

TEACHING ENGLISH GENERIC NOUNS: THE EXPLORATION OF THE GENERIC IDEA IN ENGLISH AND INDONESIAN AND THE APPLICATIONS OF EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION IN CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Although the generic idea is often expressed in discourse, the acquisition of it is so slow among learners. Moreover, this idea is expressed through a highly complex system of the English language called the article system. As a result, learners tend to make errors when they attempt to convey the generic idea in their output. Since the Indonesian language has a different way to express the generic idea, Indonesian learners of English may be interfered by their first language when expressing this idea. Consequently, errors are inevitable. A thorough examination at how the generic idea is expressed in English and in Indonesian is perhaps the only way to understand this complexity. To help learners express the idea correctly and appropriately, teachers should give explicit instruction in forms of mini lesson and explicit corrective feedback (i.e. metalinguistic feedback). This article presents all the patterns to express the generic idea both in English and Indonesian, poses some pedagogical implications and discusses some useful approaches for English teachers in dealing with it.

Keywords: generic idea, article system, explicit instruction, explicit corrective feedback

INTRODUCTION

Nouns and noun phrases carry ideas. One of the ideas that often poses difficulties for learners is the generic idea. The generic idea is expressed

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when a noun in a sentence refers to members of a species or class in general. Generic reference is used to “refer to a whole class of entities, usually with regard to their typical characteristics or habitual activities” (Downing & Locke, 2006, p. 421). In English, this idea is expressed with or without the presence of an article. As discussed in a lot of literature (Diesing, 1992; Faurud, 1990; Hawkins, 1978, 1991; Lyons, 1999), the English article system is regarded as one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for nonnative speakers and one of the latest to be fully acquired.

Among five determinants (perceptual salience, semantic complexity, morphophonological regularity, syntactic category, and frequency) proposed by Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001) that could account for the acquisition order, two can explain the phenomena of article acquisition among English language learners. First, articles are not perceptually salient because they are often unstressed. It is difficult to detect whether the article used is *a/n*, *the*, or zero article. Second, articles are semantically complex. They can carry indefiniteness, definiteness, and genericness. Consequently, despite of the fact that the learner is exposed to articles a number of times, low on perceptual salience and semantic complexity hinder the article acquisition for the learner.

The acquisition can be further impeded if the teaching of the article system is delayed significantly as suggested by Whitman (1974). He argued that genericness is “not commonly found” and thereby teaching the article system that expresses the generic idea is “probably best delayed considerably”. If his suggestion is to be followed, then, English language learners are highly likely to experience difficulties in determining whether to use an article, the zero article, or a plural marker to express the generic idea. It becomes more difficult when the learner has to decide which article she has to use. And if she decided to use a definite article, she still has to decide one more thing: keeping the singular form or adding a plural marker to the noun. Consequently, articles can be the latest to acquire.

Although Whitman was confident that the generic usages were not easily found, this actually might not be the case. As shall be explained in this article, there are a lot of contexts where genericness occurs. Delaying teaching this part of the article system is probably not the best idea since beginning level learners may already encounter it and be asked to use a generic noun phrase in their output. This paper presents the discussion about how the generic idea is expressed in English and in Indonesian, explains the implications and the typical errors by Indonesian learners of English, and suggests some useful approaches to teach articles that convey genericness.

THE IDEA OF GENERICNESS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

English generic reference can be expressed in five ways: (1) by a singular preceded by a definite article; (2) by a plural preceded by a definite article; (3) by a plural with zero articles; (4) by a singular preceded by an indefinite article; and (5) by a mass noun with zero articles. An article cannot be added for the fifth pattern unless there is a shift from mass to count (Bergsnev, 1976).

At the surface, all four patterns share the same meaning and use, just as many reference grammars and ESL/EFL texts say (e.g. Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973; Azar, 1999). It is difficult to detect any significant difference between them. Consider the following examples (articles are bolded):

1. **The** Italian has a marvelous sense of humour.
2. **The** Italians have a marvelous sense of humour.
3. Italians have a marvelous sense of humour.
4. **An** Italian has a marvelous sense of humour.

However, research by Stern (1977) shows that the four generic patterns for countable nouns have very different distributions in discourse and that a great deal depends on whether generic statements are being made about humans, animals, plants, historical inventions/devices, or less significant inanimate objects and whether the context is formal or informal. The article *the* does not have any special meanings. However, their use in discourse makes them special because they create different meanings in the sentences. As Downing and Locke (2006, p. 421) point out, *the* is used when the noun is referred to as “a single undifferentiated whole class of entities”; while *a(n)* characterizes “any individual member of a class of entity as typical of the whole class.” For example, while *a* is not suitable in the sentence below because an individual Javan Rhino does not constitute a species, *the* can be used to represent the class as a whole:

The Javan Rhino is critically endangered.

**A Javan Rhino is critically endangered.*

Due to this complexity, it is advisable to take a closer look at each usage pattern and analyze it. By doing so, it is hoped that we can get a full picture of it and thus come up with some effective strategies to teach generic reference to our students.

The first pattern: a singular preceded by a definite article

The + singular noun

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1998, p. 180) state that this pattern represents general classes of humans, animals, body organs, and plants in general. It also describes generically countable inanimate objects that are presented as human inventions whose origins can be traced. However, this pattern is not applicable for simple inanimate objects to express the generic idea (e.g. **(*The smartphone assists people to connect to each other more easily)*).

Cowan (2008) argues this pattern is rarely found in daily conversations since it represents formal usage (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1998, p. 180). According to Swan (1980), this pattern is used to talk about science (e.g., *The tulip is a perennial, bulbous plant with showy flowers in the genus Tulipa.*) and technology (e.g. *Galileo claimed that he had invented the telescope.*). Master (1987) found that this pattern is also more likely to occur with noun subjects and to mark the topic of the essay, and in the first sentences of paragraphs and in introductions and conclusions of essays than elsewhere. However, this pattern also occurs in the informal context. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1998, p. 181) discovered the use of this pattern when we talk about singular body parts (e.g. *the heart, the liver, the stomach*), and some diseases (e.g. *the flu, the gout, the plague*). Swan (1980) also added it is used to talk about musical instruments (e.g. *I'd like to learn the guitar.*)

The second pattern: a plural preceded by a definite article

The + plural noun

Stern (1977) found that this pattern is the most limited of the four. It usually expresses generic facts about human groups that have a religious, political, national, linguistic, social, or occupation/professional basis. It refers to all the members of a particular group, for examples, *the Germans, the Americans, and the Indonesians*. However, if the adjectives end in a sibilant sound (having the sound of /s/, /ʃ/, or /tʃ /), no plural ending is added (e.g., *the English, the Chinese, and the Dutch*). This pattern is also used if we want to name groups of people by a nominalized attribute (e.g., *the poor, the persecuted, and the underprivileged*). As can be seen, group affiliation is the main characteristic of this pattern. Therefore, this pattern cannot be used to express a noun related to plants or animals that makes science-based class membership, not group affiliation, its criterion (**The roses are thorny.*).

However, only on rare occasions do plants or animals achieve group affiliation status to merit use of this pattern (e.g., *Save the Javan Rhinos*).

The third pattern: a plural with zero articles

☐ (plural noun)

When we talk about things in general, a plural noun is usually used with no article (Swan, 1980). It is the broadest generality because it talks about everything or everyone in the group. Plural count nouns with zero articles, like the fifth pattern (☐ + abstract noun), denote an indefinite amount of the entities (Cowan, 2008). When this pattern is used, a general classifying function seems to be signaled with 'no differentiation required' between any members of the group (Yule, 1998).

Therefore, as has been shown by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1998, p. 181), this pattern occurs more often in speaking than the first pattern. It can also be used in almost all discourse environments where pattern 1 occurs and to make generic statements about simple inanimate objects. They further explain that it is more concrete and frequent than pattern 1 in that it generalizes via pluralization rather than abstract classification. It can also be used in almost every context, ranging from semiformal to informal register. Some examples of this pattern are:

1. *Dogs are friendly animals.*
2. *I like roast potatoes.*
3. *Computers are the most helpful inventions for humans.*

The fourth pattern: a singular preceded by an indefinite article

☐ a/an (singular noun)

The focus of this pattern is on individual. It is also thought to be the most concrete and conversational way of expressing a generality. It implies any member of a class of objects (Yule, 1998). The meaning would be almost exactly the same if we use the third pattern (Swan, 1980). *A baby deer can stand as soon as it is born* and *baby deer can stand as soon as they are born* mean the same. What differs is the former focuses on the individual baby deer, while the latter focuses on all the baby deer. However, since it focuses on individual, it is not appropriate to be used in some semantic contexts where collectivity is expressed (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1998, p. 181).

In addition, Bergsnev (1976) pointed out that *a/n* is available to express a generality for abstract nouns deriving from verbs and adjectives:

1. *Decrease in ticket sales is frustrating.*
2. *A decrease in ticket sales is frustrating.*

We can choose whether to use this pattern or the fifth pattern. Some of other abstract nouns that Bergsnev noted being used both ways include: *acceleration, achievement, deceleration, decrease, demand, emphasis, equilibrium, expenditure, growth, priority, retardation, strain, and success*. And since written texts in the hard sciences are more likely to use the fifth pattern, whereas written texts in the humanities appear to favor the countable form use with a/an, Bergsnev argued that there were no hard-and-fast rules. However, he suggested some possible guidelines: The more concrete and informal the context, the better the countable form sounds with the indefinite article.

The following chart summarizes the above discussions.

Patterns	Contexts	Functions	Examples
the + singular noun	Musical instrument	Talking about ability	She can play the piano.
	Science	Describing something in a scientific text	The leopard is a large strong cat of southern Asia and Africa.
	Technology	Talking about inventors and inventions	Thomas Edison developed the phonograph.
the + plural noun	Human groups (nationalities, religions, etc.)	Classifying a human group	The Christians should promote social justice.
□ + plural noun	Generic statements	Making statements about something in general	Pandas eat bamboo shoots.
a/n + singular noun	Generic statements	Making statements about something in general with focus on individual	A baby kangaroo is carried in its mother's pouch.
□ + mass noun	Generic statements	Making statements about something in general, but the noun is uncountable	Rice is grown in many parts of Indonesia.

The fifth pattern: Zero article

☐ + Noncount Noun

The fifth pattern does not use the indefinite article since the noun is mass. When the definite article is used, the meaning is not generic anymore, but specific.

Common mistakes: * *It's a nice weather.*

* *A water is made of hydrogen and oxygen.*

* *The life is beautiful.*

THE IDEA OF GENERALITY IN THE INDONESIAN LANGUAGE

The idea of generality in the Indonesian language can be categorized into four patterns:

(1) a noun preceded by a classifier, (2) a singular noun standing on its own, and (3) a noun followed by a demonstrative. Thus, as can be seen, the Indonesian language does not have the article system. A close examination of each pattern may be useful to understand how Indonesian expresses genericness.

The first pattern: a noun preceded by a classifier

☐ A classifier with **se-** + a singular noun

This pattern is almost similar to the fourth pattern in English, a singular preceded by an indefinite article. In this pattern, the prefix **se-** implies 'one, and thus the focus of this pattern is on individual, not group collectivity. It also points to any member of a class of object. This emphasis on individual is what differs this pattern from that of the next pattern.

Seorang anak harus taat pada orang tuanya. A child has to obey his or her parents.

The second pattern: a singular noun without a precedent or a determiner

☐ + singular noun/mass noun + ☐

To talk about genericity, Indonesian mostly uses a singular noun without being preceded by a classifier or a determiner. This pattern talks about things in general and does not express any distinction among the members of the group. It can be used in any context, be it formal or informal, written or oral discourse, and casual or technical/scientific. Moreover, it can be put as a subject or an object. It should also be noted that this pattern can be used for both count nouns and mass nouns.

Noun reduplication is one way to make a noun plural in Indonesian. However, it is not a way to indicate plurality. Whereas in English plural nouns can express genericity, in Indonesia this is not possible. If one reduplicates a noun to mean something in general, it will sound unnatural and non-standard.

Children should obey their parents.

He sells books.

The rose is a bushy plant of the genus Rosa.

He likes drinking milk.

The third pattern: a noun followed by a demonstrative

A singular noun + itu

This pattern is similar in meaning to the first pattern (A classifier with **se-** + a singular noun). It refers to all members of the group (Sneddon et. al, 2010). While in the first pattern the noun has a suffix **se-**, this pattern does not. The addition in this pattern is a demonstrative **itu** (that). However, this word does not carry the basic sense of determiner. It does not show who or what is being referred to specifically. It does, however, point to a class of entity generally. It can also be proposed here that this pattern occurs more frequently in colloquial than in formal written texts.

The wolf is a wild animal.

Students should study diligently.

SOME PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The complex semantics and functions of the English articles that express the generic idea may present ambiguity for learners to interpret them despite their high frequency. For Indonesian learners of English, their significantly different ways to convey the generic idea in their first language may pose great difficulty and thereby can induce errors in their interlanguage (i.e. their English). This has been confirmed by Master's study (1997) that investigated ESL article use by ESL learners whose L1 does not include articles. His study shows they experienced difficulties to use articles correctly. In addition to the errors attributed to their first language, overgeneralizations of the rules also contribute to their errors. Overgeneralizations in this case can mean putting a less or not appropriate article in a given context. This may be due to their lack of knowledge of the uses and functions of each article. The next section of this paper discusses the typical errors made manifested from these two main causes (i.e. transfer learning and overgeneralizations).

Indeed, teachers should anticipate these errors. Learners should be guided and assisted to notice this grammatical feature (Schmidt, 2001). Explicit instruction is deemed necessary for Indonesian learners if they want to be able to use the article system correctly to mean generically. Even so, it may take time for them to fully acquire it. Along the way, the learner may still repeatedly make errors as he tries out his knowledge about it. The implication of this is that the errors should be responded in a timely and aptly manner. Error corrective feedback can either add to their existing knowledge about the use of generic idea if they have not learnt about it or reinforce their working knowledge about it. Some ways to give corrective feedback are suggested after the discussion of the typical errors.

TYPICAL ERRORS MADE BY INDONESIAN LEARNERS

There are four most common errors, among others pointed by Swan and Smith (2001), produced by Indonesian learners of English: dropping the plural marker *-s*, overusing the plural marker *-s*, overusing the article, and misusing the definite article.

The first type of error, dropping the plural marker *-s*, is probably the most recurrent one. Since in Indonesian the generic idea is commonly expressed through a single noun (see pattern 2), learners might find it difficult to get used to marking the noun with the morpheme *-s* to indicate plurality and to convey genericity. Some common errors are:

**I like banana.*

**Rose is thorny.*

**They don't sell car.*

The second type of error, overusing the plural marker *-s*, is adding the plural marker *-s* to an abstract noun. This happens mostly because the learner does not know that the noun is essentially a mass noun in English. However, it can be argued that this only occurs in some abstract nouns because a lot of abstract nouns in Indonesia are the same in English (e.g., water, hair, sand, air, and sugar) and cannot be made into plural. Thus, typical errors are like these:

**Do you have candies?*

**They sell cakes.*

The third type of error, overusing the article, is overgeneralizing the rules of article usage. Since learners are not aware that there are some special 'cases where only one kind of article is possible to use, they use the

other kind of article which is inappropriate in the given context. Therefore, the typical errors are as follows:

**I have a good news for you.*

**Felicia is playing a guitar.*

**Nowadays it is normal to see people bring the tablet anywhere they go.*

The fourth type of error, misusing the definite article, is largely due to the L1 interference. As pointed out by Swan and Smith (2001), the demonstrative **itu** (that) can overlap in function with the determiner (the) and thus it leads learners to use the definite article inappropriately to indicate genericness. In addition, the definite article could also be incorrectly used to convey the generic idea in a mass noun. Typical errors are like these:

**The student should study diligently.*

**The cellphone is an important communication device.*

**The rice is grown in Indonesia.*

In a nutshell, overgeneralization, L1 interference, and the lack of knowledge are attributed to the errors. As been discussed in the previous section, these errors should be anticipated and treated so that learners can avoid making such errors in the future and thus help them fully acquire this grammar structure. To this issue now we are turning.

SOME PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS: IMPLEMENTING AND ENHANCING EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION AND CORRECTIVE FEEDBACK

As has been argued previously, although the presence of articles in English is undoubtedly ubiquitous, unfortunately, learners are not always successful to learn the patterns and uses implicitly. Since the article system is semantically complex and not perceptually salient, having learners internalize the underlying patterns and uses through the exposure of the article usage without their awareness and attention being explicitly focused on it seems very likely to be ineffective. By taking the learning context (EFL) into consideration, it is beneficial for Indonesian learners to receive explicit instruction about how to express the generic idea in English. Learners need to receive explicit instruction that involves ‘some sort of rule being thought about during the learning process’ (DeKeyser, 1995). Learners should develop metalinguistic awareness of all the patterns and uses of the article system that convey the generic idea. Ellis et al. (2009, p.18) argue that

explicit instruction can result in both explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge. These two kinds of knowledge are necessary for learners as they recognize, internalize and use the complex English article system that expresses genericness.

Considering that if the ELT textbooks used do not exclusively discuss this particular grammar point, explicit instruction may have to take a different form. One way to do this is by raising learners' consciousness of the generic noun pattern in the structure they are learning. Teachers should direct their students' attention to the pattern and overtly tell the learners about the usage. For example, if the lesson is about musical instruments and the grammar focus is ability (e.g., *I can play the piano.*), the teacher should also remind the students to always use the first pattern (the + singular noun) in that context and briefly tell them that the noun in the pattern means the same in general. When teaching uncountable nouns, the teacher can also explain that if the students want to mean the noncount generically (e.g. *That shop doesn't sell sugar.*), they cannot add any article before the noun. When teaching conversation, the teacher should raise the learners' attention to the presence of the indefinite article that precedes a generic noun focusing on an individual (e.g. "*Jonas, don't be lazy. A student should study hard.*"). When the teacher uses a scientific text in class and he or she encounters the presence of the definite article preceding a generic noun (e.g. *The panda is a bear native to south central China.*), the teacher can explain this pattern. To sum up, every time one of the patterns occurs, teachers should give a mini lesson about the use and occurrence of the pattern. The chart 1. might be helpful to help teachers see the occurrences of each pattern and thus know when to give a brief instruction of it.

In addition to providing a mini lesson, teachers should also give corrective feedback whenever an error occurs. In the previous section we have seen some typical errors in the Indonesian learners' interlanguage. These errors are due to at least two reasons. First, they have no knowledge yet about the rule and usage of the grammar point. They try and test out their hypothesis about how to express meaning in English, but it turns out that their hypothesis is not correct. They are not aware of the error they have just made and have no clue to correct it. Second, they have learnt about the grammar point, but not yet fully acquired it. In other words, they know about the rule and probably could tell you back about it if asked, however, they are still prone to making errors as they have not fully internalized the target structure.

For the two reasons above, it is suggested to provide metalinguistic feedback in responding to the errors the teacher encounters. Metalinguistic feedback is a type of error corrective feedback that offers the learner with

comments about language. This can be done in two ways: providing a statement or a question about the correctness of an utterance. If the learner still has no knowledge about the rule, the teacher could provide metalinguistic explanation about the target structure. For example,

Student: Candies are sweet.

Teacher: Candy is uncountable.

If the learner already knows the rule but still has not yet mastered using it, the teacher could ask a question related to the target structure. For example,

Student: I like eating apple.

Teacher: Can you correct apple?

Providing a recast, a reformulation of the learner's erroneous utterance, may not be as effective as giving metalinguistic feedback because the learner may perceive it as a confirmation of the learner's utterance. Research also has shown that metalinguistic feedback promotes explicit learning (e.g., Ellis et al., 2009).

However, it should be noted that since the contexts and the functions that determine the pattern, the teacher should be careful when providing feedback. Signaling the learner about an error he made because it is inappropriate in that context but generally fine in terms of meaning and does not break any linguistic rules can certainly disrupt the flow of communication and confuse the learner. Therefore, a simple indication, such as only telling the learner whether to supply the definite article, indefinite article or a plural marker, may suffice. Certainly, corrective feedback should not be necessary if the learner uses a pattern that is less appropriate in the context but not wrong at all, for example,

1. *The Americans are so proud of their culture* vs. *Americans are so proud of their culture.*
2. *A nurse is someone who takes care of the sick* vs. *Nurses are people who take care of the sick.*

Nevertheless, if the error breaks a restricted linguistic rule or does not convey the generic idea, the teacher may extend the explanation a little bit. That is, after telling the learner what should be supplied, the teacher can give a short explanation about the rule. For example:

1. *Student: *The e-readers are now allowed during flight.*
Teacher: Omit the. Use only the plural form to convey something in general. OR Omit the. Use the + plural only to classify a human group.
2. *Student: *Who invented space crafts?*
Teacher: Not space crafts. Use the without the plural marker -s when talking about inventions.

See the chart to know what kind of comments teachers could give to respond to their learners' errors.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the English language uses the article system to mean generically. The article system is realized in five different patterns. This complexity is problematic for all learners in general and Indonesian learners specifically because the Indonesian language does not have the article system. Therefore, understanding in which context each pattern occurs may help teachers explain this structure to their students. Explicit instruction in the form of mini lesson is deemed as necessary so that learners can notice the patterns. Also, explicit corrective feedback can be beneficial to help learners fully master using all the patterns correctly.

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