

ISBN : 978-602-14018-0-4

PROCEEDINGS
ENGLISH EDUCATION - UNS
INTERNATIONAL TEFL CONFERENCE

*Current Belief in ELT and Its Implication
in English Classrooms*



May 18, 2013
Solo, Central Java, Indonesia

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The Concept of Familiarity, Identifiability, Uniqueness, and Inclusiveness in Definiteness in English and the Analysis of Students' Writings

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Abstract

Noun is a syntactic category which bears a grammatical status related to the context whether it is new, old or identified information. Noun mentioned previously is called a definite noun since it is already known by both the speaker and the hearer. Noun which is mentioned in the first time is indefinite because the hearer does not recognize it yet.

Some languages have certain markers to identify the definiteness of a noun. For instance, English has special articles such as *a*, *an*, and *the* to mark definite or indefinite noun. However, not all languages have the markers. Indonesian, for example, does not possess definite articles to identify its noun. Indonesian has *-nya* or *itu* positioned in the end of the noun to show it as old information.

The differences of these languages in marking the definiteness can be related to the characteristic of the language and the basic concept of definiteness. There are some basic concepts of definiteness, including familiarity, identifiability, uniqueness, and inclusiveness. These concepts might be perceived differently in each language, including in English and Indonesian language. Thus, Indonesian people who learn English should pay attention to the concepts of definiteness in English to construct grammatical English constructions. However, as learners, they are still influenced by Indonesian language. Therefore, this paper aims at describing these four concepts of definiteness in English by analyzing students' writings.

Keywords: *noun, definiteness, familiarity, identifiable, uniqueness, inclusiveness, English, Indonesian*

Introduction

When speaking a language, people speak the flow of information because linguistic construction consists of information conveyed by noun. It is widely believed that, as stated by Chafe (1970) this world has two main conceptual categories, namely verb and noun. Thus, noun is one of the nucleus constituent in linguistic construction. There are new or given information related to linguistic and extra-linguistic context can be found in noun. Besides, there are several status provided by the noun of the construction.

As one of linguistic categories, noun embodies information, namely number, gender, definiteness, and so forth. Number is related to the singularity or plurality, while gender refers to the status of the noun whether it is feminine, masculine or even neutral. In the meantime, definite is included as part of information flow of a construction together with new/given information. Both generic and definiteness are sometimes related to each other in forming the information flow.

What is the importance of keeping the flow of information on the right track? Human beings produce linguistic construction to communicate effectively and efficiently to their interlocutors. To keep the message of the communication delivered and understood well by the hearer, one should pay attention to the structure of information. Martin and Rose (2007:155) stated that when one introduces people into discourse or speech, he should keep the track of them there to maintain the information structure. One of them is by using definite articles.

English is an article-language (Chesterman, 2005:4) because the language has article as the realization of definiteness. By realizing that a particular noun is definite, it means both the speaker and the hearer can refer to the noun or have the knowledge about the entity.

(1) I buy *a car*.

Noun phrase *a car* in sentence (1), for the speaker's assumption, is new to the hearer. Thus, the article being used is *a* to show the indefiniteness of the noun. Meanwhile, in the following sentence, the NP is already known to both speaker and hearer since it has been introduced in the prior construction (prior mention).

(2) I buy *a car*. *The car* is a brand-new product.

By using *the*, it means that the car mentioned previously is the same car which is mentioned previously. In other words, the speaker tries to keep the track of the NP in his speech. Based on the explanation, it can be concluded that definiteness is related to two aspects: 1) the speaker's and the hearer's knowledge on the noun and 2) the speaker's assumption on the hearer's ability to identify the noun.

Although it is intuitively known to native speaker, it will probably cause a problem or problems for English learner which is basically non-native speaker of English, including Indonesian people. It should be realized that Indonesian language has no specific article to mark definiteness. To express definiteness, Indonesian will place determiners *itu* or *-nya* after the noun. In addition, Indonesian language has no indefinite article which is different from English that has *a/an*.

(3) *Paman membeli (sebuah) rumah baru. Rumahnya luas sekali.*

When mentioning NP *rumah* for the first time in the construction, there is no specific article to indicate the indefiniteness of the noun. It is possible to put *sebuah*, however it merely shows the number, though sometimes it can also help the hearer to find the linguistic context of the noun. After *rumah* is being known to speaker and hearer, *-nya* is used and being attached to the noun. Linguistically, *-nya* is not a specific article for definiteness since it is an affix.

Concerning the information structure, given or old information is absolutely definite, but new information does not always deal with indefiniteness (Dardjowidjojo, 1983).

(4) I find *an interesting topic*. *The topic* is in the field of Linguistics.

(5) I got *new clothes* from my mom. *The price* is expensive.

NP *topic* in example (4) is mentioned before so it is a given information and definite noun as well. However, in example (5), *the price* is new information but it is definite.

As part of semantic aspect of noun, it is also important to consider generic and its relation to definiteness. Observe the following sentences.

(6) *A dog* runs in my backyard.

(7) *A dog* likes bone.

(8) *The dog* runs in my backyard.

(9) *The dog* likes bone.

Sentence (6) consists of indefinite NP *a dog* which means the dog is unknown yet for the speaker and hearer (new information). Yet, in sentence (7), *a dog* is something generic that refers to the whole class of dog, not any particular member. While *the dog* in sentence (8) and (9) refer to particular dog.

According to the explanation, it is becoming obvious that definiteness is one of important linguistic features a learner should realize. Producing construction without paying attention to the definiteness of the noun will cause not-English-like construction. Indonesian people learning English will have the chance to make an unacceptable construction due to its unclear state of definiteness.

(10) Ali went to *kitchen*.

(11) And then my mom went to *market*.

(12) There are many stars in *sky*.

NPs *kitchen*, *market*, and *sky* in the sentences above are English nouns, but the constructions are less acceptable for native speaker of English, regardless the grammaticality of the sentences.

According to the previous explanation, this paper will describe further the definiteness in English and analyzing English learners' writings to find out the description of students' comprehension on definiteness. Regarding the wide aspect of definiteness in language, including English, this paper will limit the discussion to four basic concepts such as familiarity, identifiability, uniqueness, and inclusiveness. Furthermore, the coverage of definiteness in this paper is the prototypical one with *the* as definite article. In addition, for those who already intuitively know the right use of definite article, this paper attempts to provide the reason behind it, to answer the question "why".

Definiteness in English

Definite is a term used in grammar and semantics to refer to a specific, identifiable entity or class of entities (Crystal, 2008:133). If verb has its semantic specification, noun is also specified in terms of its semantic aspect (Chafe, 1970:185) and one of the aspects is definiteness of the noun. Definiteness in English noun is generally conveyed by the use of definite article *the* and also determiners such as *this*, *my*, *that*, and so forth. However, to state that a noun is definite or indefinite by merely paying attention to the

use of the definite or indefinite article is somehow misleading. There must be concepts as the framework of definiteness to work in the language. Lyon (2003) mentioned four concepts such as familiarity, identifiability, uniqueness, and inclusiveness as the basic concepts related to definiteness and indefiniteness. Thus, this paper will focus the discussion on those four concepts and give the examples by analyzing students' writing.

Familiarity

Familiar means something is already known. In definiteness, something can be said to be definite if it is familiar not only to the speaker but also to the hearer or the interlocutor. Pay attention to example (13) and (14) in which the definite articles are used to refer to definite nouns.

(13) There are many *books* in the shelves. *The books* are arranged well.

(14) There is a *new elephant* in the zoo. *The elephant* is big.

To say something is familiar, it can depend on the linguistic context available in the discourse (or speech). What does linguistic context mean? It means the entity is mentioned before in the constructions. In example (13), NP *the books* is definite due to the prior mention in the previous sentence. This is the same as in example (14) in which *elephant* is mentioned before and in the second time of mentioning, it becomes familiar to the speaker and hearer.

In other words, the entity becomes familiar not only to the speaker but also to the hearer because the linguistic context allows the entity to be mentioned before. Regarding linguistic context, there are several types of them, namely anaphora and cataphora. Anaphora is the description for the process or result of a linguistic unit deriving its interpretation from previously expressed unit or called the antecedent (Crystal, 2008:25). Meanwhile, when the antecedent is following the definite NP, it is cataphoric. See the example below.

(15) *The fact* that you've known them for years is no excuse.

Anaphoric use of definiteness makes the antecedent occurs previously or precedes the definite NP, while cataphora describes the antecedent later. As in (15) the definite NP *the fact* is explained later by the following constituents (that you've known them for years).

Not only linguistic context, extra-linguistic context is also prominent to the familiarity of a particular entity. Extra-linguistic context covers the aspects outside the language and linguistic construction. It emphasizes on the social setting and the like. The extra-linguistic context that can be explained in the area of definiteness is physical situation.

(16) Please wipe *the shelf* before I put my books on it.

In (16), *the shelf* is not mentioned before—there is no linguistic context supported the definite NP—and the hearer probably does not have prior knowledge about the shelf, but the shelf is before the speaker's and the hearer's eyes. Thus, both of them can make immediate identification of the shelf. Indeed the concept of familiarity in definiteness is still debatable until today, but it will not be considered here to keep the focus of the discussion.

Identifiability

It is commonly known that when an entity is familiar to both speaker and hearer, it is definite and thus it can be added "the". How about the following sentences?

(17) Pass me *the book*.

If a speaker says as in example (17) to someone who just comes (the hearer), he has no idea on what or which book the speaker means. However, definiteness is not merely concerned the speaker's and the hearer's knowledge, but also the speaker's assumption on the hearer's ability to identify. Thus, the speaker of example (19) assumes the hearer can identify the book so that he makes it as definite noun.

Some experts say the concept of identifiability completes the concept of familiarity. It does not need to be familiar in order to be definite. Sometimes, in some cases, it is need to be identifiable to be definite. It means the use of definite article directs the hearer to the referent of NP by signaling that he is in a position to identify it (Lyon, 2005:5) or he is in the immediate position to identify it. This is illustrated in (19) above. In other words, according to Dardjowidjojo (1983), to be identifiable, it is based on the relative environment. For example, if someone in Yogyakarta says,

(18) Let's go to *the beach*!

It means that he wants to go to a beach, somewhere in Yogyakarta. It is different from the following example. When someone in Bandung, for example, says sentence (18), the interlocutor cannot identify which beach the speaker means because there is no beach in Bandung. Chesterman (2005:52) called this use of definite article *the* as being used for a larger-situation because the relative environment is bigger than that of the immediate context.

Uniqueness

If familiarity works due to the knowledge of speaker and hearer on the entity and identifiability is according to the ability of the hearer in identifying the entity, uniqueness is related to the associative use of the hearer on the entity. Based on Lyon (2003:7) associative use of definiteness is based on particular context. Dardjowidjojo (1983) stated this type of uniqueness as uniquely salient since it is relative to the context.

(19) *The president* will not run for the election.

NP *the president* is relative due to the location. If it is spoken in Indonesia, it refers to the president of Indonesia. Observe the sentence below.

(20) When I came to a wedding, I saw *the bride* wearing gorgeous gown.

Sentence (20) consists of indefinite NP *a wedding* and definite NP *the bride*. Though the bride is not supported by the linguistic context, it is commonly known that a wedding involves bride. Thus, the speaker assumes that the hearer can associate the knowledge and he produces definite NP *the bride* instead of *a bride*. The definiteness of *the bride* cannot be defined by identifying. The hearer associates the wedding with the bride because a wedding involves a bride. Similarly NP *the president* in sentence (19) associatively refers to a president of a particular country because a country has a president (leader).

Observe the following examples.

(21) I had to get a taxi from the station. On the way *the driver* told me that there was a bus strike.

(22) They've just got in from New York. *The plane* was four hours late.

NP *the driver* (21) is not mentioned before but it is a general knowledge that a taxi must have a driver. Thus, by using associative knowledge, *the driver* is known for both the speaker and the hearer. While in (22), *the plane* is definite due to the previous context mentioning journey. It is a common knowledge shared among people that journey includes the use of vehicles or public transportation. That makes NP *the plane* definite.

As observed, uniqueness concept is relative to particular context, but it can be an absolute uniqueness. Absolute uniqueness refers to single entity in the world or has no other copies. To mention, *moon, sky, earth, universe* are single entities (Dardjowidjojo, 1983; Lyon, 2005) and thus people naturally use definite article *the* to accompany the nouns as in the following sentences.

(23) *The moon* was very bright last night.

(24) He is going to conquer *the universe*.

If familiarity and identifiability complete each other, so do uniqueness and inclusiveness.

Inclusiveness

Inclusive means including something (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). It shows that something is part of something else. Thus, inclusiveness means the state of being the part of something. If it is associated with definiteness, then it can be stated that something can be definite if it is part of something else. For example, kitchen is part of a house or tire is part of a bike.

To say something is part of something else, it can be based on the previous knowledge of the speaker and the hearer. It is called entailment or presupposition (Dardjowidjojo, 1983). The speaker and the hearer already know the truth that, for instance, tire is part of a bike. They share common knowledge on it. Therefore, although the NP has no definite description where the referent to fit the definite description, it is possible to know the referent by presupposing (Saeed, 2005) which requires prior knowledge.

(25) Ani has a new bike. *The tire* is decorated with white and stripes ribbons.

(26) My uncle buys a new house. There is bathroom in *the master bedroom*.

Nevertheless, there are some cultural or geographical contexts that must be concerned. For example, in an area where a house is supported by poles, it is possible to say,

(27) *The pole* is made of high quality timber.

The same construction will elicit surprised reaction in another area with different geographical context which has no pole as part of the house.

Besides presupposition, inclusiveness also encompasses inherent properties of an entity (Dardjowidjojo, 1983). These inherent properties might be called as innate since they are something which is naturally possessed by entities. These include color, size, weight, length, and so on.

(28) I bought *a book* yesterday.

(28a) *The color* is blue.

Even though *color* is not mentioned before (28), sentence (28a) sounds good because *color* is the innate properties of *book*. So, indirectly, *color* has been mentioned through its entity.

Therefore, these concepts (familiarity, identifiability, uniqueness, and inclusiveness), though distinguishable, are sometimes overlapping and have no clear-cut boundaries. Therefore, it has to bear in mind that these cannot be used separately to explain the phenomena of definiteness.

The Analysis of Students' Writings

After discussing the concepts, this part will discuss the examples taken from students' writing to describe the comprehension of English learners on definiteness in English. In this part, the speaker refers to the writer and the hearer refers to the reader because the data are collected from written language (students' writings).

(29) Oscar Oasis is a cartoon movie that tells us about a lizard named Oscar and his friends. *The movie* contains positive and negative effects.

If example (29) is observed, it can be seen that there is no problem with the definite description *the movie* which refers to *Oscar Oasis* in the preceding context. The student is successful at making the referent familiar due to the linguistic context. However, sentence (30) below is rather strange because the NPs *girl* and *village* have no linguistic context. Furthermore, the hearer or the reader has no general knowledge about NP *girl* and *village*.

(30) ... Junaedi was unhappy.

Junaedi got married with *the girl* from *the village*.

NP *the girl* is not introduced in the previous construction so it cannot be referred by using linguistic context. So does NP *the village*. There is no prior mention of both *the girl* and *the village*. Hence, it is inappropriate to use definite article to mark the NPs. As the NPs are introduced for the first time, the sentence should be in the following form.

(30a) Junaedi got married with *a girl* from *a village*.

Meanwhile example (31) shows the definite expression *the cat* and its antecedent *a little cat* forming the linguistic context.

(31) He found *a little cat*. *The cat* wore a necklace.

Sentence (31) has prior mention for NP *the cat* and it makes the linguistic context available. This condition is similar to Indonesian language. For an entity that has been mentioned, the speaker can add – *nya* or *itu*.

(32) *Andi membeli baju. Bajunya* terbuat dari kain sutra.

Affix –*nya* is added to NP *baju* as the NP is no longer a new entity. Both speaker and hearer can refer to the entity due to the linguistic context.

Other examples can be observed from sentence (32) and (33) below.

(33) So, if we meet *the naughty student* we must be patient.

(34) People steal because they cannot find *the job*.

NPs *the naughty student* and *the job* in (33) and (34) respectively are introduced in the first time in the construction. Hence, the use of definite article for both NPs sounds inappropriate because the abstract entities mentioned by the NPs cannot be recognized by the hearer.

(33a) So, if we meet a naughty student we must be patient.

(34a) People steal because they cannot find a job.

Even though familiarity is perceived as simple concept, English learners find it sometimes difficult because they produce definite article *the* for unfamiliar entity. However, it is not only the concept of familiarity in definiteness that is problematic. The concept of identifiability is confusing as well. It is possible to find sentence as the following sentence.

(35) Ali went to *market*.

NP *market* in (35) refers to certain location that is nearby so that it can be identified by the speaker and the hearer. It is something identifiable as it is relative to the position of *Ali*. English native speaker usually produces:

(35a) Ali went to *the market*.

Identifiability regards the ability of the hearer to identify the thing or the entity. This is an immediate recognition of the entity. Therefore, the hearer should be in the position of identifying. Because immediate identification involves the context of environment, identifiability works well in spoken language rather than in written one. Thus, it is difficult to find the example of identifiability in students' writings.

After describing familiarity and identifiability in students' writings, the next concept of definiteness to discuss is uniqueness. As previously mentioned, unique noun refers to a single entity in the world, for instance *sky*, *moon*, *universe*, *earth*, and so forth. Instead of using definite article, student use no article to mention unique noun.

(36) There are many stars in *sky*.

As *sky* is one of unique entities, the sentence should be like the following with article *the* as the definite marker.

(36a) There are many stars in *the sky*.

The similar case happens to *earth* which is a single entity as well. Student may produce this sentence with no article to mark the *earth*.

(37) *Earth* is the planet where human beings live.

Indeed unique entities are also known in any languages, however not all language mark them with specific article. Indonesian language has no specific article to identify the definiteness of unique noun.

(38) *Matahari bersinar terik pagi ini*.

(39) *Mari kita jaga bumi demi masa depan kita bersama*.

Matahari and *bumi* are unique entities but Indonesian language has no article to mark the uniqueness. This is assumed as the trigger of the absence of article in unique noun in English construction written by Indonesian student. Instead of producing sentence (37), student should produce the sentence below to be more native-like.

(37a) *The earth* is the planet where human beings live.

Nevertheless, not all the students produce uncommon English sentences. It is found several examples of correct use of definite article.

(40) Indonesia is a beautiful country. However, *the government* does not pay attention to the tourism object in the country.

Although NP *the government* has no linguistic context, definite article *the* can be used. It is because the hearer can associate the government with the government of Indonesia (a country must have its government). Compare to the following example.

(41) One day the king asked *the gatekeeper* to open *the gate* because he wanted to walk around *the palace*.

In sentence (41), NP *the gatekeeper* is marked as definite noun because in the context of the sentence the hearer can associate it with the gate (the gatekeeper of the gate in the king's palace). Similarly, *the palace* is marked as definite noun due to the ability of the hearer to associate them with the king (a king should live in a palace).

Another associative use of definite article can be reflected in the concept of inclusiveness. Some examples of inclusive definiteness can be found in students writing as follow.

(42) Ali just entered his friend's house. And then he went to *kitchen*.

NP *kitchen* in (42) can be associated with the house so the absence of definite article causes non-English-like construction. Instead of producing constructions (42), English native speaker will produce:

(42a) Ali just entered his friend's house. And then he went to *the kitchen*.

It is related to the association between house and kitchen. Kitchen is part of a house. Hence, though it is not mentioned before, the hearer can associate NP *the kitchen* to the kitchen of friend's house.

Indonesian language has the similar concept. By using *-nya* (like in the following example), the speaker tells that *dapur* is part of *rumah*. However, demonstrative *itu* might result in unacceptable Indonesian language sentence as in (43a).

(43) *Diana membeli rumah. Dapurnya cantik sekali.*

(43a) ?*Diana membeli rumah. Dapur itu cantik sekali.*

Regarding the previous discussion, it can be concluded that several aspects of definiteness are easily (and intuitively) understood by Indonesian students learning English because of the similarities between Indonesian and English. Yet, several misuses of definite article or the absence of definite article in certain cases are commonly found in students' writings.

Conclusion

Based on the explanation, it is clear that familiarity and identifiability, uniqueness, and inclusiveness complete each other and cannot be separated. In other words, those concepts are integrated in explaining the definiteness of the language. However, each language has its own way to express the definiteness and it triggers the interference when learning another languages. Indonesian students who learn English might be interfered by the concept of definiteness in Indonesian in producing English construction. However, this paper is only a beginning study to stimulate further and deeper study on definiteness. Hence, it is expected for the next writer or researcher to conduct further studies for the improvement.

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