that there have been improvements relating to usage content, usage presentation patterns, sequencing, and rule descriptions, but several problems occur in the way rules are described. They are either vague, inadequate, or actually contradictory and confusing. Moreover, none of the books give an overall principled introduction to the
article system, leaving it up to the student to make sense of a maze of separate, seemingly arbitrary uses of the article system.

The problems (noticed in the pedagogical studies and grammar books) have created a basis for us to develop an approach that deals with the article in a more principled way. Our approach is based on Master’s schema, augmented with insights from cognitive grammar. The rationale behind this approach was as follows. First, since our main aim was to present the “rules” of using English articles in such a way that article-less language learners could “reason out” a native speaker’s intuitive “rule” step by step by means of a flow chart, which is kept as general and simple as possible, we felt the reasoning should go from the most general principles and prototypical cases to peripheral or less frequent cases. Because the use of English articles may often lie in a speaker’s choice, we also felt that students needed to be made aware of the principles that cause the differences in meaning.

Since students have often been exposed to oversimplified rules of thumbs such as “first mention use a, second mention use the” or “use the when a noun is modified by a phrase or a clause,” we felt that students should be warned explicitly against the use of such rules in our lessons. Finally, based on the evidence in Chapter 5, we felt that Vietnamese learners have a different intuition about English definiteness, countability, and maximality, so our approach has given a great deal of explicit attention to the conceptual import of these notions. On the whole, we assumed that the new approach is pedagogically more sound than traditional ones because it gives a coherent account of the article system as a whole, and it may alleviate the burden for students to memorize many separate and seemingly arbitrary rules.
To judge the effectiveness of the approach suggested, an experiment was conducted as found in Chapter 7. The aim of the experiment was to compare the new approach with a traditional one that has been applied in current grammar textbooks. Three levels of analyses were performed: (1) a general one in which we looked at which group performed better in using articles in general, (2) a more detailed one in which we looked at differences in particular article forms, and (3) a detailed one in which we looked at differences in the semantic environments in which articles occur. At the general performance level, the results showed that immediately after the treatment, the group treated with the new approach performed better than the group treated with the traditional approach. The ‘cognitive’ group performed better than the traditional group in using *the*. The cognitive group also performed better than the traditional group in three environments: names, unique type, and maximal set. However, when we measured for a long-term effect, we found no significant difference between the two groups even though the mean scores of the cognitive group were somewhat higher. Analyses of particular errors revealed that a significance difference was still found between the two groups in that the cognitive group still performed better than their counterparts in using *zero* and in using *zero* in maximal set environments.

Despite the disappointing long-term results, we still feel that this dissertation has given quite a few new insights into the reasons why Vietnamese students have such difficulty with the English articles and in the principles that seem to govern article use. Therefore, it might be worth pursuing our approach to teaching articles further. However, awareness of the limitations of this research is necessary for future applications and research.
LIMITATIONS

Limitations of this research are found both in the treatment and data analysis. As far as the treatment is concerned, the first limitation in our lessons was the lack of an explanation of the type-instance distinction. We focused much on the definiteness and non-definiteness distinction, which are both at the level of instantiation. If we had presented the notion of type and instance first, students could have understood better the contrasts between the noun phrase in English and Vietnamese, especially in categorizing nouns as either count or non-count.

Another limitation in our lessons lies in the lack of variety of discovery tasks and task-based practice (Bygate, 1994). For example, in Lesson 1, which is about definiteness, we provided an identification exercise at the end of the lesson, asking students to explain why the definite article is used in a certain context. However, from our observation, some students had difficulty recognizing the difference between such notions as “immediate environment” and “larger situation.” Also, such notions as “arbitrary instance” and “actual instance” presented problems for students. If some discovery tasks had been designed to help students understand the meaning difference of these notions, they could have been useful tools in making choices. Also, translation exercises, as suggested by Berry (1991), could have been provided. These exercises might have assisted students in recognizing the differences between Vietnamese and English in expressing definiteness and non-definiteness.

The lesson on names could also have been improved. In this lesson, we relied on Quirk et al. (1985), and the notion null we used in this dissertation was not mentioned. Also, Chesterman’s insights in what we call pseudo-names were not dealt with. We did not mention the principle of
familiarity, which would have helped students to know when a name becomes familiar and when it is still less familiar.

Finally, a major obstacle in the treatment lessons is found through the backwash effect of previous lessons the students have been exposed to. In many traditional grammar books, students are taught to use the when a noun phrase is mentioned again. Students may respond automatically again when they encounter such instances. As a result of our warning, the cognitive group may have been confused especially in unique contexts. Of course, to avoid fossilized article errors, it would be even better for students to be exposed to adequate explanations from the very beginning.

IMPLICATIONS AND ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

Even though the long-term effects were disappointing, we feel that the strength of the approach lies in the fact it takes into account the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese. The type-instance distinction in cognitive grammar is an example of a helpful tool to help Vietnamese learners to see the similarities and differences between English and Vietnamese noun phrases. The noun cake in its purest form is considered a type in English and Vietnamese. It becomes instantiated as a cake or the cake when the elements of grounding (i.e. articles are added) and quantity occur (e.g. (a) book; (the) books). For example, mieng banh (‘piece of cake) is similar to the cake in English in that it is singular and definite. The difference is that English marks definiteness with the and Vietnamese with null.

Second, the new approach is pedagogically more sound than traditional ones because it alleviates the burden for students to memorize so many separate and seemingly arbitrary rules, and helps them reason from
the more general principles and prototypical cases to peripheral or less frequent cases. We do not agree with Beaumont and Gallaway’s (1994) claim that “a semantic approach is of no help in article use that is fixed or idiomatic.” For in our approach, fixed or idiomatic phrases can also be explained semantically. For example, nouns such as home or school in fixed phrases like go home or go to school can be accounted for on the basis of the familiarity principle (Chesterman, 1991).

If the suggestions for improvement of the method are incorporated, it would be useful to test our approach again. It would also be interesting to see how students perform if they have not been exposed to oversimplified rules of thumb previously. Secondly, despite our detailed error analyses, we can still not be sure what motivates students to make their choices. For example, as far as overuse of no-article form is concerned, do they know it is a singular count noun and use null as in Vietnamese or do they think it is a mass noun and use zero as required in English? Similarly, why do students overgeneralize the in maximal set environments? We hypothesize that they overuse the in maximal set contexts because they do not distinguish between what we call conventional maximality (i.e. plural nouns used with the) and semantic maximality (i.e. mass and plural nouns used generically). Yet, the source of the errors could also lie in the fact that students used the because of the ubiquitous rule of thumb “use the when there is a post-modifying phrase after a plural or mass noun” as found ungrammatically in the minerals in the world. To find out, we could conduct protocol studies to gain insight into students’ metalinguistic knowledge and the steps they take in making their choices.

Finally, it must be said that the English article use is extremely complex for a Vietnamese student, and we might ask if it is worth the effort spending much time on it for learners who need English only as an informal
lingua franca, as it does not often interfere with communication. However, the extra effort may be useful for the more advanced students who will be professionals in their fields and who may have to write for an international public, as they will feel more confident when errors in English are kept to a minimum.