

What's the Use of Grammar? Indefinite and Definite Articles Written by Xavier Munoz, Faculty Support Manager, LCNV

Grammar has to do with rules. To what extent do you agree or disagree?

To explore that opening statement, let's take a partial look at the English articles – *a/an*, *the*, and the *zero* or *no article*.

Now, those of you who teach might be thinking that English articles are incredibly difficult for students. "I taught them the rules for when to use *a/an* vs. *the*, and they can answer grammar exercises correctly. But, unless I tell them to, they don't apply the rules in their speaking or writing." Sound familiar? Even advanced learners may make errors when using the articles. And, in truth, research in second language acquisition has found that language learning is not linear, not sequential. Language learners continue to build accuracy, meaningfulness, and appropriateness to their grammar and vocabulary as their proficiency develops.

But how would you explain or teach the English articles? Chances are that you might be thinking of descriptors like nonspecific or general for the indefinite article – *a/an*. Or you might be thinking to pair articles with count and noncount nouns in a unit on, say, food, clothing, or furniture. (Side note: the word *some* is often considered the plural form of the indefinite article.) If we take our cue from textbooks, we might see a leveled approach like the following. The low-beginning text *All-Star 1* explicitly presents it as such: **Articles: *a* and *an***

We use ***a*** before a singular noun that starts with a consonant or consonant sound. We use ***an*** before a singular noun that starts with a vowel or vowel sound.

The high-beginning text *All-Star 2* explicitly presents it like this: **Count and Noncount Nouns**

Singular count nouns: We use ***a*** and ***an*** before singular count nouns.

Plural count nouns: We use ***no article*** before plural count nouns.

Noncount nouns: We use ***no article*** before non-count nouns.

The low-intermediate text *Downtown 3* explicitly presents it like this: **Indefinite vs. definite articles**

We use indefinite articles (*a*, *an*) for singular count nouns. We use them to talk about a general category of something. Example: Give me **a book**. (any book, not a special book)

We use the definite article (*the*) for a special or specific thing or things. We use *the* when there is only one of something (**the White House**), when the speaker and listener both know which thing they are talking about (**the beach** was wonderful today), or

when they talk about a noun for the second time. Example: I saw **a movie** last night. **The movie** was really boring.

There's more to articles than is mentioned above – generic sentences, abstract nouns, geographical places, illnesses, etc. But we don't want to overload our students (or ourselves, for that matter!) with all of the nuances. Can we make it easier though? Yes! Larsen-Freeman (2000) suggests that learners can better understand and use grammar if they learn the **reasons** behind seemingly arbitrary rules. And the core reason is listed in the *Downtown 3* description: *a/an* is for introducing new information, the first mention; *the* is for information known by both the speaker/writer AND the listener/reader, the second mention. We can see this discourse-level use especially in jokes and stories. Just as I might do in class, I will try to draw your attention to the target grammar by using bolding and underlining.

A reporter meets **a** man carrying **an** eight-foot-long metal stick and asks, "Are you **a** pole vaulter?" "No," says **the** man, "I'm German. But how did you know my name is Walter?"

Source: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/olympics/9462225/London-2012-Best-Olympic-jokes.html>

See if you can fill in the appropriate article in the following excerpt, from an Indian folktale.

Once upon a time, ___ fox and ___ squirrel were friends. Farming was their livelihood. ___ squirrel was jealous of ___ fox because his crop always turned out so much better. This time ___ fox was cultivating pumpkins.

Source: Excerpt from "The Dexterity of a Squirrel" in *Folktales of India* by Brenda Beck, Peter Claus, Praphulladatta Goswami, Jawaharlal Handoo

In both of the examples above, the difference between *a/an* and *the* is revealed through the discourse-level context (i.e., above the level of the single sentence). Even at a beginning-level, I think it is to our learners' benefit that we not shy away from exploring language above the single sentence. We needn't necessarily expect them to produce that much language, but we can draw their attention to meaningful and appropriate use of grammar to prime them for future learning explorations. Check it out for yourself. Look through a textbook you're currently or recently have used with a student. Or look through something you read recently. Do you notice instances of first mention, second mention?

In summary, Grammar has to do with rules AND reasons. Reasons can help learners see the logic woven into the grammar, rather than just seeing it as random or arbitrary rules. At the discourse level, we can see that there is a shift from the indefinite article *a/an* to the definite article *the* based on what the speaker/writer assumes that their audience knows. We use the

indefinite article for new information or first mention of a particular thing. We shift to the definite article for familiar information or second mention of that same thing. The definite article is also used when referring to unique objects.

a → the	
first mention, new information	second mention, familiar information
	unique object

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). Grammar: Rules and Reasons Working Together. *ESL Magazine*, 3(1), 10-12.