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Chan, Alice Yin Wa

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How much do Cantonese ESL learners know about the English article system?

Abstract

This article investigated Cantonese ESL learners’ explicit knowledge of the English article system. A total of 33 Cantonese ESL learners majoring in English participated in a questionnaire survey consisting of both ranking questions and open-ended questions requiring them to give detailed descriptions about their use and knowledge of English articles. The results of the study showed that many respondents were confident of their use of English articles, but they did not regard articles as very important for speaking, reading, writing or listening. They did not possess the metalanguage that enabled them to articulate the functions and semantics of different English articles and had some misconceptions and/or confusion about the system. These misconceptions may be the source of certain article errors, such as substitution errors. It is suggested that formal and systematic teaching be given to enhance ESL learners’ explicit knowledge of the English article system and to strengthen their use of English articles.

Keywords:

Cantonese ESL learners, the English article system, explicit knowledge, second language learning
1. Introduction

English articles are one of the most frequent grammatical forms available to ESL learners in their second language learning input, yet the use of these grammatical forms creates much difficulty to learners of English, especially those whose native languages lack articles, like Chinese (Ionin, Zubizarreta & Maldonado, 2008). Different kinds of article problems have been documented in the literature, but most previous research on Chinese ESL learners has focused on learners’ actual use of English articles. Their knowledge of the English article system has largely been neglected. The present study bridged this research gap by probing into Cantonese ESL learners’ explicit knowledge of the English article system in an attempt to understand learner problems and to obtain insights into the teaching of English articles.

2. Literature review

The acquisition of English articles by second language learners has often been found to be a difficult process (Huebner, 1983; Ionin et al., 2008; Master, 1987; Parrish, 1987; Pica, 1985; Robertson, 2000; Thomas, 1989). Even learners whose L1 have articles also show a fluctuating pattern in English article choice (Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008, 2012). It is sometimes regarded by English as Second Language (ESL) teachers as their students’ number one difficulty (Covitt, 1976, cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1983; Han, Chodorow & Leacock, 2006). The complex ways in which meaning is mapped onto form, such as the way the is used for generic reference, anaphoric reference and uniqueness, are regarded as one main source of learner problems (Young, 1996). Noun countability, which has often been seen as an underlying feature in the English language system, is also a source of problems, as “the perceptual system of noun countability used by native speakers of English is not necessarily describable, explainable or acquirable by second language learners” (Yoon, 1993: 284). Native speakers of languages which do not have an article system do not perceive the countability of nouns in the same way as those of languages which have an article system, and this difference often results in deviant choices of English articles by the non-native English speakers (Yoon, 1993).

Different kinds of ESL errors in the use of articles have been documented in the literature, including co-occurrence errors (e.g. *His an umbrella is self-opening), word-order errors (e.g. *Young a man took it up), under-extension errors (e.g. *Old man came here this morning), overextension errors (e.g. *The corn is a traditional food in America), and substitution errors (e.g. *A sun becomes red) (Mizuno, 1999). The definite
article *the* has often been found to be overused in contexts where the indefinite article *a* is required instead (Parrish, 1987; Thomas, 1989; Zdorenko & Paradis, 2008, 2012).

The effects of the existence or non-existence of structural parallels of English articles in a learner’s mother tongue on acquisition have also been the focus of investigation. For example, in their study of the acquisition of English articles by two monolingual English speaking children and a Serbo-Croatian-English bilingual child, Mede & Gurel (2010) found that for the bilingual child whose native language was article-less, cross-linguistic transfer overrode other factors such as maturational/pragmatic or semantic factors. Ionin, Ko & Wexler (2004), likewise, showed that ESL learners whose mother tongue lacked articles appeared to fluctuate between their use of definite and indefinite articles. Conflicting results were, however, reported in Dai & Wei (2008), that Chinese speakers, whose native language also lacked articles, did not fluctuate between definiteness and specificity, so they could acquire the former setting whereas the latter had no effect on their choice of articles. Zdorenko and Paradis (2008, 2012) also found that *the* was overused for *a* in indefinite specific contexts by children irrespective of whether their native languages had articles or not.

Given the diversity and severity of the problems that English articles present to ESL learners, it may be taken for granted that explicit teaching in the area is urgently needed. Nevertheless, arguments for and against the teaching of the use of English articles are both found. It has been claimed by some researchers, such as Krashen (1981) and Pica (1985), that explicit teaching has no impact and leads to no useful long-term effects on learners’ acquisition of the English article system (Master, 1997). On the other hand, there is evidence showing that learners’ use of articles in obligatory contexts improves significantly with proficiency level (Liu & Gleason, 2002) and that guided careful online planning has positive effects on learners’ production of English articles (Ahmadian, 2012). Other research has shown that in terms of long-term learning, both direct correction and metalinguistic explanations impact positively on learners’ ability to use English articles (Kao, 2013).

In view of the various difficulties that the English article system presents to second language learners, as well as the contradictory arguments about related pedagogy, a systematic investigation into this area of learning is of paramount importance to researchers in the field and to English teaching professionals. One way of understanding ESL learners’ acquisition of a learning area is to examine their explicit knowledge (or declarative knowledge) of that area. In information processing approaches to second language acquisition, explicit knowledge,
which “exists as declarative facts that can be stated” (Ellis, 2009: 13), is thought to be what most learning starts with. Explicit knowledge of an area to be acquired is also regarded as a major educational goal by proponents of language awareness (van Lier, 1995), as it is assumed to facilitate the attainment of proficiency in that area (Roehr, 2004). Through practice, it will become implicit knowledge (or procedural knowledge) which forms the basis of fluent performance (DeKeyser, 2001, 2007)². ESL learners’ explicit knowledge of the English article system is, thus, worth investigating. Although previous research has studied Chinese/Cantonese learners’ use of English articles, to the author’s best knowledge, no systematic studies have been conducted to investigate Chinese/Cantonese ESL learners’ explicit knowledge of English articles. The present study aimed to bridge this research gap.

3. Research questions

The study consisted of a questionnaire survey which aimed at investigating Hong Kong Cantonese ESL learners’ declarative knowledge of the use of English articles³ and identifying the relationship, if any, between their explicit knowledge of the system and their learning problems. The following research questions underlay the questionnaire design:

(1) What are learners’ perception of their own use of English articles?

(2) What is their declarative knowledge of the descriptive system of English articles?

For the first research question, respondents were required to give a self-evaluation of their levels of confidence in their use of English articles, their perception of the importance of the use of English articles, and the frequencies and kinds of difficulties they encountered. Possible solutions to their problems were also asked. For the second research question, the questionnaire required respondents to verbalize, with the use of appropriate metalanguage, their explicit knowledge of the English article system, such as the inventory of English articles, the technical terms associated with the use of English articles, and the context of use⁴.

4. The study

4.1. Respondents

A homogenous group of 33 Cantonese university English majors from a local university participated in the questionnaire survey. Respondent selection was based on convenience sampling⁵. These included 24 second year and 9 final year students, 4 males and 29 females. Their ages were from 19 to 23 years at the time of the
study. All of them were taking English as their majors. Seven of them had learnt English for 14-16 years, nineteen for 17-19 years, and the rest for 20 years or more. 25 of them had received a C or above in the Hong Kong Advanced Level Use of English (UE) exam, 7.5 or above in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test, or 5 or above in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary education (HKDSE), and the rest had received D in UE or 6.5-7 in IELTS. In view of their linguistic backgrounds, the respondents could all be regarded as advanced ESL learners. Having many more female students than male students was inevitable, as there are many more female English majors than male English majors in Hong Kong (and probably worldwide). The majority of the respondents (90.9%) claimed that they had received formal teaching in the use of English articles in primary (69.7%), secondary (66.7%) and/or tertiary (69.7%) institutions.

4.2. Materials

The questionnaire consisted of two parts, the first of which collected general background information about respondents’ majors of study, first and second languages, English education, and public English examination results. The second part investigated (a) respondents’ perception of their own use of English articles and (b) their knowledge of the English article system. For (a), there were questions asking respondents to rank their confidence levels in their use of English articles and their perception of the importance of the correct use of English articles in different learning tasks. The kinds of problems they often encountered in the use of English articles, the frequencies with which such problems occurred, as well as possible solutions to the problems, were also asked. All of the questions, except questions about difficulties and possible solutions, were forced-choice questions with five options on a Likert scale given for respondents to choose from. For (b), there were questions probing into respondents’ declarative knowledge of the English article system, such as the inventory of English articles, the labels of the articles (definite, indefinite, etc.), and the contexts in which an article is used. All the questions were open-ended questions (see Appendix).

4.3. Data collection

Before the implementation of the survey, the questionnaire had been piloted with two native English speakers and three Cantonese ESL learners also majoring in English at other local universities. One of the native speakers was Australian (48 years of age) and the other British (67 years). Both of them had received tertiary education beyond the undergraduate level. The local students were aged between 18 and 21 years. Their linguistic
backgrounds were similar to those of the respondents, having studied English for 14 years or above. The whole pilot group found the questionnaire clear and self-explanatory. Only a few minor changes to the wording of some questions were made after the pilot study. The actual questionnaire survey was conducted by a research assistant with each respondent individually. The respondents spent about half an hour to 45 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

4.4. Data analysis

Different data analysis methods were used for the questionnaire. For the forced-choice questions (Q1-Q16, see Appendix), which required respondents to choose one option from a list of fixed choices on a Likert scale, the percentage of respondents who had chosen each option was calculated. It was decided that only numerical data were recorded and presented and no statistical analyses were performed, because comparisons across different learners or across different questions were deemed unnecessary for the purposes of the study.

For the questions about difficulties encountered and suggestions for improvement (Q17-Q19, see Appendix), the answers given by the respondents were recorded. Emerging patterns of perceived difficulties and suggestions were identified by the researcher. No attempt was made to codify the answers given by the respondents or to calculate the relative frequency of a certain difficulty or suggestion, as only representative patterns were selected for reporting.

For the questions about the inventory of English articles and associated technical terms (Q20-23, see Appendix), since only a closed set of short answers (e.g. definite article given as the technical name of the; indefinite article given as the technical name of a/an) were given, the percentage of respondents who gave the same answer to a certain question was calculated. There were a few technical terms (e.g. determinator, directive) which were given as answers to a certain question by only a very small number of respondents. Those answers, though not necessarily the same, were grouped together and the percentage of respondents who gave those answers was calculated.

As for the questions on how or when an article is used (Q24-Q26, see Appendix), based on the answers given by the respondents, five broad categories of contexts of use were identified for the indefinite article, namely (i) being used with a noun beginning with a vowel/consonant, (ii) referring to something mentioned for the first time, (iii) indicating singularity, (iv) referring to something not specific, and (v) referring to something generic; and three
broad categories of contexts of use were identified for the definite article, namely, referring to something (i) specific, (ii) mentioned before and (iii) unique. The respondents' answers were, thus, coded by the researcher and classified into these categories. Answers which specified more than one context (e.g. a/an is used when it precedes a noun beginning with a vowel/consonant and it is used for a singular noun) were classified into all relevant categories. The percentage of respondents whose answers were classified into a certain category (e.g. referring to something specific) was also calculated. For ZERO, because only a very small number of respondents (i.e. 3) specified the contexts of use, the answers were not coded but will simply be reported in the Results section. As the purpose of the study was to have a general understanding of the respondents’ linguistic knowledge about the English article system instead of comparing the relative frequencies of the identified contexts of use of a certain article, no statistical analyses were performed.

5. Results

5.1. Self-evaluation

5.1.1. Confidence levels and perception of importance

The respondents’ confidence levels in their use of English articles in terms of understanding and accuracy were generally high. In listening, 3% of the respondents were not confident, 12.1% were confident, and 84.8% were quite confident or very confident; in reading 15.2% were confident and 84.8% were quite confident or very confident; in speaking, 15.2% of the respondents were not very confident, 39.4% were confident and 45.5% were quite confident or very confident; and in writing, 6.1% were not very confident 27.3% were confident, and 66.7% were quite confident or very confident (see Table 1).

Regarding their views of the importance of their correct understanding and/or use of English articles, 15.2% and 3% of the respondents felt that their correct understanding was not very important in listening and reading, respectively, 30.3% and 9.1% thought that it was important in listening and reading, respectively, and 54.5% and 87.9% thought that it was quite important or very important in listening and reading, respectively. As far as language production is concerned, similar results were found, in that 30.3% and 0% of the respondents thought that their correct use of English articles was not important in speaking and writing, respectively, 36.4% and 6.1% thought that it was important in speaking and writing, respectively, and 33.4 % and 94% thought that it was quite important or very important in speaking and in writing, respectively (see Table 1).
As far as the four skills are concerned, the use of English articles in speaking seemed to be the area which the respondent were least confident about, but speaking was also the area which the least number of respondents regarded as important as far as the use of English articles is concerned.

5.1.2. Frequencies and levels of difficulties encountered

Some respondents encountered difficulties in their use and/or understanding of English articles. Most respondents (81.9% and 75.8%) claimed that they never or rarely encountered difficulties in their understanding of English articles in listening and reading, respectively, a few of them (18.2% and 18.2%) said that they sometimes encountered difficulties in listening and reading, respectively, and 6.1% said that they encountered difficulties in the use of English articles in reading quite frequently. In productive tasks, fewer participants claimed that they rarely encountered difficulties in their use of English articles in speaking and writing (33.3% and 27.3% respectively), 54.5% and 42.4% sometimes encountered difficulties in speaking and writing, respectively, and 12.1% and 30.3% encountered difficulties in speaking and writing, respectively quite frequently or very frequently (see Table 2). In sum, productive tasks seemed to induce more difficulties in the use of English articles to the respondents than receptive tasks.

With regard to the levels of difficulty in achieving accuracy in the use and/or understanding of English articles, most respondents reported a low level of difficulty: 78.8% and 66.7% of the respondents thought that it was quite easy or very easy to understand the use of English articles in listening and reading, respectively, 18.2% and 27.3% considered it difficult to understand the use of English articles in listening and reading, respectively, and 3% and 6.1% considered it quite difficult to understand the use of English articles in listening and reading, respectively. A similar pattern for speaking and writing was also observed: 60.6% and 48.5% of the respondents thought that it was quite easy or very easy to achieve accuracy in speaking and writing, respectively, 27.3% considered it difficult to achieve accuracy in both speaking and writing, and 12.1% and 24.2% considered it quite difficult or very difficult to achieve accuracy in speaking and writing, respectively (see Table 2).

5.1.3. Kinds of difficulties encountered and possible solutions
The problems that the respondents most often encountered with their use of English articles were that they did not know or understand the rules of article use (e.g. response (1)). Some respondents (6.1%) just used them regardless of the rules or just by their instincts (e.g. response (2)). They found it hard to know whether to use an article on many occasions (e.g. response (3)). Although they knew that there were occasions on which an article, such as *the*, was needed and other occasions on which no articles were needed, they were not sure whether a noun was definite or specific enough for the use of, say, the definite article (e.g. response (4)). Sometimes they had difficulties deciding whether to use an article or not, because it seemed to them that the noun phrase they had in mind was acceptable with or without an article (e.g. response (5)). They did not even know whether a noun was countable or uncountable in certain cases (e.g. response (6)). To a lesser extent, the choice between *a* and *an* was sometimes a source of difficulty to the respondents, especially in speaking, because there were words which began with a consonant letter but which were used with *an*, and words which began with a vowel letter but which were used with *a* (e.g. response (7)).

The following are some of the actual responses given by the respondents:

1. *I don’t understand the rules in using articles, for example, when to use it to indicate a general or typical object.*

2. *Sometimes I used articles based on my instincts, so I can’t explain why I choose a particular article.*

3. *I used “the” when it is not necessary sometimes. On the other hand, I omitted “the” when it is required.*

4. *Sometimes the noun that requires article can be vague in its nature, like I’m not sure about if it is definite or specific enough to use “the”.*

5. *Sometimes the use of articles can be ambiguous as it seems that the expression with or without articles can be acceptable. E.g. “The books are good” and “Books are good” are both grammatically correct.*

6. *In the use of *a/an*, I have to know whether a noun is countable or not, but sometimes I don’t really know.*
Sometimes I am not sure whether I should use “a” or “an” when I need to add articles before words starting with a/e/i/o/u.

As far as understanding is concerned, many respondents (20.3%) claimed that they did not encounter any difficulties because they could understand a text from the overall context (e.g. responses (8) and (9)). Two of those respondents claimed that unlike other concepts such as active/passive voice and tenses, articles were of less importance in English (e.g. response (9)). The most prevalent difficulty the participants encountered was that they did not know what a noun phrase (with or without an article) exactly referred to (e.g. response (10)). Some respondents (12.1%) found it hard to know whether one thing or a group of thing was being referred to by the use of a/an (e.g. response (11)). Others (also 12.1%) respondents thought that although there were rules governing the use of English articles, there were often exceptions which they couldn’t understand (e.g. response (12)).

The following are some of the actual responses given by the respondents:

(8) Not much difficulty. I could probably understand the text from the overall context.

(9) It’s less difficult since usually there are more sentences/information given in the following that helps me to understand the meaning of the speech/reading. Also, article does not carry much importances than other types of thing like active/passive or tenses.

(10) I am not sure what specified items or thing the “the + noun” refers to.

(11) It’s difficult to understand if “a/an” + noun refers to one thing or a group of thing.

E.g. A printer can print documents. I sometimes find difficulties in understanding if “a printer” is talking about one printer or is referring to all printers.

(12) The English articles have rules but they’re not always general and have many exceptions.

Regarding the ways to solve their problems in this aspect of grammar, possible solutions suggested by the participants included reading of books and/or newspapers, reading of grammar books, and memorization of examples. Formal teaching of the English article system, together with extensive drills, was also considered useful.

5.2. Linguistic knowledge
5.2.1. Knowledge of technical names of English articles, inventory of English articles, and technical terms associated with use of articles

The respondents did not know many terms associated with the English article system. Very few respondents could spell out the technical names of different articles or the technical terms associated with the use of articles. 10 respondents (30.3%) knew that *a/an* is known as the indefinite article and *the* as the definite article. A minority (9.1%) thought that *a/an* was known as numeric, generic, or quantifier, whereas 5 respondents (15.2%) thought that *the* was known as determiner, directive, specific or determinator. The rest did not know the technical names of these articles. Only 3 respondents (9.1%) knew that apart from *a/an* or *the*, ZERO is also regarded as an article, whereas 3 respondents (9.1%) wrongly thought that *this, that, these, those, their* or numbers were articles. The rest did not know of any articles other than *a/an/the*. Only 4 respondents (12.1%) could name some technical terms associated with the use of English articles, such as generic, forward-pointing (forward referencing), backward-pointing (backward referencing), countable, uncountable, anaphoric (mis-spelled as anamorphic), exophoric (mis-spelled as exomorphic). The rest did not know any or had forgotten all associated terms.

5.2.2. Knowledge of context of use

Although most respondents had some awareness of the contexts and conditions under which English articles are used, their knowledge was not comprehensive and precise enough. Some common misconceptions could be identified.

**A/AN:** In explaining how and when *a/an* is used, most respondents (48.5%) focused on the conditions for use, i.e. *a* is used before a consonant sound and *an* is used before a vowel sound, and were able to spell out the conditions correctly (e.g. response (13)). Some respondents (18.2%) could correctly explain that *a/an* was used for first-mention or not referred to before (e.g. response (14)), and many respondents (39.4%) claimed that *a/an* was used to indicate numbers, a singular subject/object or the singular form of a countable noun (e.g. response (15)). Many respondents (30.3%) also said that *a/an* was used when we were not talking about specific items (e.g. response (16)). There were a few respondents (12.1%) who, without being able to use the term generic, were able to say that we used *a/an* when we talked about a characteristic of an object, or to refer to a group of things, such as in *A pen is a tool for writing* (e.g. response (17)).

The following are some of the actual responses given by the respondents:
(13) “An” is used when the word begins with a vowel. “A” is used when it begins with a consonant.

(14) When mentioning a singular countable noun for the first time, or when it’s not a specific object. E.g. There is a girl.

(15) “A/an” is used before a noun to focus on the number (the singularity). E.g. I have an apple.

(16) A/an is used when indicating there is one thing which is non-specific one.

(17) “A/An” is used when one thing is used to represent a group of things. E.g. A printer is used to print documents and photos.

(18) A/an is used when we are not specifying something, and that thing is the same with the things in the same class. For example: I am a girl.

(19) When the noun following is pointed to a specific thing rather as a general term, the article a/an is used. For example, an experiment is carried our for this topic.

Although some respondents could correctly indicate the use of a/an, the examples given were sometimes wrong. For example, there was a respondent who correctly said that a/an was used when a thing was the same with the things in the same class (i.e. generic), yet the example given was I am a girl (e.g. response (18)). Only one respondent could correctly point out that a/an could sometimes be used with specific items, such as in An experiment is carried out for this topic (e.g. response (19)).

THE: A great majority of the respondents (84.8%) said that the was used to refer to specific items or to specify the thing being referred to (e.g. response (20)). Many (48.5%) said that it was used to refer to something that has been mentioned before (e.g. response (21)). A few (15.2%) said that it was used to refer to a unique object, or the only thing (e.g. responses (22) and (23)).

The following are some of the actual responses given by the respondents:

(20) “The” is used to refer to more specific item. E.g. There are a lot of cats. The cat with the longest tail is called Mimi.
(21) “The” is used when we are referring to something that has been mentioned before.
   E.g. The books I read are interesting. Timberland is a company that sells shoes. The company is experiencing 40th ...

(22) “The” is usually followed by objects that are unique and are part of the nature. E.g.
   The sun, the moon.

(23) When the object is “the only one”. E.g. the moon, the sun.

(24) When the article “the” is used, it refers to specific object instead of general idea of the object that a word refers to. For instance, ball means all objects which are round, but the ball refers to a particular ball which owns the feature of have a sphere shape.

Again the examples or illustrations given to explain the use of the were sometimes inappropriate. For instance, a respondent used an indefinite noun phrase (a particular ball which owns the feature of have a sphere shape) to explain the use of the in a definite noun phrase (e.g. response (24) above).

ZERO: The few respondents (3 in total; 9.1%) who could name ZERO as an English article all focused on its generic use (using the term “general” instead of “generic”) by claiming that it was used when referring to something belonging to the same class or referring to every single one of a kind of thing, or when general information was shown. Examples such as Apples are good for our health were given (e.g. responses (25) and (26)). One respondent also mentioned the indefinite use of this article by claiming that it is used with something not referred to before or not to be referred to later (e.g. response (26)).

(25) When the thing we are referring to is a general information. Or it refers to every single one of that kind of thing. E.g. Apples are good for our health.

(26) Zero/Empty article is used when the following noun is not referred before or after and is talking about an abstract or general idea. E.g. Life is a script.

6. Discussions

As can be seen from the results above, most respondents were quite confident about their use and/or understanding of English articles. Speaking seemed to be the area which the respondents were least confident about, but speaking was also the area which the least number of respondents regarded as important as far as the
use of English articles is concerned. Some difficulties were still encountered, and productive tasks seemed to induce more difficulties in the use of English articles to the respondents than receptive tasks. Learning difficulties included indetermination in choosing a suitable article to use and in determining the reference of a noun phrase, as well as difficulties in understanding the rules for using articles. However, these difficulties did not cause much concern to many respondents, as they did not regard the correct use and/or understanding of English articles as very important to their learning of English and they thought they could solve the problems by referring to the relevant contexts.

The metalanguage that the learners could use to describe the English article system was, however, very limited and was restricted to just a few general concepts. Their explicit knowledge about the use of English articles was not comprehensive either. The following sections discuss ESL learners’ knowledge of the English article system and account for their problems in the light of the theoretical concepts that are often used in the literature.

6.1. The inventory of English articles

Despite all the respondents’ being English majors, full knowledge of the inventory of English articles was not taken for granted. Other determiners, such as demonstratives, were regarded as members of the English article system, and ZERO, which has been regarded as an English article in contemporary linguistics, escaped the notice of most respondents.

The use of English articles as noun phrase determiners may be the cause of ESL learners’ wrong inclusion of other determiners as articles. As is well-known, English articles are a kind of determiners, which also include other sub-categories such as demonstratives, possessives, etc. (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985). While English articles, like other determiners, share the function of expressing the reference of the noun phrases they are used in, they do not signal whether the reference is near the speaker in space/time or not (like what demonstratives can do) or whom the referent belongs to (like what possessives can do) (Downing, 2015). Instead, they signal whether a whole class of things or just a subset of a class is being referred to, and if the latter, whether the referent can or cannot be identified (Lock, 1996). It is apparent from the study that some learners equated these various subcategories of determiners without realizing that different determiners particularize noun referents in different ways.
As far as ZERO is concerned, the presentation of the English article system in many grammar books may be a cause of the respondents’ non-inclusion of ZERO as an English article. In most, if not all, grammar books targeting students below the university level or students of non-linguistics backgrounds, and even in some grammar books targeting students at the university level (e.g. Greenbaum & Nelson, 2009), only *a/an*, and *the* are included as English articles⁹. When ZERO is viewed as a separate English article as postulated in many theories of grammar, such as functional grammar (e.g. Downing, 2015; Lock, 1996), it is given the same status as other articles which indicate reference, and its function of a determiner is recognized: It has the function of indicating generic or indefinite references. On the other hand, if a noun phrase such as *teachers* is seen as one without an article, then the scope of reference of the head noun *teachers* cannot be explained in a unified approach. While using the ZERO article and using no articles will result in the same noun phrase, the representations underlying the two are very different. The respondents’ non-inclusion of ZERO as an article shows their unawareness of this alternative way of describing the English article system. With the results of the present study, it is not clear if such awareness will impact on their awareness of the functions and semantics of English articles, especially of ZERO (see Section 6.3). Further research is needed to ascertain that.

6.2. Noun countability

As observed in Yoon (1993), non-native speakers of English sometimes perceive English nouns in different ways from native speakers’, and they often assign articles to nouns based on their intuitive judgment about noun countability. The finding of the present study that some respondents had problems with noun countability and did not even know whether a noun was countable or uncountable in certain cases (see response (6) in Section 5) was consistent with Yoon’s (1993) claim. For Cantonese ESL learners, the differences between noun countability in English and Chinese may help explain learners’ indetermination in judging noun countability. While English nouns are classified into count and mass nouns and most count nouns are marked for plurality, Chinese nouns do not change for number (Author, 2004), but they can be used with a classifier (or measure word) for showing quantity or number (e.g. 一粒沙 “one CLASSIFIER sand”: a grain of sand; and 一枝筆 “one CLASSIFIER pen”: a pen). Chinese ESL learners may perceive the countability of a certain English noun (e.g. equipment) differently from native English speakers, resulting in different, and possibly inappropriate, choices of
articles (e.g. *an equipment). The fact that some English mass nouns (e.g. food) can be used as count nouns in certain contexts adds further difficulty to ESL learners’ judgment about noun countability in English.

Crosslinguistic differences may also explain the respondents’ misconception that numbers were also articles or that a/an was known as a quantifier or numeric (see Section 5.2.1). In English, a distinction is made between different determiners (Quirk et al., 1985): Articles are classified as a kind of central determiners whereas quantifiers (e.g. one, two, three), which show quantities between all and none, are classified as a kind of post-determiners. However, Chinese has no articles, and English noun phrases such as a book are translated as “一本書” “one CLASSIFIER book” in Chinese, with — “one” being the literal translation of the article a. It is no wonder that many Chinese ESL learners are confused about the terminology distinction between a/an and one.

6.3. Reference interpretations

Reference interpretations, which are most fundamental and integral in the description of English articles, were not given comparable attention when the context of use for different articles was considered. For a/an, co-occurrence restrictions, such as the compatibility of the initial sound or the number of the head noun with the selected article, seemed to be a more important concern to many respondents, so its use for generic and indefinite references was often overlooked. Though the use of the definite article for definite (or specific; see Section 6.4) reference was more referred to, its use for generic reference seemed to escape the notice of all respondents.

The technical names of a/an (the indefinite article) and the (the definite article) may be a source of the respondents’ unawareness of the use of these articles to show generic interpretations, as learners may be inclined to consider the indication of definiteness (or indefiniteness) as the key function of English articles. The much more widespread use of ZERO for generic reference may also be a cause. It is well known that ZERO + plural (or ZERO + mass) can be used for indicating generic reference in nearly all contexts without creating ambiguity, whereas a/an is typically used for generic reference when one member of a class is picked out to represent the whole class, and the when generalizations are made about a class with clear defining characteristics (Lock, 1996). Where the reference would be ambiguous with indefinite reference and definite reference respectively, a/an and the cannot be used for generic interpretation. The more widespread use of ZERO for generic reference may, therefore, be a cause of learners’ unawareness of the generic use of a/an and the.
As for the respondents’ preoccupation with the co-occurrence restrictions for *a/an*, the salience of the availability of two alternatives (*a* or *an*) and the co-occurrence requirement of a singular head may have overridden the importance of reference interpretations as far as the context of use is concerned. Failure to appreciate the importance of reference in article selection may help explain many learners’ difficulties and/or indetermination in choosing a correct article.

6.4. Definiteness vs. specificity

The results of the study, that the term *specific* was predominantly used by the respondents to explain definiteness (see responses (4,14,16,19,20,24) in Section 5), may be an indication of learners’ confusion between definiteness and specificity. In the literature on article use, a distinction is made between specificity and definiteness. As Ko, Ionin & Wexler (2010) put it, specificity makes reference to the knowledge state of the speaker, and English is a language which marks the specificity distinction on indefinites. While *a merchant banker* in *Peter intends to marry a merchant banker, even though he doesn’t get on at all with her* and in *Peter intends to marry a merchant banker, though he hasn’t met one yet* (Ko et al., 2010: 219) has indefinite reference in both sentences, it is specific in the former sentence but non-specific in the latter, because the former intends to refer to exactly one individual and there exists a property which the speaker considers noteworthy in the context (Ionin, 2003, 2006). The latter, on the other hand, does not intend to refer to a particular individual. The semantics of definiteness is not related to specificity either, as it presupposes existence and uniqueness and is related to the identifiability of referents in discourse, i.e. a noun phrase can be identified because there is prior mention of it in the discourse, or because it is unique for all speakers (e.g. *the moon*), in a given setting (e.g. *the desk*), for a given social group (e.g. *the government*), or by pointing, etc. (Ko et al., 2010). Therefore, noun phrases which are definite may not necessarily be specific, and noun phrases which are specific may not necessarily be definite either – The concept of identifiability is, thus, important in distinguishing between specificity and definiteness.

It is not clear, however, whether such a distinction between the two concepts was part of the linguistic knowledge of the respondents. It may be argued that the term *specific* was used in an informal sense roughly corresponding to “unique” or “referential” rather than in a linguistic sense as defined by semanticists to stand in contrast to definiteness. If that is the case, then the respondents may simply have used a wrong label. However, many ESL learners indeed have problems distinguishing between definite and indefinite references in examples
such as *A girl is coming* and *I met a boy with long hair*, in which *a girl* and *a boy with long hair*, which are specific but indefinite, are often interpreted as having definite reference\(^{10}\). Similar observations have been made in the literature, that learners overgeneralize *the* in referential indefinite contexts (e.g. *I saw a boy*) but not in non-referential contexts (e.g. *Mary is a student*), because they initially associate *the* with the specific reference feature (Thomas, 1989). Learners’ overuse of *the* in L2 English has also be argued to be associated with the specific reference feature, and when this feature is absent, L2 learners overuse *a for the* instead (Ionin et al., 2004). An awareness of the distinction between specificity and definiteness is important in learners’ use of English articles, as a lack of such awareness may result in their overuse of *the* in contexts where *a/an* should be used. It is, therefore, important to understand learners’ explicit knowledge about the distinction between the two concepts (of specificity and definiteness) and to ascertain if learners appreciate the importance of identifiability for definiteness.

The findings of the present research call for further research in this area.

### 7. Limitations

The present study suffered from some limitations. It was just an opinion-gathering survey by the use of a questionnaire to investigate ESL learners’ self-evaluation of their use of English articles and their knowledge of the English article system. Only subjective data were collected. No data on the respondents’ performance in authentic learning contexts were gathered. Although language examples were elicited for supporting or illustrating respondents’ answers to a certain question (such as in what contexts a certain article is used), most of those examples were isolated sentences (or even isolated phrases) constructed out of context. As Loewen (2009) argues, a common measure of metalinguistic knowledge is the grammaticality judgment test. Empirical data collected through the implementation of language tasks, such as grammaticality judgment tests, which require learners to use English articles in an authentic context, will yield more reliable conclusions about learners’ actual use of English articles and their explicit knowledge of the functions and semantics of different English articles. It may also be enlightening to conduct research to investigate learners’ selection of an English article in a given text and probe into the reasons behind their selection like what was done in Butler (2002)\(^{11}\).

The nature of the questionnaire may have been another limitation, as it only focused on the formal properties of the English article system (e.g. technical names, inventory, etc.). Factors other than the linguistic forms themselves, such as the frequency and salience of a certain article in the input that the respondents received,
or even the respondents’ memory and ability to verbalize their linguistic knowledge, were not taken into consideration. Future research which includes these issues as variables may give a more comprehensive picture of learners’ learning difficulties as well as their linguistic knowledge. The open-ended questions may also have been limited in their capacity to measure learner’s knowledge of the English article system, as the participants, who were not given any cues, may have had difficulties retrieving their linguistic knowledge.

The last limitation concerns the representativeness of the sample. Only a homogenous group of advanced Cantonese ESL learners participated in the study. The data collected and thus the conclusions yielded may be biased towards this single group of learners. It is unclear if the knowledge of the English article system of university students majoring in other disciplines is similar or different. It is also interesting to include students of other levels (e.g. intermediate levels), or students with other mother tongues (e.g. Japanese), for comparisons.

8. Pedagogical implications

Notwithstanding the above limitations, the present study provides some insights into the potential areas of difficulties facing ESL learners and has important implications for the teaching of English articles. These implications concern teaching approaches, teaching focuses, and teaching activities which are applicable not just to Cantonese ESL learners but also to learners of other native languages.

With regard to teaching approaches, it has been argued that because of the complexity of the English article system, learners may be able to learn the system better via exposure to the input (Lightbown & Spada, 2013) (e.g. via extensive reading) so as to advance their implicit knowledge of the system and allow them to use articles correctly. This is true, but the findings of the present study reveal the need for explicit instruction drawing learners’ attention to the intricacy of article use and eradicating learners’ misconceptions about the article system. A discourse grammar approach, which focuses on the functions of a linguistic unit and analyzes “grammar as an aspect of discourse rather than as something that operates only within the boundaries of the clause or sentence” (Hughes & McCarthy, 1998: 264), should be useful, as the selection of an English article depends very much on the contexts in which it appears and the intention of the writer/speaker.

As far as teaching focuses are concerned, since learners themselves may not see the importance of the correct use of English articles, it is suggested that explicit instruction should target not just learners’ implicit knowledge but also their explicit knowledge and metalinguistic awareness, as explicit knowledge can help support
learners’ development of implicit knowledge (Andrews, 2007). For advanced learners, mastery of the English article system encompasses not just knowledge of the technical terms and the conditions relating to noun countability and/or word pronunciations but also knowledge of the theories and generalizations regarding the semantics and functions of English articles, as well as ability to recognize the intended referentiality of a noun phrase in a certain context (i.e. whether it is generic, definite or indefinite) and the identifiability of the noun. Teaching professionals also need to diagnose their students’ metalinguistic awareness to detect gaps in their knowledge. The problems identified in the present study, such as possible confusion between specificity and definiteness, lack of awareness of the importance of reference interpretations and of the generic use of *a/an* and *the*, as well as difficulties in distinguishing the differences in the countability of a target word in the target language and its equivalent in the native language, may also confront learners of other native languages. The teaching of English articles should target these, and other possible, gaps in learners’ knowledge.

Regarding teaching activities, explicit linguistic analyses using ample authentic data and relevant metalanguage can be incorporated into the key component of an advanced ESL teaching programme, such as analyzing the reference types of each article in an authentic text, substituting another article for the target article and discussing the possible changes to the interpretation of the sentence/text after the substitution. These activities should be useful in giving learners a platform for verbalizing relevant linguistic concepts and thus enhancing their metalinguistic awareness.

9. Conclusions

In this article, I have reported on the results of a questionnaire survey which investigated advanced Cantonese ESL learners’ perception of their own use of English articles and their knowledge of the English article system. Although many advanced ESL learners are confident of their use of English articles, they may not possess the metalanguage that enables them to articulate the functions and semantics of different English articles. Most important of all, certain misconceptions about the English article system are evident. While learners’ deficiency in describing the English article system may not be indicative of their lack of knowledge of how the system works or their inability to use English articles accurately, there is reason to believe that some, if not many, of learners’ difficulties in using or interpreting English articles are the results of their lack of awareness of the importance of reference interpretations and their failure to distinguish between specificity and definiteness. It is suggested that
formal and systematic teaching on English articles be given to eradicate their misconceptions about the use and functions of English articles and to enhance their knowledge of the system. Heightened knowledge is beneficial to learners’ acquisition of English articles, as their selection of appropriate articles for use in a certain context will then be led by their linguistic knowledge rather than their ungrounded intuitions.

Acknowledgements

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Table 1: The respondents’ confidence levels in their use of English articles and their perception of the importance of the correct use or understanding of English articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Listening N=33</th>
<th>Reading N=33</th>
<th>Speaking N=33</th>
<th>Writing N=33</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unconfident</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very confident</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite confident</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>60.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very confident</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unimportant</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite important</td>
<td>30.3%</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: The respondents’ frequencies of encountering problems in their use or understanding of English articles and the levels of difficulties of the problems encountered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Listening N= 33</th>
<th>Reading N= 33</th>
<th>Speaking N= 33</th>
<th>Writing N= 33</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
<td>69.7%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite frequently</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very frequently</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very easy</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite easy</td>
<td>69.7%</td>
<td>57.6%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite difficult</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very difficult</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix

Sample Questionnaire Questions

A: Self-Evaluation

(The options for each question below were given, from left to right, 1 to 5 points on a Likert scale).

Q1-Q2: How would you rank your confidence level in your understanding of the use of English articles in listening/reading? (Options: unconfident / not very confident / confident / quite confident / very confident)

Q3-Q4: How would you rank your confidence level (in terms of accuracy) in your use of English articles in speaking/writing? (Options: unconfident/ not very confident/ confident/ quite confident/ very confident)

Q5-Q6: How important do you think the correct understanding of English articles is in listening/reading? (Options: unimportant/ not very important/ important/ quite important/ very important)

Q7-Q8: How important do you think the correct use of English articles is in speaking/writing? (Options: unimportant/ not very important/ important/ quite important/ very important)

Q9-Q10: How often do you encounter problems in understanding the use of an English article in listening/reading? (Options: never/ rarely/ sometimes/ quite frequently/ very frequently)

Q11-Q12: How often do you encounter problems in your use of an English article in speaking/writing? (Options: never/ rarely/ sometimes/ quite frequently/ very frequently)

Q13-Q14: How difficult was it for you to achieve correct understanding of English articles in listening/reading? (Options: very easy/ quite easy/ difficult/ quite difficult/ very difficult)

Q15-Q16: How difficult was it for you to achieve correct use of English articles in speaking/writing? (Options: very easy/ quite easy/ difficult/ quite difficult/ very difficult)

Q17-Q18: What difficulties did you encounter in your own use/understanding of the use of English articles?

Q19: What do you think you can do to improve your use/understanding of English articles?

B: Knowledge of the English Article System
Q20-Q21: What is the technical name of each of the following articles: *a(an)/the*?

Q22: Apart from the above, do you know of any other articles in English?

Q23: Do you know of any technical terms which are associated with the use of English articles? If so, what?

Q24-Q25: How or when is the article *a(an)/the* used? Please give examples to illustrate your answer.

Q26: How or when is the article you gave in Q22 used? Please give examples to illustrate your answer.

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1 The phrase “use of English articles” here, and in the rest of the manuscript when learners’ use is at issue, refers to learners’ selection of an article in a particular context.

2 There is no attempt on the author’s part to claim or assume that investigating learners’ explicit knowledge of the English article system is the method to understand ESL learners’ acquisition. This is only one way of doing so. Other methodologies, especially those which collect empirical data on learners’ actual use of English articles, are definitely useful and complementary to the present research (see Section 7).

3 The phrase “use of English articles” here, and in the rest of the manuscript when the English article system is at issue, refers to how and when an article is used, i.e. the usage.

4 As Elder (2009) argues, “a common measure of metalinguistic competence is to have learners verbalize language rules” (cited in Roehr & Gámen-Gutierrez, 2013: 75). The use of a questionnaire asking respondents to verbalize their explicit knowledge is deemed a valid measure of metalinguistic knowledge.

5 The respondents were recruited on a voluntary basis. Learners who responded to the researcher’s recruitment emails were invited to participate in the study. This sampling technique was used because it was the most efficient way of recruiting participants who were willing to provide the required data for the study.
The Hong Kong Advanced Level Use of English (UE) Examination aimed at testing students’ ability to understand and use English at a level required for tertiary education and/or future employment. It was normally taken by F.7 students in Hong Kong who had completed their two-year matriculation studies. UE Grade E was regarded as equivalent to Grade E in the GCE A level examinations.

The HKDSE exam aims to measure the attainment of students upon their completion of six years of secondary education and has been the only public examination in the new 3-3-4 education system in Hong Kong since 2012. 5** is the highest grade that students can attain for a certain subject, followed by 5* and 5.

As will be seen in Section 5, only three respondents could say that ZERO was also an article. Thus, there were only three answers related to the contexts of use of ZERO.

Because of the inclusion of only *a/an* and *the* (not ZERO) as English articles by many grammar books, it may be argued that the question “Do you know of any articles in English” may have induced the respondents to give irrelevant answers such as demonstratives, pronouns etc. because of their lack of awareness of an additional article in the English article system. This argument may be right, but it does not seem to affect the reliability of the results of the questionnaire survey as well as the insights arising from the results, as the main purpose of the study was to investigate how much Cantonese ESL learners knew of the English article system.

The author has been teaching English grammar in local universities for over 20 years and has witnessed many students’ difficulties in understanding the said concept.

In the second phase of the present study, a cloze passage task with two passages was given to the respondents to investigate their selection of English articles and the reasons behind their selection. The empirical data collected will provide further insights into the acquisition of English articles by Hong Kong Cantonese ESL learners and their knowledge of the English article system.

The Likert scale points used in the questionnaire may be seen as somewhat biased, and other terms such as “neutral” should have been used to replace “confident” or “difficult” in the middle of some scales. This could be seen as a weakness of the design of the study. However, since the questionnaire had been piloted before the actual implementation and the pilot group all agreed that the items were clear, and since the scale points were sequenced
consistently in all the items with an increasing degree from left to right (e.g. from the leftmost option of least confident to the rightmost option of most confident), the imperfect design of the questionnaire should not have had significant effects on the reliability of the results.