A Note on the Teaching of *a* and *the* to Beginners whose Mother-Tongues do not show Parallel Usage

H. V. GEORGE

(Central Institute of English, Hyderabad, India)

Many beginners' courses begin with the sentence 'This is a ...'. In this sentence, the word *this* draws attention to a single, definite, object, which to beginners must appear to be in the First Person sphere of interest. This is not a good context for a supposedly 'indefinite' *a*, and it is commonly advised that, in the classroom presentation, the teacher should arrange for several similar objects to be visible, so that when he points to one of them, saying 'This is a ...', an impression of '*any* one of *many*' is formed. This procedure does seem to give some protection to the concept of indefiniteness, but it involves the teacher in two things not obviously necessary, namely, the provision of several objects for each name he teaches, and the prohibition of the names of objects of which only one representative is visible, 'blackboard', 'door', and so on. Moreover, when pictures are used, the procedure is almost certain to break down; in illustrations of actions involving an object, for instance, there is unlikely to be a choice of objects ('He is riding a bicycle'). Furthermore, in many courses, the *a* of the sentence 'This is a ...' is soon replaced by what must seem to unsophisticated pupils an equivalent *my*—a strongly defining adjective. Altogether, it would seem that in countries where article-usage needs careful presentation, the sentence 'This is a ...' is too indiscreet a sentence to begin a course with.

When one tries to look at actual article-usage from a learner's point of view, and to see how confusion may be experienced, three usage-areas seem conspicuous:

1. When the process of defining or delimitation is at its extreme (one object, unique in the context), there is an area of confusion with numerical *a* (=one). For example, we have ' . . . a chair, a chair . . . *the* blackboard' and ' . . . forty chairs, four windows, a blackboard'.

2. When the indefinition is maximum and extends to any individual in the class indicated by the noun, extends, that is, to the limits

of the noun-concept, then *a* ('any individual') may be replaced by *the* (the class): 'A horse cannot see colours' is equivalent to 'The horse cannot see colours.'

3. Unless the procedure is understood, general impressions of *a* and *the* are bound to be confused by anaphoric *the*, since one object is, on successive occasions, preceded by *a* and *the*: '... *a* bicycle. *The* bicycle...'

Looking now at the concepts of *definite* and *indefinite* in article-usage, as presumably we shall wish to present them, it seems that the quality of definiteness may come from a more-or-less absolute uniqueness ('the sun', 'the blackboard'), or it may derive from linguistic sources, adjectives and limiting phrases; and it seems that the equality of indefiniteness may derive, likewise, either from inherent qualities, in which case no article is used and we label the noun a 'mass-noun', or from the implication (from 'one') of a range of selection, over which *a* is free to rove.

If we think that acceptable article-usage is worth trying for with beginners whose mother-tongue does not have parallel usage, it is worth while thinking over the first steps of a teaching programme, abandoning 'This is a...', moving carefully in confusing areas, and building up concepts of 'definite' and 'indefinite', perhaps before using articles at all.

The following tabulation may be useful:

a	*the*
one (numerical)	the on(e)ly (unique)
one to choose from many	the one, or the group,
—	chosen from the many (anaphoric)
any (one) representative	the class
—	before plural nouns

Reading from left to right, there are three 'pairs', and one free-standing use of *the*. Of the first pair, *one* (*numerical*) is the better standing use of *the*. Of the first pair, *the* (*unique*) being more sophisticated, and probably rarer. Both members of the second pair are required fairly early. Of the third pair, the classifying *a* is needed far more than the parallel *the*.

Bringing together the considerations outlined above, a strategic operation might be:

1. Teach *a* meaning one.
2. Teach several defining techniques (numbers, adjectives, preposition phrases).

3. Teach *the* before plural nouns (where no area of confusion exists), having the definite association established through the linguistic devices of 2.

4. Teach *the* before singular nouns, i.e. the one selected from the many, using the same kind of definite association.

5. Teach *a*, one to choose from many.

6. Teach classifying *a*.

This order has two disadvantages. The first is that the association *a* with *one* is precisely the association which beginners make of their own accord, and which leads to the substitution of *one* for *a* as a habit. It can be supposed, however, that since this association will be made in any case it might be preferable to have it made under guidance, and with the limited context made apparent. Undoubtedly numerical *a* is the simplest and clearest *a* to present: it stands out in this respect from the tabulated alternatives. The second disadvantage is that, if anaphoric *the* is required early, and this is a reasonable requirement since it enables supplementary statements to be used *ad lib* in a description, then the *the* and *a* concerned have been taught in inverse order (4 and 5). The word *it* could be taught, and in this way anaphoric *the* could be avoided for some time; probably this would make the subsequent teaching of anaphoric *the* seem very awkward.

An alternative teaching order would be:

1. Teach *a* (numerical).
2. Teach several defining techniques (numbers, adjectives, preposition phrases).
3. Follow *a* (numerical)+defining item+noun (e.g. 'a blue pencil', 'a pencil in my pocket') by *the*+singular noun+defining item (i.e. anaphoric+defining).
4. Teach defining *the*+plural noun+defining item.
5. Teach anaphoric *the*.
6. Teach *a*, one to choose from many.
7. Teach classifying *a*.

Such a programme of article-presentation fits fairly easily into a teaching programme of from thirty to forty items.
Comments by readers experimenting with this kind of presentation would be most welcome.