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# THE ENGLISH ARTICLE SYSTEM AND UZBEK-SPEAKING LEARNERS: A CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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**Abstract.** The English articles a/an, the and zero are among the most persistent sources of error for learners whose first language has no article system. Uzbek, a Turkic language, expresses definiteness and specificity through other means: the numeral bir (‘one’), the accusative suffix -ni, possessive suffixes, demonstratives and word order. This article compares the two systems using Bickerton’s and Huebner’s semantic classification of noun phrases and the specificity account of article acquisition proposed by Ionin, Ko and Wexler. The analysis predicts four error types for Uzbek-speaking learners: article omission, overuse of the with specific but hearer-new referents, one in place of a, and the with generic plurals. The Uzbek source of each is traced, and the article then proposes a three-question decision routine and a set of classroom activities that treat the learners’ L1 as a resource instead of ignoring it.

**Keywords:** articles, definiteness, specificity, contrastive analysis, language transfer, Uzbek, English grammar teaching

# INGLIZ TILIDAGI ARTIKL TIZIMI VA O‘ZBEK TILIDA SO‘ZLASHUVCHI TALABALAR: QIYOSIY TAHLIL VA O‘QITISHGA OID XULOSALAR

**Annotatsiya.** Maqolada artikl kategoriyasiga ega bo‘lmagan o‘zbek tili sohiblarining ingliz tilidagi a/an, the va nol artiklni o‘zlashtirishdagi qiyinchiliklari qiyosiy tahlil qilinadi. O‘zbek tilida aniqlik va noaniqlik bir soni, tushum kelishigi -ni, egalik qo‘shimchalari, ko‘rsatish olmoshlari va so‘z tartibi orqali ifodalanishi ko‘rsatib berilgan. Tahlil asosida to‘rt turdagi xato bashorat qilinadi va ularni bartaraf etish uchun uch savollik qaror qabul qilish usuli hamda mashqlar taklif etiladi.

**Kalit so‘zlar:** artikl, aniqlik, noaniqlik, qiyosiy tahlil, til interferensiyasi, o‘zbek tili

# СИСТЕМА АРТИКЛЕЙ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА И УЗБЕКОЯЗЫЧНЫЕ УЧАЩИЕСЯ: СОПОСТАВИТЕЛЬНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ И МЕТОДИЧЕСКИЕ ВЫВОДЫ

**Аннотация.** В статье сопоставляется система артиклей английского языка со средствами выражения определённости и неопределённости в узбекском языке (числительное bir, аффикс

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винительного падежа -ni, притяжательные аффиксы, указательные местоимения). Прогнозируются четыре типа ошибок узбекоязычных учащихся и предлагается методика обучения, опирающаяся на родной язык как на ресурс.

**Ключевые слова:** артикль, определённость, специфичность, сопоставительный анализ, языковой перенос, узбекский язык

## INTRODUCTION

Teachers of English in Uzbekistan know that article errors survive long after learners have mastered tenses and complex sentences. Advanced students write I have bought new laptop or The education is important for the society, and teachers often put these down to carelessness. Errors that last this long across proficiency levels, though, point to a systematic cause. Learners from article-less languages, such as Russian, Japanese, Korean and Chinese, show similar patterns, and a large body of second language research has tried to explain them [1, 2, 3].

Uzbek is also an article-less language, but it is not identical to Russian. As a Turkic language, it marks some aspects of reference grammatically: specific direct objects take the accusative suffix -ni, the numeral bir frequently introduces new referents, and possessive suffixes mark many definite nouns [4, 5]. These features can help learners in some contexts and mislead them in others. Even so, contrastive studies of English articles and Uzbek reference are rare in local journals, which usually describe articles from the English side only.

This article tries to fill that gap. It compares how English and Uzbek express reference, uses the comparison to predict the main article errors of Uzbek-speaking learners, and suggests teaching procedures that follow from these predictions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Describing English articles

Traditional grammars describe articles through rules: a for first mention, the for second mention, zero for uncountable and plural nouns. Such rules help, but they leave a lot unexplained: the sun, the guitar in She plays the guitar, and the in Pass me the salt are not second mentions. Bickerton [6] and Huebner [1] proposed a more general classification based on two features: whether the noun phrase has a specific referent (±SR) and whether the hearer is assumed to know the referent (±HK). The resulting four types are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Semantic types of noun phrases [6, 1]

| Type | Features | English example | Article |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Generic | −SR, +HK | The tiger is endangered. Tigers are endangered. | the, a, zero |
| 2. Referential definite | +SR, +HK | Close the door, please. | the |
| 3. Referential indefinite | +SR, −HK | I met a girl from my school yesterday. | a, zero |
| 4. Non-referential | −SR, −HK | He is a teacher. I need a pen. | a, zero |

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Master [2] proposed building instruction on two binary questions, identified or not and countable or not, which between them cover most uses. Biber et al. [7] showed from corpus data that the definite article is among the most frequent words in English, so even a small error rate produces many errors per page.

Explaining learner errors

Early contrastive analysis [8] predicted difficulty wherever L1 and L2 differ. Later work on transfer [9] showed that predictions also have to take into account what the L1 does mark, because learners map L2 forms onto familiar L1 categories. Ionin, Ko and Wexler [3] proposed that learners from article-less languages have access to two semantic distinctions, definiteness (does the hearer know the referent?) and specificity (does the speaker have a particular referent in mind?), and fluctuate between them. When the two features coincide, learners are accurate; when they diverge, as in a specific indefinite (a girl I met yesterday), learners often overuse the, treating it as a marker of specificity.

The account is especially relevant to Turkic languages. Enç [10] showed that in Turkish the accusative suffix on direct objects marks specificity rather than definiteness: an object with the accusative refers to a particular entity even if the hearer does not know it. Uzbek -ni behaves similarly [4]. Uzbek learners therefore come to English with a grammaticalised specificity marker, which makes the fluctuation predicted by Ionin et al. especially likely.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The comparison is carried out at the level of semantic function. For each of the four noun-phrase types in Table 1, the means of expression in Uzbek were identified using descriptive grammars [4, 5] and illustrative sentences constructed by the author. The English and Uzbek patterns were then compared, and errors were predicted where (a) Uzbek has no overt marker for an English distinction, or (b) an Uzbek marker covers a different semantic range from its nearest English equivalent. The predictions are offered as hypotheses for future error analysis of learner corpora; the examples of learner errors below are typical illustrations, not counts from a corpus.

RESULTS

How Uzbek expresses reference

**Indefinite reference.** New referents are often introduced with the numeral bir: Kecha bir kitob sotib oldim (‘Yesterday I bought a book’). Bir is optional and frequently absent, especially with non-specific objects: Men kitob o‘qiyapman (‘I am reading a book / books / doing book-reading’).

**Definite and specific reference.** Several devices mark nouns as known or particular:

- the accusative -ni on direct objects: Kitobni o‘qib bo‘ldim (‘I have finished the book’);
- possessive suffixes, including the 3rd person -(s)i in noun compounds and genitive constructions: uyning tomi (‘the roof of the house’);
- demonstratives bu, shu, o‘sha (‘this’, ‘this/that very’, ‘that’);

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• position: subjects at the start of the sentence are usually understood as known: Kitob juda qiziq ekan (‘The book turned out to be very interesting’).

**Generic reference.** Generics usually use the bare noun, singular or plural: It sodiq hayvon or Itlar sodiq hayvonlar (‘Dogs are loyal animals’).

**Predicative nouns.** A noun in predicate position takes no marker: U o‘qituvchi (‘She is a teacher’).

Predicted errors

Comparing these patterns with Table 1 gives four predicted error types (Table 2).

Table 2. Predicted article errors and their Uzbek sources

| **Error type** | **Typical learner sentence** | **Target** | **Uzbek source** |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Omission of a and the | I bought new phone. Phone is very good. | a new phone … The phone | No obligatory marker; bir is optional and position marks definiteness |
| 2. The for specific, hearer-new referents | Yesterday I met the interesting man at the bus stop. | an interesting man | -ni and demonstratives mark specificity, so learners map the to ‘particular’ |
| 3. One for a | One man came and asked me the way. | A man | bir means both ‘one’ and ‘a’ |
| 4. The with generic plurals and abstract nouns | The students must respect the teachers. The education is important. | Students … teachers. Education … | Probably not Uzbek: over-generalisation of classroom rules such as “use the for things we know”; possibly also teaching that presents Russian этот/тот as equivalents of the |

Type 1 is likely to be the most frequent. It reflects the absence of an obligatory category, and it is made worse by the fact that Uzbek word order already does part of the job: a sentence-initial noun is understood as known, so learners feel no need to add the.

Type 2 is the error that the specificity account predicts most directly. A speaker who has a particular man in mind would, in Uzbek, often use a demonstrative or the accusative (o‘sha odamni ko‘rdim), and transfers this “particular” meaning to the.

Type 3 is lexical. Because bir translates both one and a, learners tend to pick the more salient English word one, which in English adds a contrast with two or more that the speaker does not intend.

Type 4 is harder to trace to Uzbek. Generic statements in Uzbek use the bare noun, which would favour the correct English zero article. The error more likely comes from instruction: rules such as “the is used for things we know” lead learners to mark general concepts, which seem known, with the.

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A three-question decision routine

The analysis suggests that learners need a decision routine that makes the hearer's knowledge, not the speaker's, the central question. The routine below adapts Master [2] and Huebner's [1] semantic wheel:

1. **Am I talking about things in general?** If yes: plural or uncountable noun with no article (Dogs are loyal. Education matters.).

2. **Does my listener know exactly which one I mean?** (Because it was mentioned, it is unique, or the situation makes it clear.) If yes: the.

3. **If not, is the noun singular and countable?** If yes: a/an. If no: no article, or some.

Question 2 targets error type 2 directly: learners are reminded that it is not enough for the speaker to know the man; the listener must know him too.

**DISCUSSION**

If the contrast holds, article errors are not random; they follow from the way the learners' L1 organises reference. Three implications for teaching follow.

First, the L1 can be used as a resource. Short translation tasks bring the hidden Uzbek marking to the surface: learners compare Kecha bir odamni ko'rdim and Kecha o'sha odamni ko'rdim and decide which English article each needs. Discussing why both may correspond to a or the depending on the listener builds the definiteness concept explicitly. Such use of the L1 is consistent with research supporting principled own-language use [11].

Second, practice has to go beyond gap-fill sentences. Articles depend on discourse, so learners need tasks with first and later mentions. Useful activities include:

- Picture story retelling: learners tell a story from six pictures; peers count whether each new character was introduced with a and referred to later with the.
- Dictogloss: the teacher reads a short narrative twice; learners reconstruct it in pairs and then compare their articles with the original.
- Noticing in authentic texts: learners highlight every noun phrase in a short news item and label it with one of the three routine questions.
- Error correction by type: teachers mark article errors in writing with the number of the routine question that would have prevented them, rather than correcting them.

Third, one versus a deserves explicit attention early, since it is a lexical issue that is easy to fix and highly noticeable to listeners.

The analysis has its limits. The predictions come from grammatical description and teaching experience, not from a learner corpus. The influence of Russian, which many Uzbek learners also speak, is difficult to separate from that of Uzbek. A corpus-based error analysis of essays by Uzbek-speaking students, classified by Table 1 type, would test the predictions, in particular whether the is overused for specific indefinites as the specificity account expects.

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## CONCLUSION

Uzbek has no articles but does express reference grammatically, through bir, the accusative -ni, possessive suffixes, demonstratives and word order. Because -ni and demonstratives mark specificity, Uzbek-speaking learners are predicted not only to omit English articles but also to overuse the when they have a particular, hearer-new referent in mind, and to use one for a. A three-question routine that centres on the listener's knowledge, combined with discourse-level practice and principled comparison with Uzbek, offers a practical response. The obvious next step is to test these predictions on writing by Uzbek learners.

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