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Article pedagogy: Encouraging links between linguistic theory and teaching practice

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Abstract

It is two decades since Master (1997) published a framework for L2 article pedagogy, based on several years of research into the acquisition of the English article system. Among his recommendations were a focus on intermediate level learners and a simplification of the rules presented to language learners. Since then, substantial work has been conducted to better understand the underlying reasons why English articles are difficult to acquire by learners with diverse language backgrounds (Ionin et al., 2004, 2008, 2009, 2011; Trenkic, 2008; García Mayo, 2009; amongst others). The results indicate a systematic pattern of errors amongst learners whose first language does not have an article system, with varying theoretical explanations for this systematicity. Despite some intervention studies which have explored the pedagogical implications of this work (Snape and Yusa, 2013; Sabir, 2015; Lopez, under review; Umeda et al., under review), on the whole theoretical linguistic research in this area has not influenced pedagogy. The aim of this paper is to build on the work of Master (1997) by exploring whether the cumulative insights from the last 20 years of research into L2 article acquisition and instruction can help us to better understand the most effective method for teaching the complex uses of the English article system to L2 learners.

Key words

article acquisition; article pedagogy; definiteness; genericity; specificity

Introduction

The English article system is a notorious source of difficulty for L2 learners. Whilst there is some variation depending on learners' L1s, article omission and misuse (i.e. using *the* instead of *a/an* and vice versa) persist in the production of L2 learners of English even at advanced

proficiency levels. English articles are difficult to acquire because multiple functions are represented by one morpheme (Master, 2002). That is, a single article might encode *gender*, *number*, *definiteness*, *specificity* or *genericity* for the noun it modifies. The persisting errors amongst L2 learners of English indicate that teaching English articles can be challenging.

Early studies in article pedagogy include Kaluza (1963), Whitman (1974), and Pica (1983). Kaluza (1963) proposed an approach for teaching Slavonic learners (no L1 articles) which centred on presenting English articles with nouns to make them meaningful. In another study, Whitman (1974) criticized describing *a/an* and *the* as ‘articles’ and suggested that *a/an* are associated with quantification whereas *the* is associated with determination. He provided six pedagogical steps for teaching the English articles: (1) quantity, (2) general plural, (3) non-count nouns, (4) determiners, (5) quantity and determiner, and (6) generic articles. Pica (1983) focused on missing information from English teaching textbooks, and argued for including discourse-related rules in article pedagogy. She associated articles with communicative competence rather than linguistic competence and recommended using dialogues to present learners with examples of article use.

Building on this work, Master (1990, 1994, 1997, 2002) introduced several proposals for improving article instruction for L2 learners of English. He also developed a pedagogical framework (1997), which highlights suitable approaches to article instruction and recommends what should be taught at different proficiency levels. The main premise of his Binary System (1990) is a *one-form/one-function* approach and, as part of his framework (1997), he highlighted that this is appropriate for teaching articles to intermediate learners. In 2002, Master presented and tested Information Structure. This discourse-related method presents given information prior

to new information; a practice called *end-focus*, so that learners are sure whether to use *the* (for given information) or *a/an* (for new information).

Following this work on article pedagogy, a body of theoretical research developed, building on a proposal from Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004). To date, this theoretical work has had little influence on pedagogy and the two bodies of complementary research remain largely separate. The aim of the current paper is to synthesise the insights from both fields in order to better understand the most effective method for teaching articles to L2 learners of English. We begin by explaining recent developments in theoretical work. This will then be contrasted with Master's (1997) framework. The paper ends with an examination of current teaching materials, where we make specific suggestions for how grammatical information can be made more linguistically accurate.

Recent theoretical work on article acquisition

A number of hypotheses have been presented in the last decade to explain why English articles are so problematic for L2 learners. One of the most influential proposals comes from Ionin, Ko and Wexler (2004), who provide a theoretically-grounded explanation for substitution errors in L2 article production. As stated above, a single article might encode *gender*, *number*, *definiteness*, *specificity* or *genericity* for the noun it modifies and, in formal linguistic approaches to article analysis, *definiteness*, *specificity* and *genericity* are discourse-related features of article meaning that contribute to article choice (Lyons, 1999).

Ionin et al. (2004) dealt mainly with *definiteness* and *specificity*. In English, article selection is based on *definiteness* and therefore *specificity* does not require a different article

form as it is interpreted from context. The difference between the features is explained in (1) and (2).

1. *Definiteness* is determined by the knowledge status of the speaker and the hearer (i.e. their ability to identify the referent).
2. *Specificity* involves only the speaker's knowledge (i.e. the speaker having a particular referent in mind).

The combination of *definiteness* and *specificity* leads to four contexts, as demonstrated in examples 3–6 (from Lyons, 1999: 167).

3. [**+definite, +specific**] Joan wants to present the prize to the winner – but he doesn't want to receive it from her.
4. [**+definite, –specific**] Joan wants to present the prize to the winner – so she'll have to wait around until the race finishes.
5. [**–definite, +specific**] Peter intends to marry a merchant banker – even though he doesn't get on with her at all.
6. [**–definite, –specific**] Peter intends to marry a merchant banker – even though he hasn't met one yet.

Based on these distinctions, Ionin et al. (2004) proposed the Article Choice Parameter (ACP), which shows that languages with two articles either encode articles on the basis of

definiteness (such as English) or *specificity* (such as Samoan), but not both. The associated Fluctuation Hypothesis (FH) predicts that learners will have access to universal patterns of article choice, and will fluctuate between *definiteness* and *specificity* until the input guides them to set the appropriate parametric value. Fluctuation would therefore result in substitution errors that can be detected in contexts where *definiteness* and *specificity* do not match. Ionin et al. (2004) predicted that *a* will be overused in [+definite, -specific] contexts and *the* will be overused in [-definite; +specific] ones (examples 4 and 5, respectively). Following a further evaluation of Samoan articles by Tryzna (2009) and Ionin, Zubizaretta and Philippov (2009), the original prediction of the FH was revised to just overuse of *the* in [-definite; +specific] contexts. The two possible article groupings, based on the evaluation by Ionin et al. (2009), are presented in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Many studies have provided empirical support for the FH. Ionin et al. (2004) measured learners' article choice using a forced choice elicitation task and a written production task. In the elicitation task, participants chose between *the*, *a/an* or \emptyset in dialogues, based on a context established for each one. Participants were intermediate or advanced level Russian and Korean speakers and neither language has a morphologically-realised article system. Analysis of the elicitation task revealed that both learner groups made significantly more article substitution errors in [+definite, -specific] and [-definite, +specific] contexts. In the production task, there were some cases of *the* overuse with indefinites (see 7), but few cases of *a* overuse with definites could be linked to specificity.

7. My husband met us in airport and drive us to our new home. Then we went to our neighbours house for the small party.

(Ionin et al, 2004: 48)

Results confirm the predictions of the original version of the FH, and it was concluded that errors in L2 English article choice reflect L2 learners' access to the universal settings of *definiteness* and *specificity*.

In a further study, Ionin et al. (2009) compared L1 Russian adult and child learners. They found that children only made errors in [-definite, +specific] contexts whereas adult learners make errors in both contexts, possibly due to misuse of explicit strategies. The adult results replicate those of Ionin et al. (2004) but the child data represents the groupings shown in Figure 1 (above). Therefore, the child data supports the updated proposal for overuse of *the* in [-definite; +specific] contexts, and it was suggested that adults overextend these errors to an additional context. Based on these results, predictions for article choice are shown in Table 1.

[Insert table 1 here]

Ionin et al.'s (2004, 2009) work led many researchers to explore the L2 acquisition of English articles by learners from other language backgrounds, including those with an L1 article system. García-Mayo (2009) tested low-intermediate and advanced Spanish learners of English (whose L1 article system encodes *definiteness*) and found that they transfer their knowledge of Spanish articles when acquiring English and therefore do not fluctuate. Similarly, Sarko (2009)

tested the FH on two populations whose L1 article systems encode *definiteness* (Syrian Arabic and French). The Syrian Arabic group differed significantly from the native control group in [-definite, +specific] contexts, whereas the French group did not. While this result suggests fluctuation patterns, Sarko argues for an L1 transfer effect. The Syrian Arabic learners mainly overused *the* when the noun was modified by a relative clause with an overt complementiser (8), and no overuse of *the* was detected in absence of relative clause modifiers.

8. A: Kylie went to Tim's party
B: Did she have fun?
A: She met a man who I knew at school.

(Sarko, 2009: 61)

Trenkic (2008) tested the assumptions made by the ACP and the FH on L1 Mandarin/L2 English bilinguals. Even though she criticized Ionin et al.'s operationalization of *specificity* and presented an argument against the FH¹, she found a pattern in Mandarin learners' production similar to Ionin et al.'s (2004) learners. Trenkic (2008) postulates that the substitution errors do not result from *specificity*; rather they occur because of the extra-linguistic factor of stated vs. denied familiarity of the referent. Snape (2009) also explored article use amongst young adult Mandarin Chinese learners of English at intermediate level. He tested three hypotheses, including the FH with a focus on the [-definite, +specific] context, and group results were consistent with the FH. Therefore, there is a substantial body of work which supports Ionin et al.'s proposal of systematic patterns of errors based on *specificity* effects.

¹ Alternative theoretical accounts of article omission and misuse exist. One example is Trenkic's (2007, 2008) Syntactic Misanalysis Account, in which she argues that L1 learners of an article-less language misanalyse articles as adjectives because they show more omission errors with modified nouns.

A third semantic property of articles is *genericity*, which has previously been overlooked in L2 acquisition research (Ionin, Montrul, Kim & Philippov, 2011). *Genericity* indicates general reference, compared to *definiteness* and *specificity* where the referent is a particular individual(s) or object(s). Krifka et al. (1995) highlight the distinction between two varieties of generic structure. Noun-phrase Generics (NPG) refer to a well-established kind (examples 9a, and 9b). Sentence-level Generics (SLG) indicate generalizations based on the characteristics of individual objects (examples 10a, and 10b). NPGs are compatible with definite singulars and bare plurals. In contrast, SLGs are compatible with indefinite singulars and bare plurals (Krifka et al., 1995). Consequently, the type of generic structure determines article choice in a given context, and examples 9c and 10c demonstrate that article misuse will make a generic sentence ungrammatical.

9. Noun-phrase Generic

- a. The panda will become extinct soon.
- b. Pandas will soon become extinct.
- c. *A panda will soon become extinct.

(Krifka et al., 1995: 65)

10. Sentence Level Generic

- a. A dog barks.
- b. Dogs bark.
- c. *The dog barks.

(Krifka et al., 1995: 16)

From a pedagogical viewpoint, theoretical research such as Ionin et al. (2004, 2009, 2011) and others provides information about contexts that may be problematic for learners and could help teachers to target these. This body of work implies that teaching the following information (11, 12) could help L2 learners to overcome some of the causes of article misuse errors.

11. The concept of *specificity* and how it differs from *definiteness*.

12. The difference between NPGs and SLGs and the restrictions on article use with each type of generic.

Some recent intervention studies (Snape and Yusa, 2013; Author B, 2015; Snape et al., 2016; Author A, under review; Umeda et al., under review) have applied this theoretical information to classroom instruction, as discussed next.

Recent research in article pedagogy

The resurgence of interest in article acquisition in the last decade, arguably prompted by Ionin et al.'s (2004) seminal theoretical work, coincides with a corresponding resurgence of interest in article pedagogy. Several intervention studies have explored alternative methods of teaching articles in the hope of overcoming the well-attested difficulties experienced by English L2 learners.

Snape and Yusa's (2013) pilot study provides one such example. They pre- and post-tested two groups (experimental and control) of Japanese learners (n=7 in each group) using a forced choice elicitation task (from Ionin et al., 2004), an acceptability judgment task (from Ionin et al., 2011) and a transcription task. The experimental group received two 70-minute instruction sessions on article semantics (one on *definiteness/specificity* and another on

genericity) and a third 70-minute session on the perception of articles, over a period of three weeks. The control group received no instruction.

In their instruction, Snape and Yusa (2013) focused on how *definiteness* and *specificity* function in English. Their instruction associated *specificity* with speaker knowledge, and whether they have a particular individual in mind. Citing Ionin et al. (2004), they expected learners to err in [+definite, -specific] contexts since Japanese has no articles (-ART) and errors in this context are not caused by parametric differences (Ionin et al., 2009). Snape and Yusa (2013) found no effect for instruction on *definiteness*, *specificity*, and *genericity*, though the participants did improve on their perception. They conclude that articles are very complex, compared to other properties of grammar, and the instruction period was too short. For *genericity*, Snape and Yusa (2013) added that learners may be basing article choice on noun countability rather than *genericity*, and suggested that instruction should focus on the difference between indefinite generics and definite generics.

A follow up study conducted by Snape et al. (2016) applied a longer intervention period of 9 weeks, with weekly 60-minute lessons on articles. Instruction was delivered in the L1 and L2 to assist learners to understand the subtleties of article semantics. Upper-intermediate and advanced level Japanese learners were tested using an acceptability judgment task. Snape et al. note that the instruction group improved significantly on three post-tests targeting *genericity* (at 3 weeks, 9 weeks, and 12 weeks). The control group's performance on this task did not change. For the same study, Umeda et al. (under review) include data from a delayed post-test conducted one year after instruction ended and found that, by this time, participants had returned to pre-test levels. Due to the short term benefit, they conclude that theoretically-informed instruction on *genericity* is beneficial for high-level learners' explicit knowledge when delivered over a

sustained period, but that it does not improve their implicit knowledge of this form.

Two further studies (Lopez, under review, and Sabir, 2015) also explored instruction on article semantics. Lopez (under review) delivered instruction on *specificity* to Chinese learners of English. Three groups of low-intermediate L1-Chinese learners (n=50) were tested before and after a teaching intervention using an untimed written elicitation task (Ionin et al., 2009) and a timed judgment task. The Specificity Instruction group was taught about *definiteness* and *specificity* using materials informed by Ionin et al.'s (2004) theoretical framework. The Standard Instruction group received instruction on *definiteness* using standard teaching materials and the No Instruction (control) group was not taught about articles. All groups showed similar levels of improvement on the elicitation task. Results for the timed judgment task differed between the groups. The No Instruction and Standard Instruction groups made significant improvements whilst the Specificity Instruction group did not improve. Lopez (under review) concluded that article instruction is not beneficial. She stated that the complex construct of *specificity* is difficult to operationalise in teaching materials aimed at less proficient learners, and by simplifying the concept in order to make it more accessible, core elements of the definition were changed. This may have presented difficulties for the learners.

Sabir (2015) looked at both *genericity* and *specificity* in an intervention study including 67 Saudi (Hejazi) Arabic-speaking learners of English divided into four groups, and 23 native English speakers. The participants took three tasks (article elicitation, acceptability judgment and elicited written production) as a pre-test, an immediate post-test and a delayed post-test. Over three weeks, each group was provided with either implicit instruction (exposure to articles with no grammatical focus) or explicit instruction on *definiteness*, *specificity* and *genericity*, and to either translation or gap-fill activities that targeted article use in the contexts highlighted by Ionin

et al. (2004; 2011). Most groups fluctuated in [-definite, +specific] contexts in the pre-test, which suggests a *specificity* effect. Learners also distinguished between *genericity* types even though this distinction is not morphologically marked in Arabic, but showed evidence of L1 transfer in article generic use/interpretation (overuse of *the*). The study shows that explicit instruction and activity type did not have a clear effect on article accuracy, as there was no pattern of improvement in the immediate and delayed post-tests.

To summarise, these studies tested the effects of instruction on *definiteness*, *specificity* and/or *genericity*. Snape et al. (2016) and Umeda et al. (under review) found a positive short-term effect of instruction on *genericity* when instruction was delivered over a sustained period, but there was no long term benefit.

Master's article pedagogy

These previous studies are not the first time that theoretical research has inspired a review of article pedagogy. As stated above, Master (1990, 1994, 1997, 2002) made several recommendations for article instruction based on acquisition research.

In his earliest work, Master (1990) proposes teaching English articles to intermediate-level learners as a binary division between *classification* (*a* and \emptyset) and *identification* (*the*). He states that these concepts should be introduced before rules of article usage. The main premise for the Binary System is a one-form/one-function approach to instruction. Master (1990) collapsed the features *definite* and *specific* into one, the outcome being that *specificity* as a feature was ignored. According to Master (1990), instruction on article usage involves familiarising students with notions such as countability; first mention; subsequent mention; post-modification; proper nouns; and idiomatic phrases, often using multiple examples.

The implications of research for article pedagogy were further considered in Master (1997). By considering overuse of \emptyset in relation to L1 influence, the frequency of \emptyset in the input, and overuse of *the* which appears in learners' production after they realise that \emptyset is not grammatically appropriate in all contexts of usage, Master (1997) concludes that speakers of an L1 with articles (+ART) overuse *the* at the early stages of acquisition and show less use of \emptyset than -ART speakers. Thus, +ART learners are considered one level ahead of their -ART counterparts, suggesting that the latter group needs more time to acquire the English articles.

Master's empirical work (1994; 2002) studies the effects of article instruction and provides support for the teachability of the English articles. Both studies apply a pre-test/post-test design, with his 1994 research examining the performance of learners on a forced choice elicitation task before and after systematic instruction on the English articles. His 2002 paper, in contrast, compared instruction on Information Structure with traditional article instruction. The relevant aspect of Information Structure to articles is givenness which focuses on presenting given (old) information prior to new information (*end-focus*). In both studies, participants were from mixed L1 groups, and the treatment group performed significantly better than the control on the post-test. Furthermore, in both papers Master emphasises the importance of appropriate use by English L2 learners at intermediate level and higher because article errors in writing could lead to comprehension difficulties for readers. The results of these two studies suggest that instruction on articles is beneficial to these groups of learners, despite the lack of control for whether the participants have an L1 article system which may be transferred to English.

The culmination of Master's work on the English articles is best expressed at the end of his 1997 paper, where he presents a framework for article pedagogy. This framework provides recommendations about article instruction, with different advice for three proficiency levels

(beginner, intermediate and advanced). For beginners, Master stipulates that focusing on rules of article usage is not worthwhile. His assumption is based on Little's (1994) claims that beginners cannot fully understand linguistic rules since their L2 mental lexicon is not sufficiently developed to express complex meanings. However, Master recommends including *a/an* when vocabulary items are first presented to beginners (e.g. an apple vs. rice) and further recommends the use of photographs or realia to indicate whether a noun is count or non-count. Additionally, he recommends that mass nouns should be presented to beginners later and that focus on *the* is best avoided except for the names of countries.

For intermediate learners, Master recommends the use of his Binary System (1990), as outlined above, and seeks evidence for the benefits of this system from his 1994 study. He suggests that a sufficient amount of time should be dedicated to each distinction, and that each distinction should be taught separately and practiced by exercises. Alternative approaches, also advocated by Master (1997) for intermediate level learners, include Information Structure (later tested in Master, 2002) and Processing Instruction (Van Patten and Cadierno, 1993). For advanced learners, Master (1997) declares that rules are no longer interesting to them and suggests that articles are better learned by –ART learners from context as part of lexical items. He also suggests that teachers should encourage high proficiency learners to keep a record of their errors and reflect on these by themselves.

What we conclude from reviewing Master's (1997) pedagogical framework is that it was empirically informed and based on the results of his own research. In contrast, we also believe that Master's insistence on a simplification of pedagogical grammars at the expense of linguistic accuracy (1990, 1994) calls into question the benefit of applying all of these generalisations. Particularly, we disagree with his claim that *specificity* and *definiteness* should be compressed

into *identification*. This very avoidance of contexts where there is a mismatch between *definiteness* and *specificity* means that learners are not given the opportunity to overcome a potential source of errors. Despite his argument against teaching *specificity*, Master is a vocal advocate of article instruction per se, especially as written accuracy is important to more advanced learners and this cannot be achieved without control of the English articles. To conclude, we will now examine published teaching materials in light of the insights provided by these bodies of research.

Standard article pedagogy

Here we will assess how closely Master's (1997) framework matches article instruction in published texts, and consider whether some areas would benefit from more linguistically-informed explanations. A review of five general English coursebook series was carried out to show how articles may be taught to L2 learners of English. These titles were chosen because they are well-known and widely-used general English coursebooks which have been published since the proposal of Master's framework. The books are New English File (Oxenden and Latham-Koenig, 2006, 2010; Oxenden, Latham-Koenig and Seligson, 2004), Cutting Edge (Cunningham and Moor, 2003, 2005, 2007), Language Leader (Cotton, Falvey and Kent, 2008; Cotton et al., 2010; Lebeau and Rees, 2008), Global (Clandfield and Jeffries, 2011; Clandfield and Pickering, 2010, 2011) and New Headway (Soars and Soars, 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2006). For each series, the elementary, intermediate, and advanced level books were reviewed. From this review it is clear that most coursebooks teach articles at every level. All the materials focus only on *definiteness* and, as far as we are aware, no published language teaching materials provide

rules on the *specific/non-specific* contrast or on the distinction between the *genericity* types. A possible reason why these details are missing is due to space restrictions in textbooks.

Articles are known to be complex for L2 learners but are introduced at an elementary level in all of the books reviewed. The rules at this level revolve around whether a noun is *count* or *non-count*, *mass* or *concrete* and whether it starts with a vowel or consonant (to account for the use of *a/an*). The Language Leader Elementary coursebook (Lebeau and Rees, 2008) presents the grammatical structure to learners first, and it is then practised. An extract of information from the elementary level book is shown in (7).

13. [use] *the* with singular or plural nouns, to talk about a known or specific person or thing

two 11-year-old boys in Chile ... The two boys

the head teacher of the school

(Lebeau and Rees, 2008: 33)

An important point to note in this example is the rule explaining that the definite article is used to talk about ‘a specific person or thing’ (Lebeau and Rees, 2008: 33). This is linguistically inaccurate and may lead learners to falsely overgeneralise that all *specific* contexts require *the* and, vice versa, that all *definite* contexts are obligatorily *specific*. This is just one example, but the same terminology is used in other teaching materials from other publishers. A small number of practice exercises follow these explanations in the Language Leader coursebooks, and each book also contains a ‘language reference and extra practice’ section.

The New English File books also introduce articles at elementary level (Oxenden, Latham-Koenig and Seligson, 2004), but only *a/an*. It is covered in three chapters, either

alongside vocabulary items or with demonstratives or quantifiers. This appears to be motivated by vocabulary rather than grammar, which was recommended by Master (1997: 226) for beginner level learners. Cutting Edge (Cunningham and Moor, 2005) and New Headway (Soars and Soars, 2006) take the same approach of introducing the indefinite article to elementary level learners, as does Global (Clandfield and Pickering, 2010). Thus, all three of these books are really teaching vocabulary with little or no mention of the uses of *a/an*, as recommended by Master (1997). By the intermediate level book, Global (Clandfield and Pickering, 2011) has introduced both *the* and *a/an* although not the zero article, and it provides six different uses of the article (three for *the*, three for *a/an*). In contrast, the New Headway pre-intermediate book (Soars and Soars, 2000) focuses on finding examples of article use in a text then correcting some sentences using this information. The New Headway series takes the approach of loading learners with information about articles and only providing minimal opportunities to practice. In fact, this review suggests that it is a common occurrence.

The rules given in textbooks for *genericity* revolve around the idea of ‘general’ reference with no explicit mention of the types of *genericity* (NPG and SLG). As the first published work that dealt with teaching generics, Snape and Yusa (2013: 167) state, ‘no textbook mentions that there are two types of genericity: NP-level and sentence-level generic sentences’ even though this distinction is important for teaching the English articles. In pedagogic research, we saw that Master’s (1990) Binary System distinguished between *generic* and *specific* structures, but not between the two varieties of *genericity*. Moreover, Master consulted Whitman’s (1974) approach, which stipulated that *genericity* is better taught at later stages because it is not commonly found in the input, unlike referential structures. Because English language textbooks usually offer very little instruction about using articles in generic contexts and never mention the

meaning distinction (Ionin et al., 2011), the distinction between NPG and SLG provides interesting implications for article pedagogy.

In conclusion, there are clear links between Master's framework for article pedagogy (1997) and the instruction provided to elementary level learners in that the focus is on introducing *a/an* alongside lexical items. However, his recommendations for intermediate and advanced learners are not reflected in standard instruction materials. We found no evidence of instruction for intermediate level learners which applied the three approaches recommended by Master (1997). In addition, there are some instances of linguistically inaccurate terminology (such as *specific* being used to mean *definite*), and other key information about *genericity* that is missing. Although only five series of books were reviewed, these same issues appear to be widespread in most grammar instruction materials. The books we reviewed continue to teach articles to advanced learners and, at every level, appear to offer little opportunities for learners to explore the different uses. Our review shows that there is a divide between what theory suggests in terms of article acquisition and what is usually taught to English language learners.

Conclusion

In the two decades since Master's (1997) framework was published there has been a proliferation of research into the acquisition of articles, and the aim of the current paper is bridge the separate areas represented in theoretical and pedagogical publications. Research spearheaded by Ionin et al. (2004, 2009, 2011) into *specificity* and *genericity* has highlighted the gap between potential causes of errors and the knowledge provided to L2 learners of English (and their teachers). A review of textbooks highlights this divide, in the sense that *specificity* and *genericity*

types are ignored. Additionally, the term *specific* is sometimes presented as synonymous with *definite*, which is linguistically inaccurate and may lead learners to false overgeneralisations.

When applying the *specificity* and *genericity* features to article pedagogy there were mixed results. Just one study found a short-term improvement following instruction on *genericity* (Snape et al., 2016; Umeda et al., under review) with highly proficient learners who received a large quantity of instruction that, arguably, would not be replicable in real classrooms. Three other intervention studies (Snape and Yusa, 2013; Sabir, 2015; Lopez, under review) found no such benefit for instruction on *specificity*. It appears that instruction on *specificity* does not improve learners' article knowledge. In contrast, instruction on *genericity* was found to be effective in the short term (Snape et al., 2016; Umeda et al., under review) and more work on this area is warranted.

Despite this resurgence of interest in the acquisition and instruction of the English articles, what is still lacking is some clear measure of the effectiveness of Master's recommendations, and we suggest this as an interesting area for future research. What we conclude by reviewing work on article pedagogy in the last 20 years is that revival in the field is evident, and that a contribution to a successful well-acknowledged framework for teaching the English articles requires consideration of both theory and practice. We see the revival of interest in article pedagogy as promising, and hope that such work continues so that we can eventually uncover a reliable, empirically-tested framework for teaching the English articles that can be replicated in real instruction at all levels of proficiency.

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Article grouping by Definiteness

	+definite	-definite
+specific	the	a
-specific		

Article grouping by Specificity

	+definite	-definite
+specific	Le	
-specific		se

Figure 1. Article grouping cross-linguistically: two-article languages (from Ionin et al., 2009:341)

Table 1. Predictions for article choice in L2 English (a revised version of the table from Ionin et al., 2004:19)

	[+definite]: target <i>the</i>	[-definite]: target <i>a</i>
+specific	correct use of <i>the</i>	overuse of <i>the</i>
- specific	correct use of <i>the</i>	correct use of <i>a</i>