

# Turnoi Turjakuunnen

*Ph. D. , Th. D., M. A., M. R. S.*

## Did you see *a* or *the* crocodile?

*Teaching the correct usage of Definite and Indefinite Articles to Learners of English  
As A Second Language*



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# ***Did you see a crocodile or the crocodile?* – Teaching the correct usage of Definite and Indefinite Articles to Learners of English As a Second Language (Part I)**

***By Turnoi Turjakuunnen, Ph.D., Th. D.***

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**T**here are languages like English that mark definite reference of countable nouns<sup>1</sup> by the definite article *the*, and indefinite reference of countable nouns by using the indefinite article *a* (or its variant form *an* when preceding another word with an initial vowel). And as a rule, this explicit marking of definite vs. indefinite reference is obligatory in such languages.<sup>2</sup>

The explicit marking of definite vs. indefinite reference of countable nouns primarily serves to indicate whether a certain person or object referred to by the noun has been identified as a specific, individual object  $x$  from a virtual set  $X$  of all objects  $x$  in  $X$  (definite reference) or not (indefinite reference).

In actual language use, definite reference of nouns by means of the definite article indicates such a person or object to be singled out as specific and individual identified and referred to on part of the speaker/writer. The use of the indefinite article, then, serves to indicate quite the opposite.

There are many other languages like Chinese without articles for which the explicit marking of definite vs. indefinite reference of nouns is not obligatory. For native speakers of such *article-less languages*<sup>3</sup>, the correct usage of definite and indefinite articles in English hence may be constitute a learner problem when learning English as a Second Language. And it seems that most of the textbooks and grammars available for such learners of English as a Second Language fail to present a comprehensive and clear-cut rule that would help especially these students to use the definite and indefinite articles in both spoken and written English.

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<sup>1</sup> Non-countable nouns like *sun* cannot normally take an indefinite article and would normally be preceded by the definite article only. Therefore, the following remarks apply to countable nouns only.

<sup>2</sup> This applies to current linguistic forms of English, French, German, etc. In other languages like Biblical Hebrew or Koine Greek, for example, definite reference of countable nouns was marked by a definite article while indefinite reference of countable nouns was not marked due to absence of a special indefinite article. In Classical and modern variants of Arabic, definite reference of countable nouns is marked by the respective article form *al* or any of its morphologically determined variants while indefinite reference is marked by noun suffixation in *-un*, *-in*, *-an* respectively, depending upon grammatical case of the countable noun in question.

<sup>3</sup> The European continent is linguistically dominated by Germanic and Romance languages of Indo-European origin; in all these languages the definite-indefinite reference opposition of countable nouns plays a significant role in their respective grammars. Most Slavonic languages like Polish, Russian, etc., are an exception in this respect. Finno-Ugrian languages like Finnish and Estonian do not have articles while Hungarian does.

In what follows, the author of this article will present his own approach in developing and teaching such a rule.<sup>4</sup> The first part of this article will deal with a number of theoretical linguistic assumptions underlying such an approach, while the second part of this article will be devoted to a practical, detailed step-by-step procedure to outline and teach such a rule.

## 1. Preliminary Linguistic Assumptions

The preliminary linguistic assumptions below mostly will be given in a brief thesis statement form without going too much into detail.

(1.1) There are languages with definite and indefinite articles that belong to a given language group A. And there are languages without definite and indefinite articles that belong to a given language group B.<sup>5</sup>

(1.2) All languages according to language groups A and B have personal and demonstrative pronouns but not necessarily definite/indefinite articles in their word class inventory.<sup>6</sup>

(1.3) Demonstrative and personal pronouns always indicate definite reference.<sup>7</sup>

(1.4) In languages belonging to group A, definite articles may be replaced by demonstrative pronouns without any change in definite reference.<sup>8</sup>

(1.5) Historically, definite articles developed in languages of group A from demonstrative pronouns.<sup>9</sup>

(1.6) Historically, indefinite articles developed in languages of group A from the numeral word for "one" in these languages.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The author of this article has developed, tested and used this approach over the years in his teaching to students who were native speakers of article-less languages in Korea, Poland and China.

<sup>5</sup> English, German, Dutch, etc., are examples for languages belonging to group A; languages like Russian, Polish, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Swahili, etc., are examples for languages belonging to group B.

<sup>6</sup> This means that all languages of groups A and B are assumed to possess demonstrative and personal pronouns. But not all languages can be assumed to possess articles; only languages of group A possess articles in addition to personal and demonstrative pronouns.

<sup>7</sup> *He, she, it* always refer to a person or object with definite reference. The same applies to demonstrative pronouns such as *this, these, that, those*.

<sup>8</sup> For example, if you can say *He saw the crocodile* you may also say *He saw that crocodile* instead.

<sup>9</sup> For example, in Latin there were no definite articles. The definite article forms *la, le, il, el*, etc. in contemporary Romance languages developed from Latin demonstrative pronoun forms such as *illa*. In the case of English, the definite article *the* in contemporary English developed from Old English *thē*, a demonstrative pronoun. For further details, cf. *CED*, p. 1670.

<sup>10</sup> For example, the French indefinite article forms *un/une* are clearly linguistically related to the French numeral *un* meaning "one". "One" may here have the sense of „any x". In the case of English, the indefinite article *a/an* in contemporary English is most likely a contracted form of "one".

(1.7) In both language groups A and B, a demonstrative pronoun cannot be used if the use of the definite article would be inappropriate according to context in languages of group A.<sup>11</sup>

(1.8) Consequently, in contexts where it would be inappropriate to use a definite article or a demonstrative pronoun in languages like English<sup>12</sup>, the indefinite article would normally have to be used in those languages belonging to group A.<sup>13</sup>

(1.9) If the use of the indefinite article is necessary according to context in any language of group A, the use of a demonstrative pronoun is not acceptable according to context in any language of group B.<sup>14</sup>

## **2. Primary and Secondary Communicative Functions of Articles in Languages like English**

For the group of languages A, it is assumed that usage of definite and indefinite articles to indicate definite vs. indefinite reference of countable nouns is their *primary communicative function*. This is due to the fact that the latter is the most frequent and typical level of article usage in a language like English. And it is held that this primary communicative function covers at least over 90 % of all instances of article usage in languages belonging to group A.

However, there are instances of article use where this may not apply so clearly. For all such cases where the difference between definite and indefinite reference of countable nouns by usage of either article group, definite or indefinite, does not apply, we will apply the term *secondary communicative function of articles* here. One such instance of secondary communicative functions of articles would be the case of nouns with either

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<sup>11</sup> This means that there are language use contexts where according to context; a demonstrative pronoun (or a definite article in case of a language belonging to language group A) cannot be used both in languages of language group A and B. For example, in an English sentence like *Suddenly, Mike saw a crocodile*, it would be inappropriate to use *the* or *this* instead of *a*. In such a case, a demonstrative pronoun could not be used in the translational equivalent of this sentence in languages like Chinese.

<sup>12</sup> Or other languages like English, all of which can be assumed to belong to language group A.

<sup>13</sup> That is because indefinite reference would be implied then according to context.

<sup>14</sup> In its very nature, this is a contrastive rule. It says that students with a native language belonging to group B could use this as a guideline for the correct usage of the definite/indefinite article in languages like English: Whenever students feel that using the demonstrative pronoun is unacceptable in their own native language according to context, they should use the indefinite article in language like English. This rule can easily be applied by students who are in doubt whether the definite or indefinite article would be appropriate to be used in certain situations in a language like English. They could easily find out by first translating the English sentence they want to form into their native language with a demonstrative pronoun to see whether its usage is acceptable in their own language in a given context or not. If their answer is "No", then they would be advised to use the indefinite article in languages like English. - This is basically the approach I have been using in my teaching over the years.

*generic reference*<sup>15</sup> or *individual reference*<sup>16</sup> for example in sentences with a linking verb<sup>17</sup> or any of its morphological variants like *be, is, are, was, etc.*<sup>18</sup> in terms of logical class/set inclusion relationships as follows:

(1) *A horse is an animal.*

[The set of all horses is included in the set of all animals; both nouns have generic reference, and if so, this is an indicator that all horses are animals but that, on the other hand, not all animals are horses.]

(2) *This horse is an animal, too.*

[That individual horse forms part of the set of all horses; the subject noun phrase *this horse* has individual reference while the predicate noun phrase *an animal* has generic reference.]

(3) *This horse is my horse.*

[Both noun phrases *this horse* and *my horse* have individual reference; hence, an identity relationship is implied.]

From the sentence examples given above, we may conclude that:

(2.1) Whether a class inclusion (sentence (1)), an element relationship (sentence (2)) or even an identity relationship (sentence (3)) is implied depends upon the kind of secondary reference of nouns both before and after the verb in the sentences given above.

And we may further conclude that:

(2.2) If a subject noun has generic reference in relation to a predicate noun with generic reference, then a class inclusion relationship is implied.

(2.3) If a subject noun has individual reference in relation to a predicate noun with generic reference, then an element relationship is implied.

(2.4) If a subject noun has individual reference in relation to a predicate noun with individual reference, then an identity relationship is implied.

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<sup>15</sup> *Generic reference* is characterised by the fact that a noun used in the sense of generic reference refers to a set of all objects *x* in the class of *X*. For example, a noun like *The Chinese* in a sentence like *The Chinese are Asians* refers to all Chinese who are assumed to be Asians.

<sup>16</sup> *Individual reference* is characterised by the fact that a noun used in the sense of individual reference refers to an individual object *x* as a single element in the class or a set of all *X*. For example, *This Chinese* in a sentence like *This Chinese is my friend* does not refer to all *x* in *X* but to an individual single *x* from among all *x* in *X* only.

<sup>17</sup> Another, much more common term for this kind of classifying verbs is also *copula verb*.

<sup>18</sup> However, the notion of generic reference as opposed to individual reference may also apply in the case of other sentence forms such as *The Chinese normally eat rice*.

Thus, for languages like English, we can also state that:

- (2.5) Nouns with *generic reference* may be marked by:
- a. the indefinite article (cf. sentences (1) and (2)) when given in their singular form;
  - b. a zero article (absence of any article) when given in their plural form in a sentence like  
(4) Horses are animals;
  - c. the definite article when given in their respective singular form in a sentence like  
(5) The horse is an animal.

On the other hand, we can also state for languages like English that:

- (2.6) Nouns with *individual reference* may be preceded only by a definite article or a demonstrative pronoun in a sentence like  
(6) This horse is his horse, not yours.

### 3. Conclusion

In conclusion of Part 1 of this article, we can say that primary communicative functions of articles in languages like English and secondary communicative functions of articles in languages like English serve to distinguish and indicate at least two different levels of countable noun reference:

#### COUNTABLE NOUN REFERENCE CONTEXTS OF ARTICLES IN ENGLISH

<b>1. Primary communicative function of articles:</b>	definite vs. indefinite reference of countable nouns
<b>2. Secondary communicative functions of articles:</b>	generic vs. individual reference of countable nouns

It is clearly the level of primary communicative functions of articles in languages like English that may constitute a problem for learners of English as a Second Language if their native language is an article-less language and hence belongs to language group B. The second part of this article will deal with a teaching strategy of the contrastive rule presented above.<sup>19</sup>

(To be continued)

#### **REFERENCES:**

CED: Collins English Dictionary, 6th edition, 2003.

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<sup>19</sup> For further details of this rule, cf. Footnote 14 above.

## ***Did you see a crocodile or the crocodile?* – Teaching the correct usage of Definite and Indefinite Articles to Learners of English As a Second Language (Part II)**

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**I**n what follows, I will try to outline a teaching strategy for the rule I have introduced in Part I of this article.

### **4. Teaching the Rule**

Firstly, let me briefly state the rule for which I will outline a tripartite step-by-step teaching procedure below:

- (4.2) a. In any of the language groups A and B, if a demonstrative pronoun before a noun is inappropriate according to context, then in languages A the indefinite article should be used.
- b. In any of the languages A and B, whenever a demonstrative pronoun is NOT inappropriate (and thus appropriate) according to context, then the definite article (or a demonstrative pronoun in some cases) should be used in languages A.

Now, I am going to outline my strategy to teach this rule.

#### ***First Step: Introducing the Topic and the Rule (T = Teacher, S = Student(s))***

T.: “Good morning, today I want to outline a rule that will be of great help to all of you. It will help you to determine whether a definite or indefinite article should be used in an English sentence according to a certain context. As you all will know only too well, many of you may have a problem with the correct usage of these articles in English. That is because there are no articles in your own native language. Let us begin with the following pair of English sentences.

- (1) a. Yesterday, I saw a man in a car.  
b. The man in the car was Frankenstein.

*(T writes this on the blackboard for everyone in the class to see).*

OK, here we are...You can easily see that sentences (1 a-b) are about a same man in the same car. And you can also see that the man in that car was identified as Frankenstein.

In (1a), the man and the car are introduced and mentioned for the first time to the listener/reader according to context on the part of the speaker/writer; in (1b) they are mentioned a second time.

And you also can see that when mentioned for the first time, *a/an* (indefinite articles are used, and when they are mentioned the second time in (1b), the definite article *the* is commonly used.

Instances of the first and second mentioning of *man* and *car* and the use of indefinite and later definite articles depend on actual speech/writing context. Or to express it a bit differently: *Something yet unknown and unspecific and therefore marked with the indefinite article from the speaker's/writer's perspective becomes specific and will be marked by the definite article after a first-time introduction on the part of the speaker/writer in (1a).*

Let us now do a little check whether this basically works the same way in your native language that does not have articles. In your native language, you may use a demonstrative pronoun instead of the definite article because a demonstrative pronoun conveys basically the same meaning as the definite article in English.

Now, take a good look at *a man* and *a car* in (1a).

*(T is underlining these sentence parts with red colour on the blackboard).*

The question I want you to answer is this:

**If you translate (1a) into your native language, would it be acceptable to use a demonstrative pronoun like *this* or *that* before *man* and *car* in this sentence of your native language in a context such as this? And would that then be a well-formed, complete and normal sentence in your native language then? "**

*(All the S in class translate this sentence into their native language by writing the native language equivalent on a sheet of paper. Then, they reflect for a while silently and would then say something like this: "No, using THIS or THAT before MAN and CAR in this context does not sound very natural in our native language". Another possibility is that different and opposite opinions are offered).*

T continues and says:

**"Ok, that's the basic point: Whenever you are unsure of whether the definite or indefinite article should be used in English according to a certain context, then follow this *Frankenstein rule*:**

**(4.2) Simply translate the sentence into your native language silently and check whether something like *this* or *that* could be used in your native language in this sentence. If the answer is YES, then use the definite article in English. If the answer is NO, then use the indefinite article in English. "**

### ***Step 2: Practising the Rule***

T continues and says: "Let us now practice this rule by making use of some other similar English sentence pairs, for example:

- (2) a. On Monday, I saw \_\_\_ pretty girl in \_\_\_ pub.  
b. \_\_\_ girl was Mary in \_\_\_ student pub just around the corner."

*(T writes these sentences on the blackboard with gaps for filling in the appropriate articles).*

Then, T asks any S1 in class:

"Let us fill in the blanks in this pair of sentences before each noun. Would you use *a/an* or *the*? If you are unsure, remember and apply the *Frankenstein rule*".<sup>1</sup>

*After asking S1 and having been given the answer(s) by S1, T continues to ask S2, S3, S4, etc., the same question, noting the answer(s) given by each S on a sheet of paper. If the answer(s) was/were not correct, T would say:*

"Remember the Frankenstein rule: could you use *this* or *that* in your native language in this context?"

*T then continues with 2-3 more examples of other similar English sentence pairs and will S practice this rule.*

OBSERVATIONS: WHENEVER I WAS TEACHING THIS LESSON, MOST OF THE STUDENT RESPONSES WERE CORRECT, AND THERE WAS ACTUALLY LITTLE TO CORRECT. MY TEACHING STRATEGY IN STEPS 1 AND 2 WAS BASED ON THE FOLLOWING ASSUMPTIONS:

- (4.3) a. For students to understand the basic principles behind this rule, you need to apply an intuitive approach that makes use of their "intuitive" native language competencies; a presentation of the rule in a more abstract format can only follow later after having internalised the and "mastered" the more "intuitive" parts this rule.
- b. The native speaker in his intuitive feeling of the native language is always right.
- c. Regarding the sample sentences in (1), I preferred them to be a bit odd and weird in terms of sentence content by using "Frankenstein", a figure from the genre of horror fiction that I could fairly well assume to be well-known by 18 – 20 year old students in this Bachelor class. And it is because of its relative oddity and weirdness that it is more likely that such a rule will be committed to long-term memory easily by S, and T could always refer back to it easily any time later whenever necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Step 1.

### ***Third Step: Final Reinforcement***

The reinforcement phase consists of two parts as follows:

- (4.4) a. T writes the rule (cf. 4.2) on the blackboard and asks students to copy it in their notebook.  
b. Finally, T explains the linguistic factors underlying this rule.<sup>2</sup>

This concludes the lesson in class. Mostly, it took me a bit less than 45 minutes to teach this lesson with a lot of social interaction between T and S that I had not been able to reflect in this very general outline of my teaching strategy presented here. Whenever teaching such a lesson on this or a similar topic relating to language structure and the semantic concept behind, I found the sequence of steps presented here to be very helpful in making myself clear and easily understood by my students.

### **5. Comparison of Chinese and an English Text Sample**

For teachers of English as a Second/Foreign Language with a special Chinese student audience, I am adding some additional material at the end of this article in the hope that they might find it useful.

First, I am presenting these rules again in both an English and a corresponding Chinese version:

①In Chinese, if you can use a demonstrative pronoun before a noun, then use “the” in English..  
汉语句子里，名词以前可以用“这”或“那”这个指示代词，在英语里就用“the”。

②In Chinese, if you cannot use a demonstrative pronoun before a noun, then use *a* or *an*.  
汉语句子里，名词以前不可以用“这”或“那”这个指示代词，在英语里就用“a”或“an” in English.

Now, I am using a text sample both in English and its corresponding Chinese version that you may use in class:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. section 1 in Part 1 of this article.

<sup>3</sup> This Chinese text sample has been taken from: 实用汉语》第一册 (《Practical Chinese Language》, Volume 1 (no year and place of publication indicated, published in the Internet at: [http://faculty.virginia.edu/cll/chinese\\_reading/Beginning/can\\_not\\_buy.html](http://faculty.virginia.edu/cll/chinese_reading/Beginning/can_not_buy.html)). English translation added is my own.

今天不能买

今天，彼得和山本去商店买东西。彼得要买一个录音机。

这个商店很大，录音机很多：有大的，有小的，有贵的，也有便宜的。山本对彼得说：

“你看这个商店有很多录音机，你喜欢哪种？那个大的怎么样？一个五二十三块；这个小的，又便宜又好，一个三百八十六块。你买大的还是小的？”

彼得对山本说：“这些录音机都很好，可是我今天不能买。”

山本问彼得：“为什么？”

彼得说：“我就有七十块钱。”

*I cannot go shopping today*

Peter and Shanben are going to a warehouse (1) to buy things. Peter wants to buy a tape recorder (1).

The warehouse (2) is quite big; and there are many tape recorders: big ones, small ones, expensive ones, and also cheap ones.

Shanben says to Peter: “You see that this warehouse (2a) has many tape recorders, what kind of tape recorder you want? A big one (1a) like that one over there (2a)? One of them costs only 532 Yuan; and the small one over here (2b) is cheap and quite good and costs 286 Yuan. Will you buy now a big one or a small one?”

Peter says to Shanben: “All these tape recorders (2c) are good, but I cannot buy any of them today”.

Shanben asks Peter: “Why?”

Peter says: “I only have 70 Yuan on me”.

[In the English translation of the Chinese text, *warehouse* and *tape recorder* are each underlined once when they contain indefinite reference; they have been underlined twice when they contain definite reference. Numeral expressions in brackets have been added after these nouns in question with “1” for indefinite reference and “2” for definite reference. “1/2 a, b, c” indicate the first, second, and third occurrence of warehouse and tape recorder in either indefinite or definite reference respectively. ]

From the text above, it can be clearly seen that in 商店 (warehouse) in sentence (1) and 录音机 (tape recorder) in sentence (2) of the Chinese text are used in contexts where even in Chinese the usage of demonstrative pronouns like 这 (this) or 那 (that) would not be acceptable and would never be used by a Chinese native speaker in such a context where indefinite reference would be implied according to the context given. For, if such demonstrative pronouns would be used in such a context given, a Sentence like this would be regarded as ungrammatical, nor well-formed and intuitively “strange” on the part of the Chinese native speaker. The Chinese native speaker would do so on the basis of his intuitive “linguistic feeling” in accordance with the actual context given.

What does this tell us?

The structure(s) of language(s) are different because of they pertain individually to a certain, specific language. The semantic contexts determining definite and/or indefinite reference are universal in cross-linguistic terms and therefore are the same in the source language (the native language) of the ESL learner and target language, namely English as a Second Language.



The Author:

司馬我

Dr. Turnoi Turjakuunnen

**Turjakuunnen, Turnoi**: Born in 1950 and raised in Estonia at the times of Soviet rule under communism. By the end of the 1960s, he managed to escape to a Western country after imprisonment for political reasons. Turnoi Turjakuunnen graduated from universities in Europe and the USA with several Master and Doctorate degrees after completing his studies in a number of disciplines including Linguistics, African and Chinese Studies (Africanistics/Sinology), English, Theology and Religious Studies. His degrees include a Ph.D., a Th.D., M.A. and a Master in Religious Studies (M.R.S.). Dr. Turjakuunnen has been a university professor for several decades with academic teaching and research assignments at reputable universities in Europe, North America, Africa and Far Eastern Asia. He is fluent in several foreign languages, and he has published over 30 books in his research areas of interest. In his fifties, Dr. Turjakuunnen felt his spiritual calling to serve as an Anglican priest and thus was consecrated/ordained to the priesthood in 2004 after completing the required academic and practical training. Since then, he has served as a co-founder of a non-profit university college project in Nairobi, Kenya, with the primary mission of serving those underserved in tertiary education who qualify but could not be reached for a number of reasons like poverty. Today, he serves the Vice President of that university college project on a voluntary basis and is also involved in a number of infrastructural development projects at grassroots level within an Anglican church setting in Kenya. He is also the co-author of full TESL (English Teacher) training degree program for teachers of English as a Second/Foreign Language.

Contact: [turjakuunnen.turnoi75@googlemail.com](mailto:turjakuunnen.turnoi75@googlemail.com)