Abstract
One of the most difficult grammatical areas facing Thai learners of English is the use of the English articles: *the*, *a/an*, and *Ø*. The difficulty in article usage can be said to arise from the complexity of the article system itself. Such complexity stems from the multiple concepts underlying English noun phrases—namely, (1) what sense the speaker has of the hearer’s knowledge about the entity in question (definite vs. indefinite); (2) whether the speaker is referring to an entity in a specific place and time, or generically to all such entities at any place or time (specific vs. generic); and (3) whether the noun being referred to is a discrete item or mass (count vs. mass). Articles have been recognized by linguists to be a fundamental element that links the sentence to the situation of communication (Lyons, 1980); that is, one has to take into account pragmatic considerations in order to determine which article to use. This paper attempts to review linguistic theories of definite and indefinite descriptions. Theoretical and pedagogical implications are also provided in the final sections.

Key Words: Definite article, Indefinite articles, Specificity, Non-specificity
Introduction

Usage of English articles has been one of the many challenging areas for both EFL teachers and learners. Although article usage entails the use of seemingly simple morphemes the, a/an, and 0, teaching and learning how to employ these morphemes is not as simple as it might appear. Why is the English article system so difficult for EFL learners to acquire? One possible answer would be the complexity of the English article system itself. The article system stacks multiple functions onto a single morpheme, which contributes a considerable burden for the learner who generally looks for a one-form-one-function correspondence in navigating the language until the advanced stages of acquisition (Master, 2002:332). Factors affecting the choice of article within the multiple functions are based on a complex mix of concepts such as: (1) definiteness, i.e., definite vs. indefinite; (2) countability, i.e., count vs. mass; (3) number, i.e., singular vs. plural; and (4) specificity, i.e., specific vs. non-specific/generic. These concepts are closely related in terms of article use. The notion of definiteness, though introduced very early in traditional grammar books, tends to be very complicated to many EFL learners. Definite/Indefinite descriptions are the constructs that have been extensively studied by linguists, psychologists, and computational linguists (e.g. Russell, 1905; Christoperhson, 1939; Hawkins, 1978; Poesio & Vieira, 1998; Master, 1988; 1990; 2002). The author’s starting point is, therefore, to discuss definite and indefinite descriptions by exploring theories proposed by several linguists and language educators. The hope is that the understanding gained from this paper may be used as guidelines for teachers to tailor their courses to help EFL learners to acquire the concepts and usage of definite and indefinite articles.

In the following sections, theories of definite descriptions will be discussed, followed by theories of indefinite descriptions. Based on the theories presented, theoretical and pedagogical implications are accordingly offered.

Linguistic Theories of Definite Descriptions

The distinction between definite and indefinite noun phrases (NPs) has been described in terms of ‘the sense the speakerwriter has of the hearerreader’s knowledge about the topic’ (Master, 2002); in other words, whether the hearer can identify a particular object that the NP in question is referring to (Kearns, 2000). According to Quirk et al. (1985), who incorporate the insights of Hawkins (1978), definite noun phrases refer to something which can be identified uniquely in the contextual or general knowledge shared by speaker and hearer. There are several terms used by linguists to define the property of definite descriptions; for example, uniqueness (Russell 1905; Neale 1990), familiarity (Christopherhson 1939; Hawkins 1978; Prince 1981), inclusiveness (Hawkins, 1991), and location (Hawkins, 1978; Lyons, 1980). Among these theories, the work of Hawkins (1978) on definite description uses has been referred to in many research studies. Hawkins (1978) develops and extends Christopherhson’s (1939) list of definite descriptions and identifies the following classes or uses:
(a) Anaphoric Uses. These are definite descriptions that co-specify with a discourse entity already introduced in the discourse or its antecedent in a text. The definite description may use the same head as its antecedent, or any other words capable of indicating the same antecedent (e.g. a synonym, a hyponym, etc).

(1) a. Bill was working at a lathe...Suddenly the lathe stopped.
    b. Bill was working at a lathe...Suddenly the machine stopped.
    c. Fred traveled to Munich...The journey was long and tiring.

(Lyons, 1980:84)

(b) Immediate Situation Uses. These are definite descriptions which refer to an object in the situation of utterance. The referent may be visible, or its presence may be known to (or inferred by) both the speaker and hearer. The visible situation use occurs when the object referred to is in the field of vision to both the speaker and hearer, as in:

(2) a. Pass me the bucket.
    b. Close the door.
    c. Put out the light.

(Lyons, 1980:91)

Definite descriptions can also be used when a referent is a constituent of the immediate situation in which the use of the definite description is located, without necessarily being visible. Hawkins classifies those definite descriptions as immediate situation uses, as in:

(3) a. Don’t feed the pony.
    b. Beware of the dog.

(Lyons, 1980:84)

(c) Larger Situation Uses. A larger situation set of entities is characterized by the fact that even though a NP represents a first-mention of some object, its reference can be uniquely identified based on the shared knowledge between the speaker and hearer, which does not derive from the immediate situation. These uses of definite descriptions may rely on the specific knowledge shared among members of the same community or general speaker-hearer knowledge in the larger situation. An example of specific knowledge about the larger situation can be the case in which the speaker and the hearer, who are both inhabitants of Halifax, know that the town has a gibbet at the top of Gibbet Street, as in:

(4) The Gibbet no longer stands.

(Hawkins, 1978:119)

Definite descriptions for larger situation uses may rely on general knowledge that members of the same nation can talk about the Queen, the Prime Minister, or the navy using a first-mention the, as in:

(5) The prime minister has just resigned.

(Hawkins, 1978:116)

(d) Associative Anaphoric Uses. These are definite descriptions that exploit the shared knowledge of the relations between certain objects (the triggers) and their components or attributes (the associates). Whereas in larger situation uses, the trigger is the
situation itself, in the associative anaphoric use the trigger is a NP introduced in the discourse. For example, following a first-mention of a book or a subsequent mention of the book in the discourse, definite descriptions are allowed for reference of the associative anaphoric NPs such as the author, the content, or the pages, as shown in (6).

(6) I am reading a book about Italian history. The author claims that Ludovico il Moro wasn't a bad ruler. The content is generally interesting.

(Poesio & Vieira, 1998:187)

(c) Unfamiliar Uses. These are definite descriptions that are not anaphoric and are not associates of some trigger in the previous discourse. In other words, these definite descriptions do not rely on information about the situation of utterance. Hawkins (1978) classifies them according to their syntactic and lexical properties, as follows:

- **NP Complements.** These are definite descriptions which are characterized by the presence of a complement to the head noun.
  
  (a) Bill is amazed by the fact that there is so much life on earth.
  
  (b) I remember the time when I was a little boy. (Hawkins, 1978:140)

- **Nominal Modifiers.** Another form of unfamiliar definite descriptions is the presence of a nominal modifier that refers to the class to which the head noun belongs.
  
  (a) The number seven is my lucky number.
  
  (b) I don't like the color red. (Hawkins, 1978:146-7)

- **Referent-Establishing Relative Clauses.** A relative clause may establish a referent for the hearer without a previous mention.
  
  (a) The woman he went out with last night was nasty to him.
  
  (b) Will you get me the box (that is) over there in the far left-hand corner? (Hawkins, 1978:135-6)

- **Associative Relationships between Two Objects.** These are the cases when modifiers of the head noun specify the set of objects with which the referent of the definite description is associated.
  
  (a) I remember the beginning of the war very well...
  
  (b) There was a funny story on the front page of the Guardian this morning. (Hawkins, 1978:139)

- **Unexplanatory Modifiers.** Hawkins lists a small number of modifiers that do not fall into the above categories, but that require the use of the.
  
  (a) My wife and I share the same secrets.
  
  (b) The first person to sail to America was an Icelander. (Hawkins, 1978:148)

From the above descriptive list, one feature that may be identified as the defining property of definite descriptions is 'uniqueness'. Such a term is motivated by several uses of definite descriptions, particularly larger situation uses such as the pope,
the sun, the universe and by some cases of unexplanatory modifier use, such as the only person, the first man, the same thing.

Another line of research is based on the observation that many of the uses of definite descriptions listed by Hawkins have one property in common: the knowledge that the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the hearer at the time of the utterance. Simply put, the speaker (or writer) is making some assumptions about what the hearer (or reader) already knows and is able to identify the referent of the definite description. Attempts at making this intuition more precise include Christophersen's (1939) 'familiarity' theory, Chafe's (1976) 'givenness', Bolinger's (1977) 'knownness', Hawkins's (1978) 'location theory', and Prince's (1981) 'hearer-new/hearer-old information'.

Prince (1981) expands the category of discourse-old information, or givenness, which she claims includes only entities mentioned in the previous discourse. She criticizes as too simplistic the binary distinction between given and new discourse entities that is at the basis of most previous work on familiarity, and proposes a more detailed taxonomy of 'givenness', which she refers to as 'assumed familiarity'. According to Prince, one factor affecting the choice of a noun phrase is whether a discourse entity is old or new with respect to the hearer's knowledge. A speaker will use a definite description when he/she assumes that the hearer already knows the entity that the speaker is referring to. For example,

Nine hundred people attended the Institute. (Poesio & Vieira, 1998:190)

Prince asserts that although the category of definite NPs usually correlates well with conveyors of hearer-old information, the correlation is not always perfect. The following are examples that definite NPs are used to introduce entities not assumed known to the hearer:

There was the usual crowd at the beach.
There were the same people at both conferences. (Abbott, 2004:132)

For Prince, discourse-new is distinct from hearer-new. Discourse entities can be new or old with respect to the discourse model. However, for an entity, being discourse-old entails being hearer-old, but not vice-versa. For example,

(a) I need to call a man in California. (discourse-new/hearer-new)
(b) I need to call a man in California. The man sent me this card. (discourse-old/hearer-old)
(c) I need to call the Institute. (discourse-new/hearer-old)
(d) Pass me the salt. (discourse-new/hearer-old)

In Prince's theory, the notion of familiarity is divided into: familiarity with respect to the discourse, and familiarity with respect to the hearer. Either type of familiarity can license the use of definite descriptions: Hawkins's anaphoric uses are cases of noun phrases referring to discourse-old discourse entities as in (b), whereas,
Hawkins's larger situation and immediate situation uses are cases of noun phrases referring to discourse-new, hearer-old entities as in (c) and (d).

The uses of definite descriptions that Hawkins called associative anaphoric, such as a book ... the author, the content, etc., are not discourse-old or even hearer-old, but they are not entirely new, either. Hawkins pointed out that the hearer is assumed to be capable of inferring the existence of these associative anaphoric NPs. Prince called these discourse entities *inferables*, and she expanded this notion to cover another category for noun phrases that are like inferables, but whose connection with previous hearer's knowledge is specified as part of the noun phrase itself. She referred to this category as 'containing inferables'. These discourse entities, as in the following example, tend to relate Hawkins's unfamiliar uses—NP complements, and associative relationships between two objects—to this category.

*The door of the Bastille was painted purple.* (Poesio & Vieira, 1998:190)

Taken together, as definite descriptions rely heavily on pragmatic considerations, the concept tends to be so complex that no one classification scheme covers all definite interpretations. The classification process may rely on more than just lexical cues; the writer/speaker may make assumptions about what the reader/hearer already knows or about the reader/hearer's ability to use syntactic or other cues to classify a definite description.

Linguistic Theories of Indefinite Descriptions

From the explanations and discussions concerning the possible uses of the definite article, it might be assumed that the purpose of an indefinite article, in contrast, is to indicate to the hearer that the object(s) referred to does not exist in any of the speaker-hearer shared sets and that the hearer would simply have to accept that the object referred to by a dog or a horse is merely one member of an infinite class of such objects. Quirk et al. (1985) regard the indefinite article as the unmarked partner, being used (with countable nouns) when the conditions for using the definite article do not pertain.

According to Hawkins (1978), the initial theory that the objects referred to by indefinite descriptions do not exist in the speaker-hearer shared sets is not always correct. For example, if someone says *a member of parliament has resigned*, the hearer could locate the referent in the larger situation set the same way he locates the Prime Minister. Similarly, *pass me a bucket* could refer to one of the buckets in the immediate situation of utterance. Likewise, after mentioning a book, a speaker could go on to say that a page fell out (of that book). Thus, the referents of indefinite descriptions can be located in larger situation sets, immediate situation sets, and association sets in a similar fashion as the referents of definite descriptions. Hawkins claims that indefinites in fact can, on some occasions, refer back to objects previously introduced—i.e. to members of the previous discourse set as in:
(1) Some students were standing outside the factory gate. Bill kept his eye on them. After a little while a student came up to him and asked him his name. (1978:174)

Notice, however, that a student in (1) may refer back to one of the students earlier mentioned, but equally it may not. Indefinites can thus be vague with respect to whether they are or are not genuine associates of some trigger. In general, it is the context which seems to determine how an indefinite reference is understood. Indefinite referents may be locatable in these shared sets, but whether they are or not depends on the pragmatics of the remainder of the sentence. For Hawkins, it seems that the indefinite articles are quite neutral to the appropriate conditions of the. In other words, with regard to uniqueness, sentences with a are logically neutral to the uniqueness entailment of corresponding sentences with the. Hawkins (1978:203) gives examples of the ambiguities and non-ambiguities of facts such as the following:

(2) Bill didn’t eat a large cake. [ambiguous]
(3) Bill didn’t eat the large cake. [not ambiguous]
(4) Bill didn’t eat that large cake. [not ambiguous]
(5) Minna wants to meet a Norwegian. [ambiguous]
(6) Minna wants to meet the Norwegian. [not ambiguous]
(7) Minna wants to meet that Norwegian. [not ambiguous]

From the above examples, the specific/non-specific ambiguity is limited only to indefinites. The explanation for this is pragmatic and involves the hearer orientation. With definites and demonstratives the hearer is pragmatically presupposed to have a form of control or knowledge of the objects referred to in a way that he is not with indefinites. For example, by using the in (3) or that in (4), the speaker is pragmatically indicating to his hearer precisely that the latter knows that there is a cake, and which cake it is that is being referred to. But by using a as in (2), the speaker is indicating to the hearer that the existence and identity of the object referred to does not fall under their shared experience in such a way that a definite article could be used. Specific/non-specific specification is one important issue in the interpretation of indefinite descriptions; therefore, the next section will briefly review specificity and non-specificity as properties of indefinite noun phrases.

(a) Specificity

The specific sense of indefinite descriptions is found in such examples as:

(8) A dog bit me last night.
(9) John is marrying an heiress. (Werth, 1980:254)

The essential semantic feature of the specific sense is that it presupposes existence of its referent. Thus, sentences (8) and (9) are paraphrasable with there BE:

(10) There was a dog (which) bit me last night.
(11) There is an heiress (who) John is marrying. (Werth, 1980:255)
There-insertion sentences as in (10) and (11) are called existential sentences. Abbott (2004) noted the terms ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ for NPs. Weak NPs are those with determiners like a/an, some, several, many, and the ‘number determiners’ (one, two, three, etc.), as in sentences (8) and (9). Weak NPs can easily fit in existential sentences, as in (10) and (11). Strong NPs, on the contrary, are those traditionally called definite—i.e. definite descriptions, demonstratives, possessives, pronouns, and NPs determined by universal quantifiers (all, every, each) or by most. These NPs do not fit easily in existential sentences. Thus, the strong NP the dog, as shown in (12), is not substitutable for the existential context in sentence (10):

(12) *There was the dog (which) bit me last night.

Kearns (2000:120) also gives examples of specific/non-specific distinction of indefinite descriptions in:

(13) Mary wants to buy a BMW. She is negotiating with the owner.
(14) Mary wants to buy a BMW. She will look for one at the Used Car Mart downtown.

A specific reading in (13) appears where a reported thought is directed towards a particular individual the speaker refers to. A BMW is specific because it refers to a specific car which exists and which Mary wants to buy. Thus, using there BE as in: There is a BMW that Mary wants to buy, and she is negotiating with the owner, sounds normal. A nonspecific reading, on the other hand, appears where a reported thought is directed towards a kind or a class of objects and no particular individual is referred to. In (14), as opposed to (13), Mary has no particular BMW in mind and in fact there may or may not be such an entity. Thus, using an existential sentence in this situation is not acceptable: ?There is a BMW that Mary wants to buy, and she will look for one at the Used Car Mart downtown.

(b) Non-specificity

While the specific interpretation describes something about who or what the speaker is referring to, the non-specific interpretation describes something about the kind of person or thing referred to by the speaker. Thus, when saying:

(15) Melanie is looking for a millionaire;  
(Werth, 1980:257)

the speaker is not referring to any millionaire in particular. The sentence will not be interpreted as: ?There is a millionaire who Melanie is looking for.

In fact, there may be cases where definite NPs are non-specific:

(16) The first man to set foot on Mars will be a scientist.  
(17) The winner will receive a holiday for four in Scunthorpe.

(Werth, 1980:257)
The most important distinction between the specific and non-specific senses is the presupposition of existence, which the latter cannot claim. Such a distinction has been illustrated in Werth’s examples (1980:257) as in:

(18) Pass me a sandwich.  [specific]
(19) Make me a sandwich.  [non-specific]

Sentence (18) requests an activity which involves one of a number of existing sandwiches, whereas sentence (19) requests an activity which will bring a sandwich into existence.

From the above discussion, ‘hearer’s assumed knowledge’ of the referent is a primary factor in determining the definite/indefinite distinction, whereas ‘existence’ is important when the specific/non-specific distinction is concerned in indefinite NPs. Although there are pragmatically-different interpretations with regard to specific/non-specific distinction of indefinite descriptions, it is notable that English does not mark nouns/noun phrases for specificity. Specific and non-specific singular NPs are primarily marked with a or an. Moreover, the non-specific interpretation tends to describe an object in a generic sense (i.e. no particular individual is being referred to). Thus, the non-specific sense of indefinite descriptions may indeed cover both non-referential indefinite-a/an and generic-a/an.

So far, we have seen that the nature of the contrast between the and a/an centers on the logical property of uniqueness with respect to the speaker-hearer shared knowledge, and the interpretations are carried in conversational implicatures exhibited pragmatically in language use. These pragmatically-oriented aspects can only be achieved in the teaching/learning process through the introduction of the concepts within a real model of language use in the discourse of communication. Based on the theoretical review presented, the following implications can be offered.

Theoretical Implications

Much research on article acquisition has provided models for the analysis of English NP contexts for proper article use. One major line of research that classifies noun phrases based on the hearer’s knowledge is Bickerton’s (1981) two universals of NP reference: (1) a discourse universal (represented by a binary feature [±HK], which stands for ‘hearer known’ or ‘assumed known to the hearer’); and (2) a semantic universal (represented by a binary feature [±SR], which stands for ‘specific referent’). [±HK] is when the speaker assumes whether the hearer has presupposed knowledge of the referent of a NP in question, whereas [±SR] is whether an entity is specific or non-specific to the speaker. The semantic and discourse universal model holds that each NP in discourse should belong to one of the 4 combinations of basic NP contexts denoted by these 2 binary features of referentiality. Huebner (1979, 1983) adopted Bickerton’s model and called the four basic NP contexts as “semantic types”.
These four types permit us to assign a "semantic function" to each of the NP in discourse, which in turn determines article use.

Type 1, [+HK -SR] marks generic NPs. These nouns are marked with *the*, *a/an*, or *Ø*.

Type 2, [+HK +SR] includes nouns classified as referential definites (i.e., unique, previously mentioned, physically present referents, or referents assumed common knowledge), and are marked with *the*.

Type 3, [-HK +SR] NPs are referential indefinites, which include first-mention NPs whose referent is identifiable to the speaker but not to the listener, or NPs following existential *has/have or there is/are*. These nouns are marked with *a/an* or *Ø*.

Type 4, [-HK -SR] classifies nouns as nonreferentials, which are nonspecific for both the speaker and the hearer. These nouns are marked with *a/an* or *Ø*.

**Figure 1:** Bickerton’s Semantic Wheel for Noun Phrase Reference (Huebner, 1983)

From the theories and usage of the English articles presented thus far, a few pedagogical implications can be offered for teaching English articles to EFL students, as will be discussed below.

**Pedagogical Implications**

(1) Due to the fact that articles are deeply context-dependent, the use of articles should be introduced through comprehension tasks using contextualized texts to provide language in discourse. As Bickerton’s model in Figure 1 illustrates, the distinction in the use of the definite article *the* in Type 2 and the indefinite articles *a/an*, and *Ø* in Types 3 and 4 lies in the contrast between [+HK] and [-HK], which requires pragmatic consideration in determining a proper article. This means that greater attention should be given to the pragmatic domain when teaching English articles.

(2) A clear conceptual explanation with regard to the notions of HK and SR should be provided so that students will have a clear understanding of pragmatic and semantic functions of the English articles. The students’ lack of a clear understanding of the two concepts is likely to be a major source for misidentification of HK, which is the
primary requirement for determining the use of the. From the experience of the author as an EFL teacher, many students tend to associate the term 'specific' with the condition that calls for the use of the definite article. Such a misunderstanding may result from the fact that the use of terms such as 'specific', 'non-specific, and so-forth can be easily misleading. As one can see from the theoretical review presented in this paper, it is not 'specificity' that makes the NP definite, but the 'hearer's knowledge' of the referent that does. This conceptual misunderstanding that the two notions are often mixed up seems to be a major reason for the students' inability to use English articles properly. Thus, in order to avoid such conceptual misunderstanding, the teacher should introduce the notion of 'hearer's knowledge' [±HK] as the primary requirement for determining whether to use the definite or indefinite article. The term 'specific' and 'non-specific' should only be associated with the use of indefinite articles a/an and 0. While a specific NP calls for the indefinite article in the sense that the speaker knows its existence in a specific place and time, a non-specific NP describes something about the kind of person or thing of which its existence is not presupposed at any place or time.

(3) The third implication is that [±HK] should be introduced prior to countability and number. This is because definiteness is neutral to countability and number. A noun always takes the when it is used in a definite sense, no matter whether it is [+count] or [-count], [+sing] or [-sing]. This implies that the definite article the tends to be the most unmarked article, for it can be used with almost all nouns in English. Besides, it requires only the detection of [±HK], whereas a/an, and 0 require a more complex selective process in properly detecting countability and number in addition to [±HK] and [±SR]. The acquisition of grammatical morphemes should proceed from unmarked items to more marked ones. Once learners internalize the use of the, they tend to be readier for a/an, and 0.

Based on the implications discussed above, four crucial characteristics of the English article system that should be introduced to EFL classes are:
1. Hearer's knowledge, i.e. [±HK]
2. Countability, i.e. [±count]
3. Number, i.e. [±sing]
4. Generic reference

These elements are recommended to be introduced in the following order.
1. The first stage is to decide whether a noun is definite (i.e. [+HK]) or non-definite (i.e. [-HK]). If it is [+HK], the noun requires the; if [-HK], it requires either a/an or 0. To uncover the sense in which a noun is used, the teacher may refer to a list of definite descriptions and provide ample examples of contexts for the definite article the (e.g. Hawkins' theory: previously-mentioned, immediate situation, larger situation, assumed common knowledge, and so forth).
II. When the NP is judged as non-definite (i.e. [-HK]), the feature [±count] will be applied. Determining the use of the indefinite articles a/an, and the φ requires a more complex selective process. One may imagine that the concept of countability itself is highly complicated. This is probably because most English nouns can be used as count or non-count depending on the speaker's way of expressing the entity as denoting divisibility or indivisibility. Teachers need to discuss the notion of countability and give examples of how most nouns can alternate between count and mass in actual language use. With the introduction of [±count] at the second stage, a distinction between a/an and φ can now be drawn. If a given NP is used in a [-count] sense, the NP takes φ; if [+count], it takes either a/an or φ depending on the third characteristic, which is number.

III. In the third stage, the students will be explained that a [+count] noun can be in either a 'singular' or 'plural' form. A singular count noun takes a/an; a plural count noun takes φ. At this stage, teachers can also introduce the phono-syntactic rule that applies for the distinction between a and an as well as the semantico-syntactic rules regarding singular and plural nouns. The concept of the zero article φ is more abstract and more difficult to grasp. The use of the zero article may be presented later in the sequence. Toward the end of this stage, teachers may illustrate the subtle difference in meanings between the indefinite descriptions and generic statements using a/an and φ. As a matter of fact, interpretations of indefinite and generic references are difficult to distinguish, for both seem to be non-definite. Such a distinction may be handled later in advanced EFL classes, particularly when generic references are essential for academic writing in advanced courses. As the generic concept is another complicated one, it may be dealt with after all other aspects of the article system have been thoroughly practiced.

The following illustrates how the notions [±HK] can be introduced.

Yesterday evening (1) a [-HK] fire badly damaged the Grand Hotel in San Bernardino. (2) φ [-HK] (count plural) firefighters worked very hard to stop (3) the [+HK] fire. The police believed it was started deliberately. They found (4) an [-HK] empty gasoline can in one of (5) the [+HK] hotel elevators. (6) φ [-HK] (non-count) broken glass injured a number of the guests who were enjoying (7) a [-HK] party at (8) the [+HK] hotel. (9) A [-HK] German woman cut her arm badly. There was (10) φ [-HK] (non-count) blood everywhere, and she had to be rushed to the hospital in (11) a [-HK] police car. Police interviewed (12) the [+HK] guests and hotel staff to find out what had happened. (13) A [-HK] man told our reporter that he saw (14) φ [-HK] (count plural) suspicious-looking men enter the elevator. He gave (15) φ [-HK] (count plural) detailed descriptions to the police. So far, (16) the [+HK] hotel management has refused to comment on (17) the [+HK] situation.
From the above illustration, one can see that the suggested model simply introduces the distinction between the discourse feature [±HK], which distinguishes the use of the definite article the from the indefinite articles a/an and 0. [±HK] NPs can all take the. For indefinite references, countability and number are incorporated to distinguish between the articles a/an and 0. As learners start to fully understand how articles are used in the definite and indefinite senses, then instruction can be given about the subtle difference between the three generic articles: the, a/an and 0. A comparison can also be drawn between generic interpretations and the general notions of definiteness and indefiniteness that learners have learned in earlier lessons. Examples of generic/non-specific uses are shown below.

(1) The (generic) lion is one of several of (2) the [±HK] large cats that are graceful but powerful killers. (3) The (non-specific/generic) lions gather in groups. Unlike most cat species, (4) a (non-specific/generic) male lion is different from (5) a (non-specific/generic) lioness. His head is much larger than that of (6) a (non-specific/generic) female lion. When (7) a (non-specific) lion cub is born, it feeds on its mother's milk for (8) the [±HK] first three months. Then it begins to eat meat brought to it by its parent. By eighteen months it is able to hunt for itself. (9) The (generic) lioness does most of the hunting. She stalks (10) an (non-specific) animal by crawling on her belly. Then she makes (11) a (non-specific) sudden short rush, leaping on (12) the [±HK] prey to bring it down with her paw.


The following examples illustrate conditions that call for definite and indefinite NPs, countability and number, which the teacher can explain using contextualized texts containing similar situations.

(1) Definite – the [±HK] (countability and number are neutralized)

Non-count: Pass me the beer. (Immediate situation)

Count singular: Ask the guy over there. (Physically present)
The moon will be full tomorrow. (Unique referent)
I'm reading a book. The content is interesting. (Associative use)
The air in this city is not very clean. (Associative relationships)
The news spread like wildfire. (Extended reference)

Count plural: Feed the cats before you leave. (Shared knowledge)
(2) Indefinite - *a/an*, and Ø [-HK] (incorporation of Type 3 and Type 4)

**Non-count:** There is Ø beer in the glass.
I drink Ø milk every day.
Ø Electricity is a wonderful helper in the home.

**Count singular:** Dad gave me a cat.
You’d better see a doctor.
Our house has a garage.
He used to be a lawyer.
I guess I should buy a new car.
Do you have a pencil?

**Count plural:** He keeps sending me Ø messages.
They are Ø engineers.
Ø Bees carry pollen from Ø flowers.

In conclusion, this paper aims to review linguistic theories of definite and indefinite descriptions by providing classifications and uses proposed by a number of linguists and language educators. From the above discussion, we have seen that considerations of definite and indefinite references rely heavily on pragmatic interpretations of the discourse context. Thus, it is recommended that greater attention should be paid to the pragmatic domain when teaching English articles. Although it is widely accepted among EFL teachers that teaching the article system to non-native learners of English is challenging and some might even argue against wasting valuable class time teaching articles in EFL classes, many researchers and educators (e.g. Whitman, 1974; Master, 1988, 1990) support the explicit teaching of articles. Master (1988, 1990) asserts that teachers should not overlook the importance of article instruction at an early stage of L2 learning, for a lack of explicit introduction of how the article system works may greatly hinder article usage and is likely to result in fossilization. Such instruction might not be very effective at the beginning levels, but, with learners’ greater exposure to more and more English, it could gain greater effectiveness and the learners will eventually use articles correctly in their advanced studies.

**References**


