



An Evaluation of an Internet-Based Learning Model from EFL Perspectives

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Abstract

World Wide Web emerges as a potential language learning resource, which has received much attention over the past decade. Among numerous technology-enhanced applications, WebQuest has become one of the popular learning models which makes use of Internet resources by engaging students in authentic and collaborative tasks. WebQuests are believed to be theoretically and pedagogically sound for language learning; however, there have not been any studies, which explore the usefulness of WebQuests in EFL contexts. While the use of WebQuests has been widely promoted, a question remained: “Are these tools really applicable for EFL learners?” In this study, we explored characteristics of WebQuests and created a working rubric to critically evaluate WebQuests based on five factors: level of vocabulary and grammar, content/prior knowledge, interestingness, assistance/scaffolding and task demand. Based on the rubric, we have assessed fifteen of the most popular WebQuests and found a 100% interrater agreement. The results indicated that only 26% of the selected WebQuests could easily be adopted for EFL instruction while most of them needed to be modified. A number of WebQuests were found to be culturally or socially irrelevant to EFL learners. To conclude, we discuss several aspects of WebQuests, which can benefit EFL learners if they are used in EFL classes.

1. Introduction

WebQuests are activities and lessons that involve the use of Internet technology. WebQuests were first created in early 1995 by Bernie Dodge of San Diego State University, who defines WebQuests as “an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet” (Dodge, 1997). Since then WebQuests have gained popularity as a potential tool that incorporates Internet resources into lessons organized around a particular topic or theme. WebQuests were originally created for learning a variety of different subject matter through the effective use of Internet resources. WebQuests offer prepackaged, classroom-based lessons for teachers using information readily available on the web. For language learning, WebQuests offer an ideal social constructivist CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) environment (Simina & Hamel, 2005) which emphasizes authentic learning, scaffolding, inquiry and group work processes. WebQuests provide a potential resource for English language learning because of the authenticity of the resources. Students can learn English based on a theme or subject, and in this way, students can learn the language in a more meaningful way. In sum, the characteristics of WebQuest lessons that are claimed to be beneficial to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction include 1) the exposure to authentic materials 2) meaningful content and 3) possibilities for real communication in the target language (Stoks, 2002). Because of the above rationale, WebQuests present an opportunity for language teachers who wish to implement Internet-supported language learning in their classes.

It is possible to say that WebQuests are theoretically and pedagogically sound for language learning. Still, there have not been any studies that explore the usefulness of WebQuests for

language learning in EFL contexts. If an EFL teacher plans to adopt a WebQuest for his/her EFL class, what should be taken into consideration for selecting an appropriate WebQuest?

We started off with the question of whether or not the existing WebQuests are appropriate for EFL learners? What are the chances of finding an appropriate WebQuest to be used in an EFL classroom? In this study, we took on the role of a teacher who wanted to adopt a WebQuest for an EFL classroom. We developed a rubric based on a general framework for ESL/EFL material selection. Based on the rubric and pre-selection criteria, we selected and co-coded fifteen high-rated WebQuests to find out how many of them can be used in an EFL classroom situation.

The aim of this project is to examine the appropriateness of WebQuests for EFL learners in Thailand and other countries. This project has two goals:

1. To create a rubric to evaluate appropriate WebQuests for EFL learners
2. To find out how many WebQuests are appropriate for EFL learners using the rubric we created.

2. Literature Review

In order to explore the factors that affect the appropriateness of WebQuests for EFL learners, studies in second/foreign language reading comprehension and material selection are found to offer a general conceptual framework for what contributes to the readability and accessibility of texts. According to Richard et al (as cited in (Mehrpour, 2004), readability refers to how easily the text can be read and understood. The factors that affect the readability are 1) the average length of sentences in a passage 2) a number of new words a passage contains 3) and the grammatical complexity of the language used.

Traditional approaches to assessing text difficulty usually consider words and syntactic complexity as the two factors contributing most to the difficulty of the text (Fortus, Coriat, & Fund, 1998; Klare, 1984). Readability formulas such as Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level formulas can be used to calculate the readability of texts by taking into account the number of words per sentence and number of sentences per paragraph. The higher number of words per sentence and the more complex the sentence the more difficult the text is considered to be. It should be noted that the use of the readability formulas based on word and sentence length has been questioned in terms of its validity because these factors cannot completely measure the comprehensibility of a text and are not in themselves the only factors that contribute to text difficulty; they are just predictors (Fulcher, 1997).

Researchers have attempted to establish criteria that will indicate the level of text difficulty for second language learners by counting the numbers words unknown by the students. Research found that learners need to know 95% of the words in a text in order to allow for reasonable comprehension of a text (Laufer, 1989; Liu & Nation, 1985). Our experience with EFL students' reading abilities suggests that this research finding is reasonable. When students are engaged in independent reading, as in Internet activities, they rely less on teacher guidance and more on their own ability or help from their peers. The level of vocabulary and grammar should be seriously considered when students take on a more autonomous mode of learning. However, there is still no practical way to tell in advance which words are unknown to learners. Factors such as students' educational background and exposure to the target language through a variety of media make this more difficult to determine. Therefore, it is not uncommon in some cases for teachers to use their intuition and teaching experience to judge which words are too difficult for students when selecting materials.

One thing to keep in mind is that a text with a suitable level of difficulty is one that contains vocabulary that is not so difficult that it would overwhelm learners; instead, a text should be difficult enough to leave room for reading growth. According to Krashen's input+ 1 hypothesis (1982), readers can acquire meaning if what they read is one level above their present level of proficiency. On the other hand, even if a text is proven to be easy, this does not mean that the reading is not useful. For example, children's books can be considered good for some adult learners even if written primarily for young learners because they provide contextual and comprehensible input that promotes English literacy development among adult learners as well.

The lexical aspect of text is known to be associated with grammatical complexity in terms of text difficulty. Grammatical complexity includes factors such as clarity of syntax, sentence length, and number of complex clauses, passive voice, and punctuation. Research shows that both syntax and lexicon share equal importance for L1 readers in terms of interpreting text meaning (Barnett, 1986) and both skills interact with each other. If the grammar structures are known to learners, then it is easier for them to understand the meaning of the text. Also, the number of average words per sentence is one of the considerations that set the syntactical level of difficulty.

The length of the text has been widely discussed in terms of the role it plays in reading comprehension. Many researchers argue that several pages of foreign language material can be overwhelming for second language learners (Yang, 2001). One of the main factors that makes online materials look more difficult than printed ones could be the collection of hyperlinks, non-linear style text that students need to follow to get more information. The information from the hyperlinks can add up to the lengthy articles on the page and cause cognitive overload from navigational requirements of hypertext.

It can be questioned, however, whether the length of the text has any connection with difficulty level. Some research findings on reading general texts do not support the notion of the relationship between text length and difficulty level. People may intuitively believe that the longer text, the more difficult it is; however, there is no strong evidence to support it. For example, Mehrpour (2004) studied the impact of text length on reading comprehension. The results are in line with previous research which concludes that the length of text does not demonstrate any statistical significance in terms of students' performance on reading tests. More studies should be done before this result can be considered conclusive. Nevertheless, whether text length influences comprehension or not, it can still be argued that the length of the reading on a website has a major effect on the *time* students need to spend on reading tasks.

Teachers should focus on the issues of the length of text and the time allocation of using a particular material in the classroom. 'Time on task' has been shown to be a highly significant factor in learning (Nunan, 1988). Limited class time determines the extent of students' search, reading and information exploration. WebQuest resources demand much more reading than traditional materials such as textbooks. Students may be required to read at least 3-4 web pages which contain more than 3000 words each in a single WebQuest. This amount of reading is far beyond what they usually do in a regular classroom. Decisions need to be made about how long the activities will take, especially when taking into consideration that students will need extra time when reading long and difficult texts. Therefore, when making lesson plans, we should take into account the time allocation each WebQuest requires and the time a teacher needs to spend on class discussion and explanation.

Difficulty level, though it is the main consideration, is not the only thing that determines the appropriateness of materials. Several studies suggest that factors such as content/topic (whether

they are relevant to EFL curricula, interest and background knowledge) can influence foreign language reading comprehension (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2004) and contribute to the selection of good WebQuests for EFL learners.

Students' prior or background knowledge plays a major part in their comprehension of the text. It determines what students have known to understand texts and stories. It can be concluded that "greater level of background knowledge and expertise in a subject matter contribute to efficiency of attentional allocation to input during reading, enabling richer analyses and textual interpretations" (Pulido, 2004, p. 476). Lee (1986) studied the role of background knowledge associated with L2 reading. The study found that even advanced learners of a foreign language need to rely on three factors, (1) the context (which tells the readers in advance what the reading is about such as title, picture page, etc.), (2) topic familiarity and (3) transparency (specific concrete lexical items) in interpreting a text. Moreover, content can be difficult when the reader lacks adequate cultural, world or domain knowledge contained in the reading (Drum & Konopak, 1987). Most authentic materials, including WebQuests, may be created based on the assumption that students already have some knowledge about the topic. For EFL learners, though they may already have general cultural knowledge of the target culture, may not understand or be familiar with some specific cultural situations, events, persons or places that appear in the topic, and this may hinder their comprehension and accomplishment of tasks. Since content mastery is generally less a priority in foreign language class than is language mastery, the selection of content should be based on what facilitates students' understanding and activates their background knowledge.

Students' prior knowledge of the topic alone, however, does not necessarily make the material good for learners. The selection of topic/theme for language learners often involves students'

interest. Interestingness of materials or tasks refers to the extent that the reading is relevant and meaningful to learners (Nunan, 1988). Students' interest also needs to play an important role in determining a / the teacher's judgment of materials. Interestingness of materials links to learners' motivation. Even though the content may be good for students, if the students are not interested in that particular topic, the topic may be perceived as too difficult. Sercu (2004) contends that we should take into consideration whether the learners can relate to and understand the information presented to them. While we realize that interestingness plays an important part in selecting materials, one person's interest may not be the same as others. For the purposes of this research, we relied on the current materials used by students and our own experience as EFL teachers to make a judgment on what interests students.

In addition, the degree to which a WebQuest provides assistance and scaffolding should also be seen as an important factor in selecting materials. Assistance and scaffolding refer to the amount of help available to learners, tools that help language learners move along in the process of learning and accomplish an assigned task. The term 'scaffolding' is defined broadly as help, assistance that aids the process of building students' learning to complete a task independently (Gibson, 2002). Since the levels of WebQuests as originally suggested by the creators may be too challenging for EFL learners, it would be useful to have built-in scaffolding features that facilitate students' language learning. Benz (2005), for example, recommends that scaffolding may include peripheral tools such as vocabulary lists, guiding questions, grammar lessons, active stories, direct assistance, etc. Regular WebQuests do not always incorporate those features because they are not designed specifically for language learning. However, they can include graphics, multimedia functions, samples, and research notes/templates. WebQuests that

incorporate these types of scaffolding will facilitate learners' comprehension and help them to complete their tasks.

The last factor that must be explored in selecting WebQuest materials or any other materials for EFL learners is the task requirement. Tasks are considered to be the salient feature of WebQuests because WebQuests are constructed around activities. Task demand designates the complexity of the task, e.g. the steps involved in the task and the cognitive demands the task makes on the learners (Nunan, 1988). A learning task in WebQuests indicates what is being required of students' output, both in terms of process and product. If the output required is at a level that is far beyond students' linguistic level, the task is considered too difficult for them. For example, some WebQuests evaluate students' persuasive essay writing, which is considered too difficult for most EFL students by the researchers since it requires advanced language competency or training in writing persuasive essays. Not only do we need to consider language demand, we also need to consider students' prior experience and familiarity with the task. WebQuests that are good for language learning should focus on the opportunity for practicing all four skills (i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing) through doable tasks, and they should not require too many expert or specialized skills (e.g. computer search skills, drawing, writing a play) to complete the task.

In sum, several factors that are associated with the selection of reading materials have been identified and discussed. These factors include vocabulary and grammar, prior knowledge of content, interestingness, assistance/scaffolding and task demand.

3. Methodology

3.1 Setting

It is not feasible to create a guideline to cover a wide range of EFL learners' proficiency level, background, and interest. Therefore, the rubric we created was targeted at EFL learners at the college level in Thailand. The target population that we examined the WebQuests for includes second-year college-level students in Thailand. The students major in several disciplines and they have to enroll in a mandatory English course to fulfill the English language requirement for their undergraduate degrees. Students are in the range of 18-20 years of age. Their English levels are considered intermediate or upper intermediate (TOEFL score between 400-450).

3.2 Instrumentation

There were three stages involved in constructing the rubric. The first stage was to examine the current materials used by second year college students at an urban university in Thailand to set up a baseline for the current level of students' reading proficiency. The second stage was to construct the criteria and scoring rubric based on the current level of proficiency and the review of the literature. The third stage was to select the existing WebQuests for coding.

3.2.1 Textbook analysis

In EFL contexts, the English language proficiency levels required of students need to be considered a priority because most WebQuests are written for first language learners. There may be gaps between the difficulty level of L1 WebQuests and L2 students' English language proficiency. In order to estimate the students' level of proficiency, we examined the current textbook as a unit of analysis to determine what level of difficulty students can usually handle.

The textbook called 'Reading for Information' (Ratchatanan, 1999) was developed by an instructor in the Faculty of Liberal Arts and has been used for all course sections for several years.

We first analyzed the textbook and the reading materials used by instructors for a freshmen English course. Our approach was to use the textbook as current reading material to establish a level of reading difficulty that matches the students' level of proficiency. We also analyzed the textbook to examine quantitatively the vocabulary and complexity of the reading passages. The textbook analysis also revealed the factors affecting difficulty and appropriateness.

After obtaining the materials currently used in the classes at the university, we ran the first three passages from the textbook on Microsoft Word for Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade level formulas. These two statistics are calculated by averaging sentence length (the number of words divided by the number of sentences) with the number of syllables per word (the number of syllables divided by the number of words). The Reading Ease Score rates text on a 100-point scale; the higher the score, the easier it is to understand the document. For most standard documents, the score is aimed at approximately 60 to 70. The following analysis reveals surface characteristics of the text and an overall picture of the length and structure of the text. Table 1 shows the quantitative analysis of the current English reading passages used for the freshmen English class.

Table 1 The Reading Grade Level Analysis of the Current Reading Material

| | First Passage | Second Passage | Third Passage |
|-------------------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| Total Words | 1296 | 954 | 1037 |
| Sentences per paragraph | 2.8 | 6.3 | 3.8 |
| Words per sentences | 20.2 | 16.7 | 18.7 |
| % of passive voice | 7 | 0 | 22 |
| Reading Ease | 45.7 | 53.6 | 52.2 |
| Reading Grade level | 11.9 | 9.9 | 10.4 |

According to Table 1, it can be concluded that the average length of the text currently used for EFL college learners is approximately 1000 words per lesson unit. The average reading grade level is at 11. From the analysis, we arrived at a rough picture of the grade level and length of each reading unit. The textbook analysis also revealed the topics that the students were familiar with, which we discuss in the next section.

3.2.2 Constructing a rubric

Drawing from the literature, we identified five categories important for materials assessment rubrics: vocabulary and grammar, content knowledge, interestingness, assistance (scaffolding) and task demand. The criteria for each category were based on the literature and the results from our textbook analysis. We used five randomly selected WebQuests to test and revise the rubrics. After refining our rubric several times, we finally agreed on the final version of the rubric. A WebQuest would be given a score of two if its characteristics fit our desired criteria in each category, a score of one if it needs modification and zero if it did not meet the certain criteria (See Appendix I). We set the criteria for vocabulary level according to the study done by Liu and Nation (1985) and Laufer (1989), which states that 90-95% of the vocabulary should be known to the learners. Furthermore, the content should be associated with students' prior knowledge.

The overall theme or the topic of WebQuests should be relevant to students' lives, culturally and socially. The topics may cover a wide range of interests for most students. According to the current reading materials used in the course, topics include social issues, diet, ecology, health, technology and education. Scaffolding tools such as an online dictionary, guiding questions, and graphics, were provided. The task should be doable for EFL learners and it should not require expertise in areas that the students may not be familiar with, such as computer search skills, drawing, or writing a play, to complete a task. The WebQuests that did not meet the above criteria would receive lower scores, as indicated in the rubric.

3.2.3 Selecting WebQuests and Coding

In the process of selecting WebQuests for coding, we followed Brown's (1995) suggestion concerning how to adopt materials by setting up some form of evaluation process to pare the list of materials down to only those that should be seriously considered. We took the three steps below to select WebQuests for coding.

Though there are several WebQuest collections available, the ones we selected were from the WebQuest page of San Diego State University (SDSU), which is the original WebQuest database and currently includes over 2000 WebQuests (Dodge, 2006). Not all of these WebQuests have been evaluated and rated based on the WebQuest evaluation rubric (Dodge, 2001). The evaluation rubric covered the evaluation of six dimensions: overall aesthetics, introduction, task, process, resource and evaluation. Approximately 17 % of these WebQuests (approximately 350) have already been rated, which means that these WebQuests have been selected, looked at and evaluated by some teachers or educators. The WebQuests from the SDSU page were rated highest (50 points) based on the WebQuest evaluation rubric. A high rating on a WebQuest

ensures that at least some people believed that each component (e.g. introduction, task, process, etc.) of the WebQuest met the characteristics of a good WebQuest; for example, the WebQuest rubrics demand good visual design, clarity of the process, doable tasks, etc. Therefore they were, in a sense, pre-screened for us.

We narrowed down the list to 34 WebQuests that were rated highest (50/50 points). However, these WebQuests covered all ranges of grade levels (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, 9-12). Our selection of WebQuests from the SDSU page should be based on the current level of the college students. We obtained the information about the current grade level from the textbook analysis (Table 1) which showed that reading level could be between 9th and 12th grade. However, as we examined the list of other possible WebQuests, we found that some of them that were intended for use for the 6th-8th grade level had readability levels and topics comparable to the 9th-12th grade ones. We therefore decided to include them in our list. The total number of WebQuests at this stage was 25.

We found that we needed to eliminate a number of WebQuests from our list when taking into consideration the topics that would be suitable for students. First, we did not need WebQuest topics that were too technical or that require special knowledge, such as advanced mathematics and sciences. Since content mastery is not of primary intention for an English class, we wanted to select WebQuests whose content is comfortable enough for English teachers to handle alone, assuming that no collaborative help from other content area teachers is available. WebQuests that involved technical subjects as such did not meet this criterion. At the same time, we wanted to ensure that the selected WebQuests had elements that would facilitate English language learning; that is, opportunities for practicing the four skills, including reading, writing, and oral interaction during group work.

We finally narrowed our list to only fifteen WebQuest (Appendix II) that were eligible for coding. A score of 0-2 was given to each of the five categories: vocabulary and grammar, content knowledge, interestingness, assistance/scaffolding and task demand. A single score of 0-2 was given for each category; the criteria for each score are described in the rubric. After several times of calibrating, revising and attempting to understand the rubric, we made sure that both authors agreed on how to code it. Then each coder separately coded the WebQuests according to the agreed rubric.

Cohen's kappa was used to calculate the inter-rater agreement for each category (vocabulary, content, interestingness, assistance, and task demand). Cohen's kappa yields a more robust result than simple percent agreement because it takes into account the agreement of the raters occurring by chance. The equation for kappa is below:

$$\kappa = \frac{\text{Pr}(a) - \text{Pr}(e)}{1 - \text{Pr}(e)},$$

Pr (a) = number of the observed agreement between raters

Pr (e) = number of agreement that is due to chance

We established a range for the scores received for each WebQuest to determine which WebQuests were acceptable. For a WebQuest to be considered a good one for EFL, we required high scores on at least four categories. WebQuests that received the lowest score (0) on more than two categories were considered not appropriate for EFL learners. So the WebQuests would be ranked as follows: the WebQuests that were scored between 0-3 are considered inappropriate for EFL learners; WebQuests that scored between 4-7 may be adopted with some adaptation; WebQuests that scored between 8-10 were appropriate and could be adopted for use with an EFL population. The scores received in each category were summed up and compared with the above criteria.

4. Results

After coding, the interrater reliability was calculated for each category, as shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2 Results from Rating the Selected Fifteen Rubrics from Two Raters

| Coder WebQuest | Vocabulary & Grammar | | Content Knowledge | | Interestingness | | Assistance | | Task Demand | | Total | |
|-------------------|----------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|-----------------|---------|------------|---------|-------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | Rater 1 | Rater 2 | Rater 1 | Rater 2 | Rater 1 | Rater 2 | Rater 1 | Rater 2 | Rater 1 | Rater 2 | Rater 1 | Rater 2 |
| 1. | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| 2. | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| 3. | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 7 |
| 4. | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 7 |
| 5. | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 10 | 10 |
| 6. | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 5 |
| 8. | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 7 |
| 9. | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 6 | 6 |
| 10. | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 7 |
| 11. | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| 12. | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 7 | 7 |
| 13. | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 10 | 9 |
| 14. | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 8 | 8 |
| 15. | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 10 | 10 |
| Total | 20 | 21 | 17 | 16 | 16 | 17 | 21 | 21 | 17 | 18 | | |

Based on the criteria we set earlier as a cutting point for an appropriate WebQuest, we found that we had a 100% agreement on which WebQuests can be used and cannot be used with EFL learners. Four out of fifteen WebQuests (26.6%) were possible to use with EFL students without any modification needed. Two WebQuests (13.3%) were unlikely to produce good results when implemented in EFL classrooms. The rest of the WebQuests (N=9, 60%) may be used but some modification is recommended. In order to find out which aspects of the WebQuests need modification, the scores from each category were analyzed.

The interrater indices for vocabulary and grammar, content knowledge, interestingness, assistance/scaffolding and task demand are 0.9, 0.7, 0.9, 0.8, 0.7 consecutively. The overall interrater reliability was 0.9 computed by averaging agreement from all categories. The discrepancies in our coding largely came from differences in our judgment concerning the students' prior knowledge on the topic and task demand, which in many cases, are difficult to predict.

It should be noted that even though we agreed on the total rating scores, we did not necessarily score the same for every category. For example, when coding the WebQuests about Samurai's tale, even though we both agreed on the overall range of scores and the categories that the WebQuest should fall into, there were some scoring discrepancies in certain categories, such as task demand, which produced a score of 1 and 2 respectively between the two raters.

Table 2 shows the rating scores of the fifteen WebQuests as well as the scores of each category of a particular WebQuest. The low ratings for some WebQuests were due to a zero score in more than two categories. The majority of the selected WebQuests (N=9) were rated medium, which means that they can be used with some adaptations. The scores in each category identified which aspect of the particular WebQuest can be adapted; for example, WebQuests that were rated low in content knowledge can be modified by providing more pre-lesson activities to prepare students with some knowledge on the topic before starting the WebQuest tasks.

5. Discussion

We found that the difficulty level of vocabulary and grammar is not the most problematic factor in selecting WebQuests. The content and topic of the WebQuests, in fact, have more effect on whether a WebQuest will be appropriate for EFL students. As pointed out by (Graves, Juel, &

Graves, 2004), the background knowledge that the ESL/EFL students bring to the text could be inconsistent with the knowledge assumed by the text. WebQuests that require a lot of background knowledge of a specific event demand specific prior knowledge and familiarity beyond ESL/EFL students' understanding. For example, the WebQuest about the Alamo battle requires students to have at least some background understanding of the historical conflicts between Texas settlers and the Mexican government and some familiarity with the geographical areas of Texas in order to understand the story and take on the roles of people in the historical event in order to complete the task. This prior knowledge may be beyond what EFL students possess. It can be explained that some WebQuest topics that are culturally specific and closely tied to the local contexts or events in the U.S. do not translate well into other contexts. More general topics, such as obesity, crime, and environment, along with sufficient scaffolding, could be more appropriate and beneficial for language learners. For example, the WebQuest about obesity in the U.S. is an example of a good problem-solving lesson for an EFL class. Students are asked to find out about the obesity epidemic in the U.S. and offer a solution to the problem. The topic, though based on the U.S. context, contains content that EFL students can easily relate to. The WebQuest also provides step-by-step guidelines on how to accomplish the task. The scaffoldings found in this particular WebQuest include samples, guiding questions, vocabulary assistance, and detailed slide organizers which make the task possible for students to complete by themselves.

Another important point that should be brought into the discussion is the issue of the text length of the Internet resources. We previously established that web pages that contained several pages of reading could easily overwhelm learners, even though the level of vocabulary and syntax were not too advanced for them. This observation was based on the fact that students in

this particular context are not familiar with such long readings in class; therefore, it may appear too challenging for students when they see several pages of full text written in a foreign language. As we closely examined this issue, we concluded that most resources provided in the WebQuests were not meant to be read by students in every single detail. Most of the links were merely suggested resources. Students needed to learn to locate information by skimming and scanning and to come up with the necessary information to complete the task. It is crucial, however, for teachers to explicitly guide students in reading and locating information. Teachers may start with a pre-Internet Internet lesson that includes an overview of how to search for information, vocabulary preparation, group work process and role clarification. Teachers also need to find an efficient way to manage the amount of class time that should be devoted to in-class or out-of-class assignments. The decision usually depends on various factors, such as task demands and the time available for each specific context.

It should be noted that even though the rubric we created was targeted at EFL college students in Thailand, we believe that it could also be used as a guideline for comparable contexts as well.

6. Conclusion

WebQuests have gained much popularity among language teachers in recent years. However, not much research has been done to show how they can benefit language students in EFL contexts. The results of our study indicate that most of the WebQuests investigated required modifications and adjustments before being used with EFL students. Only a few existing WebQuests can be used instantly, while the rest are not appropriate for EFL learners. Therefore, we can conclude that WebQuests have a potential to enhance English language learning provided that they are appropriate for EFL learners in terms of learners' levels of proficiency, task demands, interests,

and background knowledge. Since most WebQuests were created with American students' interests and their required curricula, some WebQuests may have content that is difficult for EFL students to understand. We suggest that teachers in EFL contexts modify WebQuests to suit their specific learners' needs before applying them in classrooms.

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Appendix 1 - Rubric for evaluating WebQuests for EFL learners

| Score | 2 | 1 | 0 |
|--|---|--|---|
| Vocabulary & Grammar | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 90- 95% of the vocabulary from the Internet resources are comprehensible (There are approximately two unknown words or fewer per sentence) - Students know about all grammatical structures used in the text - Most sentences contain no more than 18 words. - The instruction given in the WebQuest has been modified for simplification. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are close to two unknown words per sentence, and more than half of the passage contains more than two unknown words. - Students have learned most, but not all grammatical structures, used in the text. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Three or more unknown words in most sentences. - Students have not learned most grammatical structures used in the text. Most sentences are longer than 18 words. - The instruction given in the WebQuest has not been simplified or elaborated for comprehension. |
| Content (prior knowledge) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The content has a connection to student's prior knowledge, subjects/ topics that students have learned/known before. - Students have some familiarity situations, event, persons, places that appear in the topic. - The content is appropriate for the maturity and level of cognitive development of students. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The content requires some good background knowledge and specialized knowledge. Students need to make a lot of effort to gain understanding of the content. - The content does not build much on students' prior knowledge | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The content requires substantial prior knowledge/ specialized knowledge to understand, such as high level science/math/literature. - A lot of background knowledge is required to understand the cultural connotation of the topic - require total knowledge and facts about the specific events/people in order to understand the text |
| Interestingness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The topic/theme includes some cultural and social relevance to students' daily lives/ things that link to their experience or issues that surrounds students - Current situation & Up-to-date information (no longer than 3 years), gives new information | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The topic/theme can be linked to students' cultural and social interest - The topic may be of interest to certain groups of students - Information is somewhat outdated, older than 5 years | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The topic/ theme is not relevant to students' lives. - The information is outdated, older than 10 years - The content is not suitable for the cognitive development of students |
| Assistance/scaffolding -Amount of help available to the learner | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are graphics and many visual aids available to facilitate comprehension - online vocabulary or glossary is available - Scaffolding tools such as guiding questions, templates, guidelines are provided | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are a few graphics but they do not fully assist with comprehension. - There are some scaffolding tools available but are not sufficient | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No visual aids present to facilitate learners' comprehension -No online dictionary available - No scaffolding tools |

Overall Score ranking:

0-3 Not applicable

4-7 Adaptable

8-10 Adoptable

Appendix II - List of the Fifteen Selected WebQuests and their URLs

| Good WebQuests for EFL | |
|---|---|
| 1. Fat Facts | http://teacherweb.com/MD/OxonHillMS/FatFacts/h2.stm |
| 2. Food Chain | http://teacherweb.com/IN/PNC/chris/ |
| 3. Solve it with logic | http://www.msu.edu/~reethskr/myweb/gwq/cover_page.htm |
| 4. Ancient Egypt | http://www.iwebquest.com/egypt/ancientegypt.htm |
| 5. Chocolate | http://www.btcs.org/tutorials/WebQuests/chocolate/ |
| WebQuests that need modification | |
| 6. Impact of September 11 | http://homepage.mac.com/suecollins/school/stocks/stocks.htm |
| 7. Media Literacy | http://homepage.mac.com/suecollins/school/media/media.html |
| 8. Who was the real Shakespeare? | http://garnet.acns.fsu.edu/~srl03e/eleven.htm |
| 9. The Truth ... and Nothing but the TRUTH! | http://www.pampetty.com/persuasive.htm |
| 10. Telling the Samurai's Tale | http://edtech.suhsd.k12.ca.us/inprogress/act/dfickett/japan/samuraistale.htm |
| 11. El Niño | http://www.powayschools.com/projects/elnino/ |
| 12. A method to the madness | http://eprentice.sdsu.edu/S04X/lbeck/wq/index.htm |
| 13. Geometry in real life | http://www.ats.edu.mx/personales/roci/Math/index.htm |
| WebQuests that are not appropriate for EFL | |
| 14. The Alamo | http://hilltop.bradley.edu/~wildcard/mywebquest/index.htm |
| 15. A personal journal | http://www.pls.uni.edu/nielsen/Gettysburg/gettysburg.html |



Learning to Use the Articles, *A* and *The*, in One Lesson

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Bio Data:

Nic Farrow (Nicholas K. Farrow) has an MS in TESOL from Anaheim University (2003). He is teaching English composition, reading and comparative cultures at Soka Women's College and University in Japan. His current research focus is on applying the consciousness-raising approach to a range of grammatical forms which appear to be obstacles in students' acquisition of the language, and to evaluate its effectiveness in the learning process.

Abstract

To deal effectively with an area of language which some consider unteachable, this report proposes a single lesson based on consciousness-raising to teach some general principles which govern the use of the articles. The lesson content and rationale are explained fully, followed by a discussion of preliminary investigations into its effectiveness with Japanese university students, using dairy observations, a cloze test and an oral production test. The initial results are very promising.

Keywords: articles, consciousness-raising, lesson plan, pre and post-testing, grammar

Introduction and Background

A frequent and persistent grammatical problem many EFL teachers encounter in Japanese schools, colleges and universities is the misuse or omission of the articles *a* and *the* in both written and spoken language. This is a serious linguistic problem for several reasons:

- Articles occur frequently ... The American Heritage Word Frequency Book (Carroll et al, 1971) lists *the* as the most commonly used word in the English language, and *a* as the fourth.
- Misuse of articles can lead to serious errors because of resulting meaning variations, since 'the distinction they mark is obligatory' (Matthews, 1997, p.26). Master (1994, p.230) notes that the need for accurate use of articles increases with writing, since readers do not have the luxury of extralinguistic clues to help understanding.

- The problem is persistent, even to higher-level learners. Claire and Greenwood, (1988, cover page) state that... (Articles) “are often the last grammatical item that distinguishes the native-speaker of English from the foreign-born speaker”.

Clearly the problem is not limited to Japan. Sattayatham and Honsa (2007) found errors in article use by Thai medical students to be the second most common error type in their opinion paragraph writing.

There exist at least three textbooks focusing exclusively on the use of articles, evidence of the weight of the problem they present to second language learners. Offering a very straight explanation-plus-practice approach is *The Article Book: Practice Towards Mastery of a, an, and the*. (Cole, 2000) However, it offers no samples of extended text, nor samples of spoken discourse for analysis and explanation. Similarly, *Three Little Words, A, An, and The* (Claire and Greenwood, 1988), covers a wide range of rules, with practice exercises. This book does include a few extended texts, devoted to contrasting the uses of *a* and *the*. *Three Little Words, A, An, The* (Brender, 1989), is very thorough and highly systematic, and was clearly written with the Japanese in mind. However, it relies on a very traditional program of tabular explanations and exercises, working point by point across the spectrum of rules.

Why then, do the articles present students and teachers with such a bewildering challenge? Article use tops Celce-Murcia’s (2002) list of grammatical problems which are ‘not context free but are clearly functionally motivated.’ (p.121) That is, they are not subject to a simple rule, isolated from context. In fact, correct choice of *the* in cases of anaphoric reference almost always depends upon context beyond the sentence level. Halliday (1994) puts it this way: ‘*..the* is usually accompanied by some other element which supplies the information required...’ (p.182)

The literature investigating this aspect of language is vast, with a number of theories proposed to explain the nature of the problems. The main controversy seems to be between the theories of uniqueness (There’s only one, so it is particular.) and familiarity (Your interlocutor knows what you are referring to, so it is particular).

A report by Master (1994, pp. 259-252) details a quasi-experiment on the effects of direct instruction of article usage. Master’s investigation differs from this one in that the subjects were ESL students, their level was far higher than that of the students in this report, and instruction was over a nine-week period. Further, the instruction and testing also covered the ‘entire range of article use in English’, in great depth and detail.

A lesson plan for article use has been detailed by a junior college teacher in Japan (Norris, 1992). This is comparable to the present study in that the lesson was designed for a similar population of students and that the focus was on *a* and *the*, not zero article. However, the approach is rather different. Norris used a mix of Total Physical Response (TPR), cuisenaire rods and picture description techniques. While he found results to be encouraging, the linguistic aims were not explicitly defined, and specific results not published.

Of the many books on the market specializing in correction of errors in English language use few dare deal with this problem at all. Neither so traditional a writer as Witherspoon's (1943) nor Burt and Kiparsky's (1972) books on common errors even mentions this problem. Turton (1995), however, explains various points regarding use and omission of each article, but stops short of dealing with errors between them. Likewise, the ESL/EFL textbooks using the communicative approach, widely used in university English classes in Japan, seem unwilling to address this problem.

Some grammar-oriented textbooks do include articles among their study topics. A traditional approach can be found in *A Basic English Grammar with Exercises* (Eastwood & Mackin, 1998) which very briefly explains a wider range of article-related grammar points, followed directly by practice exercises. Swan and Walter (1997, 2001) look at articles in some detail, clearly differentiate between the uses of zero article, *a* and *the*, and offer traditional exercises to practice the concepts explained. Addressing the problem with a more interactive style, *Impact Grammar* (Ellis & Gaies, 1999) applies a CR approach in two units, one focusing on *a* and one on *the*. These are highly simplified, however, and each one deals with only one aspect of their usage. Despite efforts by some authors, there seems to remain a large gap in ideas and material to help students grapple with this major topic. The lesson plan outlined below is an attempt to help to fill that gap.

The Participants

The research was conducted in two separate stages. The first was a pre-experiment, involving a single intact class of first-year university writing students. There was neither a control group nor any random assignment of participants. The data collected were in the form of personal journals written by students both before and after the lesson. The second stage involved two similar intact

university classes, one acting as a control, studying communicative English. These classes were given both written and speaking tests before and after the lesson. The teacher, a native speaker of English, was also the researcher, collecting data from his own classes.

Aim and Method

A lesson plan was conceived to see if it is possible for students to actually learn correct use of *the* and *a* as a result of explicit teaching. In addition, it was hoped to teach the main points in just one lesson, although some follow-up activities are thought likely to help students to integrate the concepts into their interlanguage.

This lesson plan was based on the Consciousness Raising (CR) approach, encouraging students to ‘notice’ how the language is used under certain conditions by providing ‘enhanced input’, followed by exercises for them to put their ideas into action. Language discovery is a major element in this kind of lesson. The lesson did not demand production per se, but rather required students to consider the linguistic evidence and develop a framework of understanding.

CR is a relatively new approach to second language teaching and, according to Ellis (1994, p.645) ‘... provides a logical way of avoiding many of the pedagogical problems that arise from the teachability hypothesis.’ It seemed to be a technique worth investigating when applied to one of the more challenging aspects of the English language.

There is a wide range of complications in tackling a language target of this sort. The question of use of *a* and *the*, far from being an isolated point of language, is intimately tied into a variety of closely-linked language questions, such as pronoun use, plurals, countable and uncountable nouns, zero article, language ‘chunks’ which include articles, and those ‘rules’ which seem to be clear cut, such as naming hotels and rivers. In addition, there seem to be numerous anomalies, or sub-rules which complicate the issue for both student and teacher. We go to the bathroom, but not to the bed. We also go to work, but not to office. Students are likely to be baffled when British people say that someone is ‘in hospital’, meaning they have been admitted, but someone went to ‘the hospital’ to visit a sick person.

Instead of focusing on just one isolated aspect, or trying to cover the entire spectrum of article usage, this lesson takes a middle road by highlighting principles which govern the major problem

areas which students repeatedly encounter. The use of *the* rather than *a*, is presented for the following:

- universally unique items (the sun)
- items unique to a situation (the floor, the grass, the kitchen)
- deictically obvious items (the guy over there)
- items of anaphoric reference (the guy we just referred to)
- items defined by a relative clause (the guy I met yesterday)
- superlatives (the nicest guy I ever met)

The reasoning for this is twofold. First, this covers a wide range of the problems students encounter, and arguably, the more difficult to teach and understand. Second, there is an underlying common thread to all of these, the definiteness of the items under scrutiny. If this can be established in the mind of the student, then the difficulty of understanding and even producing the target language may be controlled. Although questions about related aspects may well arise during the lesson, they should not become the main focus of study at this point.

In order to provide understanding with minimal confusion in just the one 90 – minute period, this lesson avoids *directly* dealing with the related (and relevant) questions of:

- zero article
- countable and uncountable nouns, singular and plural uses
- the occurrence of cataphoric pronouns
- such rules as the common occurrence of *the* before musical instruments, hotel names etc.

Some of these remaining ‘rules’ are relatively simple, and within clear boundaries (e.g. names of rivers), and can even be learned by students without the intervention of a teacher. Some are covered in the popular textbooks, but still could become the target language for a follow-up CR lesson.

Testing Procedures

Testing was conducted in two phases, with the two different groups of students. Three types of pre- and post-test were conducted, one to measure students’ understanding of the correct use of the target language, and two to measure their productive ability. The single CR articles lesson was conducted between tests, as detailed below. All students had been informed that they were

participating in a research project, and had agreed to be involved. Notably, the control group of university students (who received no articles lesson) requested to study the lesson after the experiment was concluded.

College Students

The first phase was a pre-experiment (No attempt was made to provide a control group.) on a single group of first-year college English students in a writing class. Their weekly English diaries were analyzed both one week before and two weeks after the lesson for examples of correct and incorrect use of the articles, along with a range of connected items such as use of all determiners. Students had been told to write their diaries freely as a normal part of their study course, and told not to pay excessive attention to perfect grammar and spelling. These diaries were handed in monthly, for comment (not grammatical correction) by the teacher. This then, was a non-interventionist observation of students' productive abilities, as the students were not told to make any effort to use correct forms of the target language. This group was tested only to look for any change in their productive ability as a result of the lesson.

University Students

The second experiment consisted of two stages, investigating the effectiveness of the lesson on first-year university English students, with one class acting as a control. The two classes had been graded as equal in level in the university placement tests, and a review of their TOEIC scores showed a close similarity in their scores, with means of 134.7 (S.D. 11.0) and 132.5 (S.D. 8.3) respectively for the control group and the experimental group. Both classes were in the middle of studying the same English course run by the researcher/teacher, using a communicative-style textbook, *Fifty-Fifty, Book One* (Wilson and Barnard, 1998).

The students were first given a simple cloze test to examine their understanding of the language being investigated. The test was specifically designed to highlight the target language, aiming only at the points on which the lesson focused. Students had to fill in 69 blanks with either *a* or *the*, with a ten-minute time limit, which proved to be ample for most students. There was no testing of zero article or other determiners. Likewise, expressions such as *a lot of* were not used since students might remember them as familiar language chunks. However, the common expression *there was a*, which was included in the lesson, also appeared in the test. An

additional test was employed to measure any change of students' oral productive ability in correct use of the articles before and after the lesson. Students were asked to explain a series of 24 pictures in their own words, in the space of ten minutes. The pictures conveyed a short sequence of events such as a man leaving his office desk and going to a meeting room. Difficult vocabulary words were supplied alongside the pictures to minimize distraction. Students recorded their narratives individually using audiocassette recorders without intervention from the teacher. Ample time was allowed for students to describe what they saw. The students' narrations were then analyzed for correct and erroneous use of the articles.

Students were aware of the target language under investigation from the very beginning. This was both inevitable, considering the explicit focus of the cloze test, and desirable, since they would surely be aware of the focus during the post-lesson test, and would therefore be expected to perform differently, contaminating the data.

Considerations in defining correct and incorrect usage:

In both experiments, various factors needed to be carefully considered before analyzing the results:

- Set expressions/language chunks: It was considered that students' possible familiarity with expressions such as 'a lot of' might contaminate the data, so in the cloze test, they were eliminated. The few incidental occurrences in the college writing class diaries and university spoken tests were also ignored for the same reason.
- Determiner omissions: When it was impossible from the context to decide what sort of determiner was omitted, this was classified as *determiner omitted*.
- Compound errors: Some errors were difficult to determine simply as *a/the* type errors, or even omission of a determiner. In the example, 'I bought book and magazine.' did the student omit *a* twice, or forget to pluralize the nouns? With no way to decide what kind of error was made, this becomes listed as a *compound error*.
- Indeterminable: 'I had spaghetti.' / 'I had a spaghetti.' Since both are correct in normal modern English, such instances were not recorded as correct or incorrect and were consequently not included in the results.

- Misused singulars: ‘We played all evening with a firework.’ These were omitted, since, although the grammar was correct, the student had clearly used an *a* inappropriately, thus making it unclassifiable either as correct use or overuse.
- Omission of noun entire phrases: Some sentences were clearly incomplete, such as ‘I went shopping and I bought.’ An object phrase, possibly requiring an article has been omitted. These were not categorized.
- Article overuse: Occurrence of the overuse of articles or other determiners, such as in ‘It was a waste of the time.’ became particularly significant in the post-lesson data, where possible examples of hyper-correction were observed.

Problems Encountered

A number of problems arose, some hard to anticipate and some due to poorly designed aspects of the experiments.

College Class Diaries

In the first experiment, many of the diaries actually contained a surprisingly low count of any kind of determiner, not only by omission, but also by the fact that the topics and writing style did not require them. For example, a diary might read (all errors included):

Today, I get up at seven o'clock, get dressed and went to Shinjuku with Mai. We went shopping and then had lunch. We ate noodles and beef. At six o'clock, we enjoyed played bowling and then went home and sang songs. It was very fun.

The sample contains 45 words, with no determiners and no errors in the language under observation. In addition, the wordage from each student proved to be very low, and it became clear that with such low numbers, analysis of individual students' language would be difficult and virtually meaningless. For this reason and for the sake of brevity in presenting the results, it was decided to gather all the analyzed results together for observation in a single table.

The initial results were analyzed according to a broad range of observations related to various determiner-related problems, but this proved far too complex to present, and a simplified table was decided upon, with more general divisions tabulated for observation. The actual number of

words produced in the pre and post-test diaries was, of course, not identical. It was, however, very close, and the tabulated results were adjusted to compensate for the difference in number.

University Classes

Plural and non-count nouns were not intended to be targeted, since they should not have an *a* before them, which should eliminate the choice. However, in error, three instances were included in the cloze test. Notably, several students still incorrectly used *a* in these cases, too. Therefore these data were included as part of the study.

As with the results of the college students' diaries, the results of the university students' oral test proved extremely complicated, requiring a very wide range of categorizations to accurately represent the error types. Along with the fact that the quantity of data available could not justify either a highly detailed analysis, nor the individualization of results, it was decided to present the data as a whole group, in tables focusing on the main target-language categories only.

Reliability

The analysis of the college class diaries proved complex and demanding. From the beginning, it became clear that there would appear numerous cases of ambiguity, as described above. Decisions had to be made and lines drawn, in order to create a reference rubric to determine as accurately as possible the correct use of the target language. It proved extremely unrealistic simply to decide the correct use of the articles, without looking at the related uses of other determiners. These were then included in the analysis, providing some interesting additional results. At this stage a second rater's evaluation was not sought, leaving all the decisions in the hands of the researcher, alone.

With the university group, as the same cloze test was used both before and after the lesson, there may arise the question as to whether data became contaminated as a result of simple learning occurring from doing the same test twice. As a precaution, this test was piloted with another class which had not received the articles lesson, conducting the 'pre' and 'post' tests three weeks apart. The results of the total number of errors from testing of 13 students was identical, 179 in both cases, though the numbers of errors of *a* and *the* varied slightly. In contrast, in an earlier pilot test employing different, but similar 'pre' and 'post' cloze tests, despite attempts to counterbalance effects of any disparity in the tests, there appeared a very substantial

unforeseen difference between the linguistic demands of the two, such that results became extremely skewed and reliability was undermined.

As a precaution against any ambiguity in the possible choices for the students, the cloze test was taken by three native-speaker teachers. This revealed some unforeseen problems which were then eliminated before the test was given to the students.

For practical reasons, it was impossible to conduct any pilot testing for the oral productivity test. On the basis of the results of the cloze test pilot, it was assumed that the same approach (using the same material for pre and post tests) would be preferable to changing the material for the posttest. However, since the test conditions were quite different from those of the cloze test, the reliability of the data from this stage could be open to question. Further, due to a large variation in the amount of spoken discourse produced by individual students, the making of individual error comparisons proved impractical. It was then decided to present the data as a whole, with figures provided as means of the whole groups.

The Lesson Plan - Overview

While the full lesson plan can be viewed in APPENDIX 2, below is a brief explanation of the stages of the lesson, totally approximately 85 minutes:

1. Noticing/Discovery Section (35 minutes)

Teacher provides a range of examples (singular entities, deictic reference, superlatives, anaphoric reference) for students to determine why *the* is the article of choice, in contrast to *a*.

2. Explicit Review and Discussion (15 minutes)

Teacher and class discuss the noticing/discovery section to clarify the points, preferably through elicitation.

3. Grammaticality Judgment (15 minutes)

Students are required to find errors in the target language in a short written passage.

4. Further Noticing - Enhanced Input Text - Progression Towards Definite from Indefinite (20 minutes)

Students are presented with texts, possible authentic materials, with a view to noticing the progression of item from indefinite forms to definite forms. This section often entails discussion of the concomitant occurrence of pronouns.

Results and Discussion

The College Class – Diary Observations

As explained above, at this stage the numbers provided are for the entire class, with no isolation of individual students' results.

Wordage: 5020

Table 1. Pre-lesson Results (adjusted to match word count of post-lesson results)

| omissions | | | overuse | | exchange | | compound error | correct use | |
|-----------|-----|------------|---------|-----|---------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|-----|
| 'the' | 'a' | determiner | 'the' | 'a' | 'a' for 'the' | 'the' for 'a' | | 'the' | 'a' |
| 60 | 50 | 29 | 6 | 6 | 13 | 6 | 21 | 58 | 57 |

Table 2. Post-lesson Results

| omissions | | | overuse | | exchange | | compound error | correct use | |
|-----------|-----|------------|---------|-----|---------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|-----|
| 'the' | 'a' | determiner | 'the' | 'a' | 'a' for 'the' | 'the' for 'a' | | 'the' | 'a' |
| 20 | 40 | 9 | 20 | 6 | 9 | 10 | 14 | 85 | 61 |

Tables 1 and 2 reveal a range of distinct and significant changes in the dairies. An obvious change is in the drop in the number of omissions of *the* from 60 to 20, a drop of 66.6%. On the other hand, we see an increase in the overuse of *the*, which might be thought to undermine any claim of improvement, since it could be interpreted as simply an increase in the overall use of *the*. While overall instances of correct use of both articles has increased, again, *the* with an increase of 46.5% is the one of note.

In a notable and unanticipated side benefit, there appears to be a very significant decrease in the omission of other determiners (69%), and a drop in the number of compound errors (30%), neither of which was the target of the lesson.

A question which commonly arises in such an experiment is whether outside influences in the time between the tests could account for such a change. In the absence data from a control group, this is difficult to ascertain. Simple writing experience and exposure to correct forms from reading and conversation classes may account for some of this change, and it is very difficult to argue to what extent these will have influenced the results. However, it would be questionable to claim that, after six years of study of English, a mere three weeks of additional study is likely to have had a very significant effect.

The University Classes – Direct Testing of Target Forms

Results of the experimental and control groups for the cloze and oral tests are explained below. As mentioned previously, for practical reasons, only the cloze tests shows individualized results, while the oral tests are recorded in less detail and as a whole group.

Cloze Test

It was decided to use the number of errors in relation to the number of choices as a measure of the participants' ability to correctly select *a* or *the* in the text. The results were first tabulated to show these numbers and the percentage of errors for each student, both in pre and post-lesson tests for both experimental and control groups.

Table 3 shows the results for each student in terms of numbers of errors and their corresponding percentages from a total of 69 spaces on the cloze test for the experimental group. The means are displayed at the bottom of the columns. The figures can be compared with the control group results shown in Table 4. The pre-lesson tests in both groups show similar numbers, 19.7% and 18.4%.

However, while the means show a drop from 18.4% to 17.1% in the post-lesson test for the control group, we can see a far greater drop for the experimental group, from 19.7% errors before the lesson to just 11.1% after the lesson. This is equal to a drop in errors of 43.7%, a figure which includes those showing negative improvement.

Table 3. Results of Cloze Tests for Experimental Group (n=17)

| Experimental group – Pre test | | | Experimental group – Post test | | |
|-------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Student | Number of errors | % of total (69) | Student | Number of errors | % of total (69) |
| 1 | 16 | 23.5 | 1 | 12 | 17.6 |
| 2 | 17 | 25.0 | 2 | 8 | 11.8 |

| | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|-----|------|
| 3 | 10 | 14.7 | 3 | 9 | 13.2 |
| 4 | 22 | 32.4 | 4 | 10 | 14.7 |
| 5 | 18 | 26.5 | 5 | 4 | 5.9 |
| 6 | 24 | 35.3 | 6 | 11 | 16.1 |
| 7 | 4 | 5.9 | 7 | 8 | 11.8 |
| 8 | 7 | 10.3 | 8 | 9 | 13.2 |
| 9 | 15 | 22.1 | 9 | 12 | 17.6 |
| 10 | 7 | 10.3 | 10 | 2 | 2.9 |
| 11 | 12 | 17.6 | 11 | 4 | 5.9 |
| 12 | 14 | 20.6 | 12 | 10 | 14.7 |
| 13 | 12 | 17.6 | 13 | 5 | 7.4 |
| 14 | 11 | 16.2 | 14 | 9 | 13.2 |
| 15 | 14 | 20.6 | 15 | 5 | 7.4 |
| 16 | 24 | 35.3 | 16 | 8 | 11.8 |
| 17 | 1 | 1.5 | 17 | 2 | 2.9 |
| Mean | 13.4 | 19.7 | Mean | 7.5 | 11.1 |

Looking at individual results, there appear three students who actually got lower scores after the lesson. For the rest of the class, there exists a range from as little as a drop of one error (Student 3), to as many as 16 (Student16). Students 2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 13, 15 and 16 all showed improvements where the number of errors was cut by half or more, some by over two-thirds.

Table 4 shows a sharp contrast in results for the control group. Seven students' results showed negative improvement (highlighted), and two had identical scores. Of the remaining eight students, just two (Students 11 and 13) showed an improvement where the number of errors was cut by half or more.

Table 4. Results of Cloze Tests for Control Group (n=17)

| Control group – Pre test | | | Control group – Post test | | |
|--------------------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| Student | Number of errors | % of total (69) | Student | Number of errors | % of total (69) |
| 1 | 20 | 29.4 | 1 | 21 | 30.8 |
| 2 | 20 | 29.4 | 2 | 17 | 25 |
| 3 | 4 | 5.9 | 3 | 6 | 8.8 |
| 4 | 11 | 16.2 | 4 | 7 | 10.3 |
| 5 | 2 | 2.9 | 5 | 9 | 13.2 |
| 6 | 6 | 8.8 | 6 | 7 | 10.3 |
| 7 | 13 | 19.1 | 7 | 17 | 25 |

| | | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 8 | 5 | 7.4 | 8 | 4 | 5.9 |
| 9 | 15 | 22.1 | 9 | 16 | 23.6 |
| 10 | 13 | 19.1 | 10 | 12 | 17.7 |
| 11 | 12 | 17.6 | 11 | 3 | 4.4 |
| 12 | 12 | 17.6 | 12 | 14 | 20.6 |
| 13 | 18 | 26.5 | 13 | 8 | 11.8 |
| 14 | 8 | 11.8 | 14 | 7 | 10.3 |
| 15 | 18 | 26.5 | 15 | 18 | 26.5 |
| 16 | 25 | 36.8 | 16 | 23 | 33.8 |
| 17 | 11 | 16.2 | 17 | 9 | 13.2 |
| Mean | 12.5 | 18.4 | Mean | 11.6 | 17.1 |

A paired-samples *t* test was conducted to evaluate the differences in mean scores between the pre-test and the post-test for each group. The results (Table 5) show a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores for the experimental group, but no significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores for the control group.

Table 5. Results of Paired-sample *t* test

| | Pre-test mean | Post-test mean | <i>t</i> | Degrees of freedom | Significance (two-tailed) | <i>r</i> |
|--|---------------|----------------|----------|--------------------|---------------------------|----------|
| experimental group: pre and post tests | 13.4 | 7.5 | 4.160 | 16 | .001 | .52 |
| control group: pre and post tests | 12.5 | 11.6 | .870 | 16 | .397 | .05 |

The *t* test confirms that there is, indeed, a significant difference in the pre and post-test results of the experimental group while also showing that the difference in the control group results is not significant. The fact that there exist some results quite inconsistent with the general trend in both experimental and control groups, makes it clear that further experimentation with a larger number of participants would be required to confirm the claims of this report.

Speaking Test

Tables 6 and 7 show the results only of the main target language, presented as means of all the students' spoken language during each test. A 'spoken unit' is defined as any comprehensible utterance of clause length or greater as part of the students' description of the pictures. Unlike the cloze test, which allowed comparison of the numbers of errors with a fixed number of items

being tested, this was not possible with the oral test. Therefore the figures chosen for observation became the number of instances of correct article use.

Table 6. Results of Speaking Test for Experimental Group: (n=17)

| Experimental group – Pre test | | | | Experimental group – Post test | | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------|-------------|-----|--------------------------------|--------------|-------------|-----|
| | units spoken | correct use | | | units spoken | correct use | |
| | | 'the' | 'a' | | | 'the' | 'a' |
| Total | 519 | 146 | 45 | Total | 494 | 228 | 98 |
| Mean | 30.5 | 8.6 | 2.6 | Mean | 29.0 | 13.4 | 5.8 |

In Table 6, the experimental group shows an increase in the means of correct use of *the* from 8.6 to 13.4, an increase of 55.8%, while the numbers for *a* change from 2.6 to 5.8, that is, 123%. Table 7, for the control group, shows far smaller increases, that is 8% for *the*, and 23% for *a*. Again, while the amount of data are very limited, the difference from this initial investigation seems very encouraging.

Table 7. Results of Speaking Test for Control Group: (n=17)

| Control group – Pre test | | | | Control group – Post test | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------|-------------|-----|---------------------------|--------------|-------------|-----|
| | units spoken | correct use | | | units spoken | correct use | |
| | | 'the' | 'a' | | | 'the' | 'a' |
| Total | 506 | 114 | 36 | Total | 521 | 124 | 44 |
| Mean | 29.8 | 6.7 | 2.1 | Mean | 30.6 | 7.3 | 2.6 |

Conclusions

This investigation was conducted with only small numbers representing just two (very similar) population groups, college and university women. Circumstantial restraints did not allow a thoroughgoing investigation of the college students' writing before and after the lessons, and there remain some questions of reliability regarding in both experiments. Therefore, the results need to be verified by further, more comprehensive study with a variety of populations. Furthermore, the pre and post-tests themselves are not an integral part of the lesson plan, and yet they will inevitably have influenced the students' thinking and awareness of the topic. We cannot, therefore, claim that the results were entirely uncontaminated by the research process.

That said, the results as they stand do look very encouraging. Significant improvement in use of the target structures has occurred both experimental groups, seen both in immediate post testing and in testing some weeks later, suggestive of an improvement of the students' overall production of correct forms. If one lesson can make such a difference, it could be a valuable addition to a syllabus, particularly when the importance of this grammatical point. Further, if it can be shown to work for other populations, this approach may prove to have a wider positive impact on the understanding of many EFL and ESL students.

One major emphasis of this report is that the lesson, as just *one* lesson, is able to have a significant impact on students' subsequent performance. This means that for many classes, it may be quite practicable to insert it at some point into the syllabus. However, that does not mean that it needs to be restricted to one lesson. Parts 5 and 6 of the lesson plan (Appendix 2) are, in fact, recommended additional reading and grammar dictation exercises (not a part of the plan studied here), which could be introduced in subsequent lessons to enhance and supplement the points learned in the main lesson. They also need not take up much time from the syllabus, perhaps thirty minutes each, and future research may show that they, too, improve performance still further. Perhaps with a combination of refinements in the present lesson plan and the development of appropriate follow-up exercises, this approach to the teaching of the articles could prove to be yet more effective.

Further Research

One major advantage to observing the effects of this particular lesson is that the target language will naturally occur in the participants' work both before and after the lesson. This offers the possibility of collecting large amounts of additional data without interfering with the students' normal syllabus or learning behavior, and in ways quite different, perhaps, from the ones used in this study.

Studies could be done on a larger scale to verify the findings of this study as is, both in similar populations to those studied here, and to others, such as high school students. Additionally, it could be of great value, as suggested above, to discover if the suggested supplements to the lesson, or others, would produce even better results.

APPENDIX 1. Cloze Pretest and Posttest for University Groups

It was warm evening, and *CIA agents* Smith and Jones were sitting in back seat of their car. Jones had bought hamburger from nearest convenience store, and was eating it. His soda can was on driver's seat. Smith was smoking cigar. car smelled really bad.

..... agents were watching house, waiting for foreign spy to arrive from Europe. sky was clear, and moon was shining. house was large and old, and it had large balcony over front door. They looked at house carefully. There was light on in living room, but front door was dark. agents had seen no one for two or three hours, but they had seen man go into house earlier in day.

Suddenly, large, blue car stopped in front of house. person got out of car, opened trunk, and took out box. It wasn't man they were waiting for. He was wearing black coat and dark hat. hat covered his eyes, but they knew him, anyway. 'He's man we saw in Washington last week!' said Jones. man looked around, and *sniffed* air. Then, he walked to front door. Jones said, 'I think there's secret radio in box. Maybe they are using radio to contact their agents!'

Smith and Jones got out of car very quickly, *leaving* car key on driver's seat. They went to blue car and *released* air from tires to stop spy from escaping. Then, they went to back of house. 'Let's look for window we can open. They found one, and climbed quietly inside. It was dark, but they soon knew that they were in kitchen. 'Oh. Good!' said Jones, 'Maybe I can find can of cold beer in fridge.' 'Shut up!' hissed Smith, 'He will hear you!' Then, they heard

noise upstairs, so they crept silently up stairs to see where man was. There were three doors on second floor. They *headed for* nearest door and opened it slowly. Suddenly bright light flashed on in their faces and they heard loud voice! ‘Freeze! I have gun!’ They could not see behind light. ‘Stand still!’ said voice, ‘and be quiet!’ There was silence for five seconds. Then they heard small sound from behind light, and again, ‘Freeze! I have - - - ’ ‘HUH?’ said Jones. ‘It’s tape recorder!’ said Smith, ‘Let’s go!’ But they were too late. spy had *disappeared*. They heard car engine start outside, and they *rushed* to front door. blue car was still outside, but their car was gone!

APPENDIX 2. The Full Lesson Plan

C.R. ACTIVITIES FOR ‘A’ AND ‘THE’

Note: Sections 1-4 will likely take 80 ~ 90 minutes.

1. Noticing/Discovery Section

a) Singular entities

CLASS: Provide the following examples:

- The world is round.
- The sun is hot.
- “Look at the sky.”
- In the future we shall all have robots in our homes.

ELICIT FOR CLASS DISCUSSION - Explain why they all use the particle ‘the’.

Teacher can help by asking:

If you used these expressions, who would understand what you are talking about?

Anyone, because everyone knows what you are talking about.

b) Deictic Reference and Superlatives

GROUP OR CLASS DISCUSSION: Provide the following examples:

Verbal interactions -

- A: "Be careful! The floor is wet." B: "Thanks."
- A: "Please close the door." B: "OK."
- A: "I'll meet you at the station." B: "OK. See you there."
- A: "Where's Wendy?" B: "She's in the kitchen."
- A: "Pass me the kettle, please." B: "Sure!"
- A: "What time is the last bus?" B: "Ten forty-five."
- A: "The guy standing by the door is watching us!"

Teacher can help by asking:

In these cases, who knows precisely what or who is being discussed?

(BOTH, and the key is in the shared information IN THE SITUATION - deictic reference)

Possible samples of written discourse –

- John was in his garden, sitting on the grass.
- Stan parked his car in front of his house, and crossed the road.
- There are gift shops and restaurants on the first floor. (On a hotel's web site.)

Teacher can help by asking:

Why is 'the' definite in these cases? Because the reader can readily imagine the one item referred to, since there would likely only be one in each situation.

GROUP OR CLASS DISCUSSION: Provide the following examples:

- Mt. Fuji is the highest mountain in Japan.
- A: "I need the cheapest film you sell." B: "Here you are, Sir."
- A: "The guy who was standing by the door is following us."

Teacher can help by asking:

What makes these definite? The superlative defines each one for both interlocutors, and the defining relative clause limits the man to one for both interlocutors.

c) Anaphoric Reference - Noticing

GROUP OR CLASS DISCUSSION: Look at the passage below, and explain the reasons for using ‘a’ and ‘the’ with each noun or noun phrase.

Teacher may elicit how, in addition to examples similar to those studied above, some of the ‘the’ noun phrases refer to previously occurring ‘a’ noun phrases.

(Potentially difficult vocabulary is italicized.)

HANDOUT –

*Detectives Black and White had a big problem. There was a gangster with a gun pointed at them! They were in a bar in downtown Chicago. The bar was almost empty, although the street outside was full of people. Black was reading a newspaper and White had a beer. The gangster was standing at the front door, and he did not look friendly. ‘Am I the guy you were looking for, officers?’ said the gangster. Joey Stun was the most dangerous gangster in the city. White slowly put the glass on the table, watching the man with the gun. Meanwhile, behind the newspaper, Black quietly switched on his radio to get help. ‘Uh, Hi, Joey! It’s a nice day, isn’t it?’ said White, nervously. ‘Shaddup! I don’t care about the weather! We are going for a nice little trip to the ocean! I’m going to give you a swimming lesson, with concrete boots!’ said the gangster, ‘Hurry up! Get up and go through the kitchen!’ ‘Can we get a drink before we go?’ said Black. ‘No way!’ shouted Joey. Suddenly, they heard a *siren*. The noise was getting louder. The detectives looked out of the nearest window. There was a patrol car about one *block* away. Joey pushed the detectives out the back door of the bar and into his car. White sat behind the steering wheel. He hit the gas, and the car was gone.*

2. Explicit Review and Discussion

CLASS DISCUSSION: Teacher needs to clarify these questions with the class, hopefully by elicitation.

‘The’ is for...?

'A' is for....?

The point to be established when we are writing or talking is 'WHAT DO WE WANT TO TELL OUR LISTENER /READER WHEN WE CHOOSE 'A' OR 'THE'? DO WE WANT TO SAY THAT HE/ SHE ALREADY KNOWS ABOUT THIS - IS IT OBVIOUS, OR ARE WE INTRODUCING NEW INFORMATION?

When writing or speaking we can add information indirectly with our use of 'a' or 'the'. For example, if in our writing or speaking, we say 'Mike went to the park and sat under the tree,' it indicates that it is a very small park! Why?

3. Noticing - Grammaticality Judgment - Find the errors.

INDIVIDUAL, PAIR, OR GROUP TASK: (This is a contrived, simplified text with limited pronoun use to minimize interference with the target point.)

HANDOUT –

Underline the errors, and circle the correct uses of *the* and *a*.

Kelly was a secretary in the small town in America. She was at home and she was having the bad day. She had a headache because she had been to the party the night before. She sat in a kitchen, and she drank the cup of coffee. She turned on the TV and began to watch. There was a program about the man who was eating a big, fat hamburger. Kelly felt ill, so she found a remote control and changed to a new channel. On the new channel there was the aerobics program. Kelly picked up a phone and called her boss, but he was not in an office.

4. Further Noticing - Enhanced Input Text - Progression Towards Definite from Indefinite

Students are to read a text and look out for examples of this progression.

Since students will also be exposed to the use of pronouns, 'it, one, they, them, some', this complication needs to be noted. Then students can observe collocation of pronouns with their antecedents. This is further to the 'detectives passage, but observation, rather than discovery.

A real joke from the internet: -

In Las Vegas, a young woman walked up to a Coke machine and put in a coin. A Coke came out of the machine. The woman looked amazed and ran away to get some more coins. She returned and started putting lots of coins in, and of course the machine continued popping out the soda cans.

Another customer walked up behind the woman. He watched her for a few minutes before stopping her and asking if he could use the machine.

The woman shouted in his face: "Go away! Can't you see I'm winning?"

A true story from the internet: -

There is a real story from a small American town, like the hit movie "Home Alone." In this story, while 13-year-old Ryan Hendrickson was home alone, a guy tried to *break into* his house. Ryan was watching a TV program, when he heard a noise. It was not loud, but he knew something was happening.

"I ran to the closet and got a baseball bat," Ryan said. "I went into the dining room with the bat, and I saw a guy cutting one of the windows with a knife. He put his left hand in first, and I was waiting for his right hand to come in. When he came through, I took the bat and I hit him as hard as I could. He dropped the knife and ran away. Then I called 911."

The lesson will probably take close to ninety minutes until this point. However, it is recommended that a little post-CR review/reinforcement take place in a following lesson by augmenting with exercises such as the ones below.

5. Optional Extended Reading Exercise

PAIRS/INDIVIDUALS: Students identify and justify instances of articles in various selected reading passages. ('An' can be included here without much comment.)

Three possible samples with simple examples of anaphoric reference can be found in:

- Reading Keys, Bronze, Book A, p. 52. (Craven, 2003)

6. Optional Production Exercise - Grammar Dictation (Dictogloss)

In a Dictogloss, the T reads the passage TWICE ONLY at a fair speed, with some pauses (faster than a dictation, slower than natural). This allows Ss to get the gist and write down substantial parts of the text, but not enough to be clear. Then Ss work in groups to recreate the story with good lexis, grammar, etc. Even if their final work is not word for word the same, this is not important. The purpose is to have them use their linguistic knowledge and common sense to reproduce the story. We hope they will get the articles right, especially.

Vocabulary: approach clerk arrest

A man with a shotgun and a supermarket shopping cart walked into a bank. He shouted at the customers to lie down on the floor, and then he approached a window. The robber told the clerk at the window to give him all the money in her drawer. She handed him the money, but then she pushed him. He fell back into the cart, and the cart rolled across the bank and out the front door! A police car arrived and the officer arrested the man.

n.b. The above passage was taken from Grammar Dictation (Wajnryb, 1990), and modified for the purpose of this lesson with the permission of the author.

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The Dictogloss passage was taken from Grammar Dictation (Wajnryb, 1990), and modified for the purpose of this lesson with the permission of the author.

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