

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COGNITIVE LESSONS ON HELPING STUDENTS AT BVU ACQUIRED THE USE OF DEFINITE ‘*the*’ AND GENERIC ‘*the*’ BY THE TESTING ADAPTED FROM NGUYEN THU (2005), VIETNAMESE LEARNERS MASTERING ENGLISH ARTICLES.

Ho Van Han

The Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ba Ria-Vung Tau University (BVU), Vietnam

ABSTRACT

The English article system is not only so complex that philosophers and linguists have difficulties in agreeing on the underlying notions designated by the different forms, but also so different from the Vietnamese article system that it must be almost impossible for students recognize and remember the underlying its rules and conventions. Therefore, the author attempts to find out an effective way to teach English article, namely definite ‘the’ and generic ‘the’.

To conduct this research, the author used a questionnaire to survey the meaning and use of English articles, a pretest to analyze the errors of using English articles before treatment, and a post-test to determine which group performs better (the control group or the experimental group) after treatment of 80 students at BVU.

The paper compared the theories of traditional grammar and cognitive lessons insight cognitive grammar to experiment on the two groups.

Keywords: Cognitive lessons, cognitive grammar, traditional grammar

INTRODUCTION

According to a number of authors such as **Hawkins** (1978), **Master** (1987), (1990), (1997), **Langacker** (1991) cited in **Nguyen Thu** (2005), the English article system contributes not only to understanding what is said, but also playing an important role in making oneself understand in the discourse that one is engaged in. A person may not understand ‘*the professor*’ in an utterance like ‘*Where’s the professor?*’ if he or she does not share the discourse uttered in the sentence.

The intricacy of the system is reflected through the problems that second language learners encounter when mastering the system.

From personal observations, the researcher found that it is very difficult for Vietnamese students to be able to use the English article correctly, namely the distinction between definite '*the*' and generic '*the*'. For example, the students encounter problems relating to the use of '*the*' as found in the following sentences:

- (1) I am going to clean *a house* tomorrow (instead of: I am going to clean *the house* tomorrow).
- (2) Yesterday, I bought *a TV*, but *a screen* did not work (instead of: Yesterday, I bought *a TV*, but *the screen* did not work)
- (3) *A (or Zero) whale* is a mammal, not a fish (instead of: *The whale* is a mammal).

They did not know that 'the house' in (1) and 'the screen' in (2) are definite because they refer to the speaker's house and the screen of the TV mentioned. 'The screen' is used as a result of the unique relationship between a TV and a screen. That is, a TV has a screen, whereas 'the whale' in (3) is definite generic because it refers to the whole class of whales.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study

This study aim is to find out the effectiveness of cognitive lessons on the acquisition of by students at BVU.

The research questions

In order to achieve the aim of the study, the research questions below will be addressed.

- a. What kind of errors do students in two groups make before the treatment? In terms of using '*the*', do errors in using the generic '*the*' outnumber those in using the definite '*the*'?
- b. Do the experimental group significances outperform the control group after treatment?
- c. What are the aspects of English articles that the experimental group outperforms the control group? Do they significances outperform the control group in using generic "the" and definite "the"?

Subjects

The sample, students were 80 selected randomly to take part in this research. The forty were for each group.

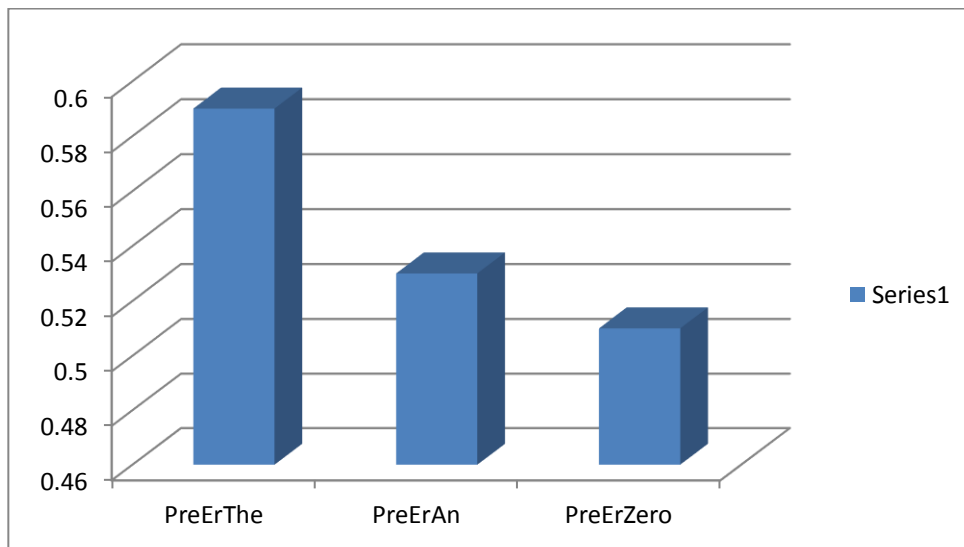
Instruments

A questionnaire, a pretest, and a post-test were used to collect and analyze the necessary data for the research.

RESULTS

Research question 1: What kind of errors do students in two groups make before the treatment? In terms of using ‘the’, do errors in using the generic ‘the’ outnumber those in using the definite ‘the’?

Among the three errors found in the two groups (experimental and control), the errors in using ‘the’ stood out ($\bar{x} = 0.59$). Then came the errors in using indefinite articles A/an ($\bar{x} = 0.53$), and finally those in using the Zero article ($\bar{x} = 0.51$). (Refer to graph 1.)



Graph 1: Errors in using the three articles: The, A/an, Zero.

Although the information from the standard deviation did reveal that students consistently had problems in using article ‘the’ (SD = .103), it is interesting to note that some students had no knowledge of using article Zero (SD= .225) if a comparison was made with the other standard deviations. (Please refer to table 1). The dispersion of the errors found based on the mean score

of the errors in using article ‘zero’ was not as consistent as what was found with those in using article ‘the’. This suggests that, although there were students who did not make any errors in using ‘zero’, there were some who had full problems in using article ‘zero’.

		The	A/an	Zero
N	Valid	80	80	80
	Missing	0	0	0
Mean		.5926	.5302	.5104
Median		.5909	.5833	.5000
Mode		.55	.58	.50
Std. Deviation		.10341	.16941	.22555

Table 1: Pretest: Descriptive statistics of the errors in using the three articles (The, A/an, Zero)

From the major errors of article use, it was noticed that students had more problems in using ‘the.’ A further investigation into the problem of using ‘the’ revealed that students had more problems in using definite ‘the’ than generic ‘the’. While the two groups’ score in using definite ‘the’ was .391, their score in using generic ‘the’ was .435. Nevertheless, the information from the standard deviation suggests that the students’ performance, compared with that of definite ‘the’ (SD=.140) was not consistent when using generic ‘the’ (SD = .188). Although students could get high scores in using generic ‘the,’ many of them got zero scores if we considered the range of the scores.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Mean pretest (definite the)	80	.07	.71	.3911	.14011
Mean pretest (generic the)	80	.00	.88	.4359	.18868
Valid N (list wise)	80				

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of the errors in using ‘the’

Research question 2: Do experimental group significances outperform the control group after treatment?

To test the hypothesis whether or not the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group as a result of the treatment of cognitive lessons, an independent t-test was performed.

Before the t-test was performed, we tested the assumption of homogeneity of variance. As such, Levene’s test for equality of variances (i.e. a form of F test) was used. For the dependent variable of post-test mean, an F-ratio of 2.216 with a probability of .141 was produced (table 3). Since the probability exceeded the alpha level of .05, we failed to reject the null hypothesis that the variances were different and maintained the assumption of homogeneity.

Based on the assumption maintained, we examined the results of the t-test for equal variances. The t-value was -2.212, based on 78 degrees of freedom (df). The 2-tailed probability of the t-test was .030, which suggests that differences between the two groups could occur by chance was up to about 3 times in 100, which was lower than the alpha level established (5 times in 100). Therefore, the mean difference must happen less than 3 times in 100 for us to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that the group means are truly different. This confirms the hypothesis that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control.

Indeed, the results after the treatment showed that cognitive lessons proved useful in helping learners acquire the English articles if a comparison is made with the pre-test results. From the results of the pre-test, it was found that the two groups were not different from each other because the probability of the t-test (sig.= .926) was higher than the alpha level established ($p < .05$). We could not reject the null hypothesis that the two groups were not different from each

other. This demonstrates that the two groups were on an equal basis before the treatment was administered.

		Levene's Test for Equality of variances		T-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	Sig.	Df	Mean difference	Std. Error difference
Pretest Mean	Equal variances assumed	.063	.802	.094	.926	78	.001	.020
Post-test Mean	Equal variances assumed	2.216	.141	-2.212	.030	78	-.057	.026

Table 3:Independent Samples Test for equality of means

Research question 3: What are the aspects of English articles that the experimental group outperforms the control group? Do they significances outperform the control group in using generic 'the' and definite 'the'?

Since the aim of this study was to find out the effectiveness of cognitive lessons on improving students' use of generic 'the' and definite 'the', we carried out another independent t-test to find out whether or not there was a difference in two groups' scores related to the use of generic 'the' and definite 'the'. The results from the post-test revealed that there was a significant difference (sig.= .009) between the experimental and control groups in using definite 'the', but not with generic 'the' (sig.= .166). (Please refer to table 4)

As far as generic 'the' is concerned, the mean score achieved by the control group was .656, and that gained by the experimental group was .712. With reference to definite 'the', the mean score acquired by the control group was .612, and that achieved by the experimental was .698. The reason why there was no significant difference between two groups with regard to the use of generic 'the' might lie in the fact that, although the mean score of the experimental group (.712) was higher than that of the control (.656), there was a lack of consistency in the scores in the experimental group as revealed by the standard deviation (SD= .194), as compared with that of the control (SD= .164). (Please refer to table 4).

Mean Posttest		Levene's Test for Equality of variances		T-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig.	Mean difference	Std. Error difference
Generic the	Equal variances assumed	1.554	.216	-1.397	78	.166	-.056	.040
Definite the	Equal variances assumed	1.297	.258	-2.697	78	.009	-.085	.031

Posttest	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Generic the	Control	40	.6563	.16445	.02600
	Experimental	40	.7125	.19447	.03075
Definite the	Control	40	.6125	.16489	.02607
	Experimental	40	.6982	.11493	.01817

Table 4:Independent Samples Test for equality of means

From the analysis of the data, the following issues were found.

1. Before the treatment, students in the two groups had more problems in using definite 'the', as compared with articles A/an, and Zero.
2. The experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in the post-test. This confirms the hypothesis established.
3. Cognitive lessons improved the experimental group's performance in using definite 'the'. This does not confirm the hypothesis that cognitive lessons would improve the experimental group's performance in using generic 'the'.

DISCUSSIONS

The results from this study confirmed those reported by Nguyen Thu in his study in 2005. As far as the errors between the two groups were concerned, based on the fact that there were no significant differences between the two groups in their pre-test (Please refer to table 3)

because the mean scores of the two groups were similar in sig. > .05. We also investigated the kinds of article errors that stood out, the results showed that students had more problems with using the definite article 'the' ($\bar{x} = 0.59$) compared with 'zero' ($\bar{x} = 0.51$) and with 'a/an' ($\bar{x} = 0.53$). To interpret these facts, we rely on Nguyen Thu's comments (2005) on this issue. Firstly, he has stated that "since 'the' is used with all kinds of nouns (i.e. singular, count, and non-count) in English, the problem is that students may not be able to determine whether a nominal refers to an instance as uniquely identified or to a type as a unique instance." Secondly, he also says that "a unique type (definite article used in generic sense) is very difficult for the Vietnamese learners because students could recognize that the noun is used in a general sense and use a 'null article' as in Vietnamese. In a sentence such as "_____ lion is becoming extinct", students may doubt between 'null', 'the' and 'a', all three of which can be used for generic sense, but not in the same type of context." Finally, "the difference between English and Vietnamese is also a factor that contributes to the problem. Nguyen Thu explained that while English uses 'the', Vietnamese uses 'null' to mark definiteness."

With reference to the fact that the cognitive lessons did significantly improve the scores of the students in the experimental group, some possible explanations may be proposed as follows.

The cognitive lessons offered only a few principles to explain many uses of the articles (Nguyen Thu, 2005: 180). In the cognitive grammar-based instruction, the teacher helped students distinguish definite 'the' and generic 'the' by using only four steps:

(1) the only *one* in our world (general world or immediate surroundings), (2) the only *one* that can be meant in the immediate context (text or conversation), (3) the only *one* that can be logically meant, and (4) a class as a *whole* is referred to (this is also called a generic sense). Although the notions found in each of the four steps had been explained adequately and consciously before the students did exercises, as likewise performed in the control group when the uses of the articles were introduced, the differences lie in the nature in which the rules were formulated.

In the control group, students had to remember different rules of uses without getting any idea of a system. In the experimental group, by contrast, the cognitive rules did provide a kind of schema for students to grasp. The schema of discourse as elaborated as environment or context defined those attributes of the definite article through the two 'parameters': definite and generic.

The cognitive lessons, besides the ability of reducing descriptions of multiple uses into principles for ease of retention, did bring forth a basis for students to retain the information inputted, which lies much in the nature of the conceptual system. That is categorization.

According to **Evans and Green** (2006:248), the ability to perceive similarities and differences between entities “relies upon and gives rise to concepts.” In many traditional grammar books, the two categories ‘definite’ and ‘generic’ with different uses are treated on an equal basis. The students may find it hard to perceive similarities or differences between the uses and find it hard to find out differences between generic ‘the’ and definite ‘the’. In cognitive lessons, by contrast, students are exposed to two concepts at the same time. Each category is surrounded by related concepts. This should give students a chance to conceptualize the use of the definite article ‘the’ easily through detecting the differences of the concepts given rise from the two categories – definite and generic - described. This reflects what **Langacker** (1987) outlines: “language is an integral part of cognition as a whole, rather than a separate and unique faculty” (cited in **Kristiansen et al.** 2006: 306)

Besides, the findings also revealed that the students in the experimental group mastered the use of the generic ‘*the*’ better than that of the definite ‘*the*’ (table 4). It might be that the rule of how to use generic ‘*the*’ is easier for students to remember than that related to how to use definite ‘*the*’. In the cognitive lessons prescribed in the treatment, the use of generic ‘*the*’ was expressed as a unique rule (e.g. when a class as a *whole* is referred to), whereas definite ‘*the*’ had more than one rule for them to remember. This fact might suggest that students still need more time to ‘digest’ the concepts related to the category of the definite ‘*the*’.

To sum up, the cognitive lessons did provide some kinds of rules of thumb, being different from those found in traditional grammar books such as “first mention, use ‘*a*’, second mention, use ‘*the*’.” These rules have minimized the students’ load to remember too many intricate rules. The rules help incite the process of categorizing the concepts which is important for students to retain the information inputted.

CONCLUSIONS

The results suggest that the approach used in the current traditional books is still restricted to teaching students acquire the use of definite ‘*the*’ and generic ‘*the*’, so cognitive lessons can be applied in teaching the English article system, especially in acquiring the use of definite ‘*the*’ and generic ‘*the*’ for students. However, it is also necessary for teachers who have a purpose of teaching the English article choose the suitable and adequate in both easy theories and simple language use from nouns or noun phrases to sentences or contexts referred in cognitive lessons because the English article is too difficult for students to acquire well if we do not provide rules and principles of linguistic system development from easy to complex ways such as we use a flow chart which is kept as general and simple as possible so that we can go from the most general principles and prototypical cases to less frequent cases. Moreover, teachers also need to know that students have to be aware of the principles that cause the differences in meaning in

using the definite '*the*' and the generic '*the*' because the use of English articles may be lie in a speaker's choice.

The researcher believes that students will always encounter with difficulties of the English article system, especially the use of the definite '*the*' and the generic '*the*' they have more difficulties. Hence, the need of teaching the students to acquire well the definite '*the*' and the generic '*the*' is a great importance. And it is also necessary for students to understand exactly what people say or write when they use the English articles as well as the students can apply them in communication with others is real important.

IMPLICATIONS

The first, cognitive lessons may help students understand English article '*the*' and remember rules easily, and may help students differentiate the two notions 'genericity' and 'definiteness'. Personal observations have revealed that students are often confused with such a description as "use '*the*' when the noun refers to something definite". The reason is that the students cannot determine the scope of definiteness or understand this meaning (i.e. definiteness) of the term 'definiteness', so teachers may modify academic texts to provide comprehensible input and focus on the meaning, and remember that students acquire language in only one-way – by understanding messages or by receiving comprehensible input, **Krashen (1985)**. In "Comprehensible input process" students have to be gone through the silent period before students can do themselves.

The second, it is necessary to assist students in understanding the notion of count ability before introducing them to the notion of definiteness and genericity, and we give students general principles "first, students are told that English has two general classes of nouns: common nouns and proper nouns. Students are told that the first step is to decide whether a common noun is used in a definite sense or not. If so, the noun requires '*the*'. If not, the noun requires '*a/(n)*' if it is a singular count noun and '*zero*' if it is not a singular count noun. Final, whether it is a proper noun or not? (Proper nouns usually do not have a definite article, but there are some exceptions.)" Nguyen Thu (2005:163)

Last but not least, categorizations and tasks should be presented so that students can distinguish the definite '*the*' from the generic '*the*'.

It is hoped that the author's findings and implications through the research could help teachers of English, especially those who are interested in improving students to master definite '*the*' and generic '*the*' feel satisfied with cognitive grammar.

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