ARTICLES USED BY ENGLISH AND COMMUNICATION FRESHMEN AND SENIORS AT THE FACULTY OF LIBERAL ARTS, UBON RATCHATHANI UNIVERSITY

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ตำแหน่ง ครูผู้ช่วย โครงการห้องเรียนสองภาษา โรงเรียนอนุบาลอุบลราชธานี ที่อยู่ที่ทำงาน: 150
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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาครั้งนี้มีจุดประสงค์เพื่อศึกษาว่านักศึกษาปีที่ 1 และปีที่ 4 สาขาภาษาอังกฤษและการสื่อสาร คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยอุบลราชธานี มีความรู้เรื่องการใช้คำนำหน้านาม (article) มากน้อยแค่ไหน และนักศึกษาทั้งสองชั้นปีใช้คำนำหน้านามแตกต่างกันหรือไม่อย่างไร ตัวอย่างประชากรที่ใช้ในการศึกษาครั้งนี้คือนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 และปีที่ 4 สาขาภาษาอังกฤษและการสื่อสาร คณะศิลปศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยอุบลราชธานี จำนวน 60 คน เครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการเก็บข้อมูลคือแบบทดสอบวัดความสามารถในการใช้ คำนำหน้านาม ในรูปแบบของการเติมคำในประโยคและเรื่อง 2 เรื่อง จำนวน 57 ข้อ ซึ่งแบบทดสอบสร้างโดยอิงรูปแบบการใช้คำนำหน้านามของ Butler (2002)

ผลการศึกษาพบว่า นักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 4 มีความรู้ในการใช้คำนำหน้านามมากกว่านักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 กล่าวคือ นักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 มีคะแนนคิดเป็น 58.19 % ในขณะที่นักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 4 มีคะแนน 69.88 % นอกจากนี้นักศึกษาทั้งสองชั้นปีใช้คำนำหน้านามแตกต่างกันในแต่ละชนิดของ ชนิดของนามวลีทั้ง 5 ชนิด กล่าวคือ นักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 1 ได้คะแนนมากกว่า 50% ในการใช้คำนำหน้านามกับนามที่ถูกกล่าวถึงโดยทั่วไป นามที่ถูกกล่าวถึงโดยเฉพาะเจาะจง และนามที่ถูกกล่าวถึงเป็นครั้งแรก แต่ได้คะแนนต่ำกว่า 50% ในนามที่ถูกกล่าวถึงโดยไม่เฉพาะเจาะจงและสำนวน ส่วนนักศึกษาชั้นปีที่ 4 ได้คะแนนมากกว่า 50% ในนามทั้ง 4 ชนิดข้างต้น ซึ่งนักศึกษาทั้งสองชั้นปี มีคะแนนที่แตกต่างกันอย่างมีนัยสำคัญที่ P = 0.049, 0.002, 0.005 และ 0.000 ตามลำดับ ทั้งนี้นักศึกษาทั้งสองชั้นปีได้คะแนนต่ำกว่า 50% ในการใช้คำนำหน้านามกับสำนวน

ศัพท์สำคัญ : คำนำหน้านาม รูปแบบการใช้คำนำหน้านาม นามนับได้และนามนับไม่ได้

Abstract

This study aimed to find out the extent to which the first and the fourth-year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani University knew how to use the English articles and whether they used the English articles differently. The subjects of the study were 30 freshmen and 30 seniors majored in English at the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Ubon Ratchathani University. The instrument of this study was a fill-in-the-blank test requiring the subjects to complete individual sentences and two passages with appropriate articles, totalling 57 blanks, classified according to Butler's model (2002) of article usage.

The results revealed that the first-year students somewhat knew how to use articles (58.19%) whereas the fourth-year students knew it fairly well (69.88%). Both groups of the subjects used the English articles differently. The first-year students' scores were higher than 50 percent on the NP environments of generics and unspecifiable, the referential definites, the referential indefinites and first mention, but not the non-referentials. On the contrary, the fourth-year English majors could gain scores of higher than 50 percent on all of the four NP environments, which were significantly better than the first-year students' scores at P = 0.049, 0.002, 0.005 and 0.000 respectively. However, both groups scored lower than 50 percent on idioms and conventional uses.

Keywords: Article, Butler's model, Noun countability

Introduction

It is known that English is taught as either a second or a foreign language across the world because it is used as an international language for communication (Tawilpakul, 2100). Even though ESL (English as a second language) and EFL (English as a foreign language) learners realize that English plays a role as an international language, most of them are still not competent users. In fact, their English proficiency is far behind English native speakers. One reason is no two languages have equivalent grammatical rules, which may cause grammatical errors (Sattayatham & Honsa, 2007). The most frequent error that the largest number of L2 learners make in the English language concerns English article usage (Butler, 2002) because its use may be confusing and complicated for many L2 learners. Therefore, it is difficult for them to master the article system as English native speakers do.

An English article is a kind of determiner used with a noun to provide some information about it. It is sometimes called a noun marker which affects the meaning of the noun phrase and can allow us to think of nouns in a specific or a generic way, as shown in the following examples (Crystal, 1995):

(1) The / A cat is running.   (specific)

(2) A / The cat/ Cats is/ are cute.   (generic)

The English articles are of two major types: definite and indefinite. The only definite article is "the". It is normally used to refer to a particular member of a group.

(3) The car that he bought yesterday is expensive.

Indefinite articles are of three forms: a, an and Ø. They are generally used to refer to any member of a group.

(4) A car is expensive.

The zero article is used when an indefinite plural noun (5),

an uncounTable noun with an indefinite referent (6) or a proper noun (7) is referred to (Swan, 1995: 61-69).

(5) Students like playing games.

(6) She does not provide information for us.

(7) Sandy just left.

Articles are essential in the English language and they may also lead to an effective communication (Diez-Bedmar & Pap, 2008: 147) because misusing the English articles in some situations may cause misunderstanding between interlocutors (Yoshii & Milne, 1998).

As mentioned earlier, the English article system is one of the most difficult tasks of English grammar learning for many ESL and EFL learners because cross-linguistic influences may affect their uses (Butler, 2002; Master, 1990; Yoshii & Milne, 1998). For example, in the Thai language, which does not have articles, the concept of definiteness is expressed via demonstratives as shown in the following:

(8) คนคนนี้ไม่ได้เป็นหมอ   (definite)

 khon khon nii maidai pen mor

person Classifier this not be doctor

This person is not a doctor.

(9) หนังสือนั้นมีประโยชน์   (definite)

Nang-sue nan mee prayode

book that have use

That book is useful.

The differences between Thai and English in terms of definiteness and indefiniteness expressions are believed to bring about the misuse of the English articles by most Thai learners of English (Thonglow, 2002). According to Sattayatham and Honsa (2007), English article errors made by Thai learners in

four medical schools were up to 75 percent of the article use. This shows that Thai students do not realize which article should be used in a particular context, which may lead to misunderstanding or stigmatizing speakers (Yoshii & Milne, 1998). In this respect, this study aims to analyze errors in English articles made by first-year and fourth-year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani University in order to explore the extent to which they know how to correctly use the English article system and whether they use the English articles differently. The study focused on the first-year and fourth-year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani University. It is expected that the results would probably shed light on the extent to which the latter group is able to use the English articles compared to the former group.

1.1 Research objectives

Two research objectives are as follows:

1.1.1 To find out the extent to which the first-year and fourth-year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani University know how to use the English articles.

1.1.2 To find out whether they use the English article system differently.

1.2 Research questions

To serve the objectives above, the two research questions are set as below:

1.2.1 To what extent do first-year and fourth-year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani University know the English article system?

1.2.2 Do they use the English articles differently? If so, how?

1.3 Significance of the study

The results of this study may enable the researcher to know the extent to which the subjects of this study, the first-year and the fourth-year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani University, know how to use the English article system correctly and whether these two groups of subjects use the articles differently. Also, it may be beneficial for some instructors who teach English to find an alternative approach to language teaching concerning the English article use and program evaluation.

1.4 Definition of key term

Article use in this study means the use of articles based on Butler's model which focuses on noun countability and two features of referentiality: the specific referent [±SR] and the hearer's knowledge [±HK].

Butler's model (2002)

Including the semantic classification of Huebner (1985), Butler's model (2002) also focuses on the noun countability which is considered as important as the referent specificity and the hearer's knowledge. That is, Butler employed Huebner's (1983 ; 1985) semantic classification and added the countability component in order to make this classification capture all aspects concerned as presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Butler's NP environments

Noun Phrase Environments	Examples
Type 1: [-SR +HK], generics and unspecifiable: [*a(n)*], [*the*], [*ø*]	
1.1. [a(n) [+ count] [+sg]] NP	A cat likes mice.
1.2. [*the* [+ count] [+sg]] NP	**The** whale is a mammal.
The generic form of [*the* [+count] [-sg]] NP is possible if the NP is followed by a postpositional modifier (Kuno, 1973)	
1.3. [ø [+count] [-sg]] NP or [ø [-count]] NP	*ø* Dogs are cute. *ø* Language is a great invention of humankind.
Type 2: [+SR +HK] Referential definites: [*the*]	
2.1. [*the*] NP Exophora, Homophora[1]	Pass me **the** pen.
2.2. [*the*] NP Cataphora[2]	**The** idea of coming to the US. was....
2.3. [the] NP Anaphoric reference	When I found **a** red box in front of my house, it was too late. The box blew up with a terrific explosion.
2.4. [*the*] NP Connotative reference[3]	This book did not sell well even though **the** author was a famous writer.

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[1] It is a visible situation where 'the' is used with a noun mentioned the first time to refer to something that both the addresser and addressee can see (e.g. Give me the letter).

[2] In linguistics, cataphora (from Greek, forward+carry) is used to describe an expression that co-refers with a later expression in the discourse. That is to say, the earlier expression refers to or describes a forward expression.

[3] Immediate situation use where the is used to refer to something not visible but is known to the addresser and addressee (e.g. Don't put your hand in the box. The rodent will bite it.).

Noun Phrase Environments	Examples
2.5. [*the*] NP Extended reference[4]	I won a million dollar lottery. *The* news quickly spread all over town.
2.6. [the] NP Unexplanatory modifiers[5]	**The** first person to jump into the cold water was my brother.
2.7. [the] NP Unique in all contexts	**There** are nine planets traveling around the sun.
Type 3: [+SR -HK] Referential indefinites, first mention: [a(n)], [ø]	
3.1. [a(n) [+ count] [+sg]] NP	I saw **a** strange man standing at the gate.
	I keep sending **ø** messages to him.
Type 4: [-SR -HK] Nonreferentials: [*a(n)*], [ø]	
4.1. [*a(n)* [+ count] [+sg]] NP	I'm going to buy a new bicycle; He used to be **a** lawyer.
4.2. [ø [+ count] [- sg]] NP	**ø** Foreigners would come up with a better solution for this matter.
Type 5: Idioms and other conventional uses (including uses with pronouns): [*a(n)*)], [*the*, [ø]	
5.1. [*a(n)* [idiom or other use]]	All of **a** sudden, he woke up from his coma.
5.2. [*the* [idiom or other use]]	In **the** 1960s, there were lots of protests against the Vietnam War.
5.3. [ø [idiom or other use]]	He has been thrown out of work, and his family is now living **ø** hand to mouth.

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[4] Associative anaphoric use, is the same as anaphoric use except that the first mention of the is used with a noun that is related to a previously mentioned noun rather than the same noun (e.g. We attended a party. The host was very gracious.).

[5] It is similar to the extended reference, the only difference being that the modifier does not provide explanatory information (e.g., My wife and I share the same secrets, where the modifier same does not inform us as to what the secrets are but "only points to an identity between the two sets of secrets, my wife's and my own").

The research instruments of this study will be made based on the model proposed by Butler (2002) in which the countability of nouns had been taken to be the aspect for choosing the appropriate articles. So, that it may make this model easy to understand by many ESL and EFL learners because the noun countability is the first aspect that they think about when they make a decision on article use and it also may lead to an appropriate article choice (Butler, 2002).

Research methodology

Subjects

Due to the researcher asked the subjects to do the test during their English class, the researcher needed all of the first-year and the fourth-year English majors to take the test. Then, 30 freshmen and 30 seniors were chosen again by simple random sampling in order to create the equal number of the subjects for the statistic reasons.

Instruments and procedures

The instrument of this study was a fill-in-the-blank test requiring the subjects to complete 16 individual sentences and two passages with appropriate articles, totalling 57 blanks. These items were categorized according to Butler's model (2002): three items for each type of noun phrase environments. For the fifth type, idioms and conventional uses, what was chosen was based on usefulness and frequency. The test was written by the researcher and approved by three qualified native speakers of English who have many years of experiences in language teaching.

Data collection

The data was collected from the scores on the 60 tests. Each item was worth one point, totalling 57. Each item was given one point if the correct article was chosen, or 0 if not.

Data analysis

To answer research question one concerning the extent to which the first-year and the fourth-year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani University knew the English article system, the mean scores of the two groups were considered.

To answer research question two concerning whether the two groups used the English articles differently, the mean scores of the two groups classified into five types would be compared. Therefore, the statistics used in this study included mean, percentage and independent sample t-test.

Results of the study

The data gathered for this study was analyzed quantitatively. The quantitative analysis focused on differences in the article use by the first year and the fourth year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani University. As mentioned in the research objectives, the purposes of the study drawing on the extent to which the first-year and fourth-year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani University know how to use the English articles and whether they use the English article system differently. The results are presented below.

The mean scores of both groups of the subjects are shown in the following Table to show how much they know how to use the English articles.

Table 2 The average scores on the article tests of both groups

	The first-years	The fourth-years	Differences
Sum (out of 1710)	1001	1204	200
Median	33.00	41.50	8.50
Mode	27	43	16
Mean (out of 57)	33.37	40.13	6.76
Percentage	58.19	69.88	11.69
SD	**6.58359**	**6.50588**	**7.33144**
t	-4.004		
P	.000		

The data in Table 2 shows that the mean percentage of the correct article use by the first-year English majors was 58.19% while that of the fourth-year students was 69.88 %. This means the first-year students somewhat knew how to use articles whereas the fourth-year students knew it fairly well. Also, the mean score of the first-year English majors (33.37) was statistically lower than that of the fourth-year English majors (40.13) at P= 0.000. This shows that the fourth-year English majors had more competence in using the English article system than the first-year students.

In this section concerns whether the two groups differed in their article use. The results show below.

Table 3 Scores for each type of noun phrase environments

Type	The first-years	The fourth-years	Differences	P
1. [-SR +HK], generics and unspecifiable (total= 360)	246 (68.33%)	278 (77.22%)	32	0.049*

Type	The first-years	The fourth-years	Differences	P
2. [+SR +HK] Referential definites (total = 630)	361 (57.30%)	433 (68.73%)	72	0.002*
3. [+SR -HK] Referential indefinites, first mention (total = 270)	195 (72.22%)	242 (89.63%)	47	0.005*
4. [-SR -HK] Nonreferentials (total = 180)	88 (48.89%)	133 (73.89%)	45	0.000*
5. Idioms and other conventional uses (including uses with pronouns) (total = 270)	111 (41.11%)	118 (43.70%)	8	0.552
Total	1001	1204	200	

According to Table 3, the total scores of the first four noun phrase environments of the fourth-year English majors were significantly higher than those of the first-year students at P = 0.049, 0.002, 0.005 and 0.000 respectively, showing that the fourth-year English majors knew better than the first-years about the article usage in the environments of generics and unspecifiable NPs [-SR +HK], referential definites NPs [+SR +HK], referential indefinites and first mentioned NPs [+SR -HK] and nonreferentials NPs [-SR -HK].

However, there was no significant difference in the scores of both groups of the subjects in the fifth type of NP environment concerning idioms and conventional use. This means that both groups could use articles in idioms and for conventional uses to a similar degree as shown in Table 4.

It happened that the orders of scores of both groups of the subjects showed similar patterns as illustrated in Table 4 below:

Table 4 The order of scores on the five NP environments

The first-year English majors		The fourth-year English majors	
1. The third type: [+SR -HK] Referential indefinites, first mention	(72.22%)	1. The third type: [+SR -HK] Referential indefinites, first mention	(89.63%)
2. The first type: [-SR +HK], generics and unspecifiable	(68.33%)	2. The first type: [-SR +HK], generics and unspecifiable	(77.22%)
3. The second type: [+SR +HK] Referential definites	(57.30%)	3. The fourth type: [-SR -HK] Nonreferentials	(73.89%)
4. The fourth type: [-SR -HK] Nonreferentials	(48.89%)	4. The second type: [+SR +HK] Referential definites	(68.73%)
5. The fifth type: Idioms and other conventional uses (including uses with pronouns)	(41.11%)	5. The fifth type: Idioms and other conventional uses (including uses with pronouns)	(43.70%)

Considering the first-year students' total scores, they gained the highest scores on referential indefinites, first mention NPs [+SR -HK] (72.22%), followed by generics and unspecifiable [-SR +HK] (68.33%), referential definites [+SR +HK] (57.30 %), nonreferentials [-SR -HK] (48.89%) and idioms and other conventional uses (41.11%), respectively. It can, therefore, be concluded that the least problematic NP environment for the first-year English majors was the third type of referential indefinites, first mention and the most problematic one was the fifth type that included idioms and conventional uses because their average score was the lowest.

For the fourth-year students, the highest score was also on referential indefinites, first mention [+SR -HK] (89.63%), followed by generics and unspecifiable [-SR +HK] (77.22%), nonreferentials [-SR -HK] (73.89%), referential definites [+SR +HK] (68.73 %) and the idioms and other conventional uses

(43.70%), respectively. This indicates that the fourth-year English majors, like the first-year students, were the best at the third type. On the other hand, they did not perform well in idioms and other conventional uses as evidenced in their scores being lower than 50 percent.

Discussion

Concerning the extent to which the first-year and the fourth-year English majors at Ubon Ratchathani University knew the English articles. The results showed that the fourth-year English majors knew how to use the English articles fairly well while the first-year students' knowledge of article use is at a moderate level. The fact that both groups could not achieve the high level of knowledge is probably due to the following reasons.

One reason is that both groups are English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Their native language is Thai, which does not possess the article system. That is, no definite nor indefinite articles are used in Thai. Whether a noun is definite or indefinite is usually figured out through context. This may lead to confusion between the known and the unknown (Luksaneeyanawin, 2005) causing the subjects of this study difficulty in the acquisition of articles. It has been found that the concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness are the most problematic for many Thai learners of English and that L2 learners acquire these two concepts rather late (Thonglow, 2002). Therefore, it can be assumed that L1 interference plays a role in their acquisition of articles. Also, Carroll mentioned that the more difficult the structures of the two languages are, the more errors in L2 occur (1964).

Another reason is the English article system is one of the most problematic grammatical elements for ESL and EFL learners (Master, 2002). According to Master (2002), there are several reasons that make the article system difficult for most L2 learners. First, English articles are used as function

words which do not carry the meaning of themselves, making their rule application difficult, resulting in their omission or overuse. Second, function words are normally unstressed, thus being considered unimportant. Third, the article system has multiple functions, which is a big burden for many L2 learners who have not mastered it. Worse, there is no conclusive and reliable explanation of how they are used, as stated by Troike (2006: 216):

> "Even though articles are the first word encountered and have the highest frequency in the language, there is still no convincing evidence to account for this phenomenon. The only genuinely valid answer, "Because it is, " appeals to grammaticality judgments that are based on a level of intuition which few L2 learners can be expected to attain".

Concerning the better performance in the article use of the fourth-year English majors than the first-year English majors, this may be because the latter had less experience in using the English articles. According to Ekiert (2004), the English articles are difficult to teach and can be acquired only through exposures. In this case, the most crucial relevant factors seem to be the educational differences, especially in terms of the length of study of the subjects. In other words, the fourth-year students had more exposures to English texts and thus might have learned more, consciously and unconsciously, about how to use the English articles. Moreover, they might have been given feedback on their article use in the writing classes. This probably helped them acquire more knowledge about the English article usage than the first-year students.

The points mentioned above may create the different performances on the article use among both groups of the subjects.

In terms of the article use, both groups used the English articles differently as they gained statistically different scores on the first four types of noun phrase environments. The fourth-year students' scores on the first three NP environments were higher than 70 percent. On the contrary, the first-year students scored higher than 70 percent on only one NP environment. Their different performances on the English article use are ranked according to their degree of knowledge below.

Table 5 Differences in performance on the article use

Ranks	1st year students	4th year students
1	Type 3 [+SR, - HK] (72.22%)	Type 3 [+SR, - HK] (89.63%)
2	Type 1 [-SR, + HK] (68.33%)	Type 1 [-SR, + HK] (77.22%)
3	Type 2 [+SR, +HK] (57.30%)	Type 4 [-SR, - HK] (73.89%)
4	Type 4 [-SR, - HK] (48.89%)	Type 2 [+SR, +HK] (68.73%)

Based on Table 5 above, the results will be discussed in terms of the features and noun countability as below.

Features

From Table 5, it is obviously seen that both groups of the subjects had problems with the two features [SR] and [HK]. It is apparent that they used articles without taking these two features into consideration as there was no systematic pattern found from their article use. Their performances were different from the claim by Ekiert (2004) that the first article acquired by many second language learners was 'a' in nonreferential context (Type 4, -SR, - HK), the second article acquired was 'a' in first mention environment (Type 3, +SR, - HK), followed by zero article for generics (Type 1, -SR, + HK), idioms (Type 5)

and 'the' in referential definites (Type 2, +SR, + HK) respectively; furthermore, it seemed that L2 learners could firstly detect [SR] and then [HK]. Therefore, it cannot be concluded which feature the subjects acquired first or gave priority to. In fact, they lacked the knowledge of these two features as this concept had never been introduced to them. Moreover, their article choice was mainly influenced by a set of rules they had read and learned from many grammar books and had been taught by their instructors. For example, when a noun is mentioned for the first time, 'a' is used, but when the same noun is mentioned for the second time, 'the' is used.

Such a rule is one of the article usage rules normally found in many English grammar books which the subjects of this study made use of. This may be the reason why both groups of the subjects could do best on the third type of noun phrase, referential indefinites and first mention [+SR, - HK] (72.22% for the first-years and 89.63% for the fourth-years).

Concerning the most difficult NP environment, both groups of the subjects gained the lowest scores on the fifth type: idioms and other conventional uses. This is because choosing the appropriate articles for this type of noun phrase required familiarity with the idioms concerned because the use of articles in idioms is generally not subject to the rule due to their unique or special characteristics (Ekiert, 2004). This indicates that both groups of the subjects may not read extensively and thus may not have enough chances to encounter these idioms.

To conclude, the subjects of this study were not aware of the features relevant to the article use. When they chose an article for each noun phrase type, they principally used what they had been taught or had learned from English grammar books.

Noun countability

According to Butler (2002), noun countability is an important component in determining which articles to use. Detecting noun countability of a referent was found to be a major problem for some L2 learners (Butler, 2002). Since noun countability affects the use of indefinite articles 'a(n)' & 'ø' only, the researcher will discuss only the use of the indefinite articles. Regarding this case, 'a' and 'an' are included in the same category as 'an' is an allomorph of 'a'(Hausser, 1999). The performances of both groups of the subjects on different kinds of indefinite articles are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Different performances in the use of the indefinite articles

Type of nouns	Singular counTable nouns [a(n)]		Mass nouns [ø]		Plural counTable nouns [ø]	
	a/ an	ø	a/ an	ø	a/ an	ø
The first-years	72.19 %	27.81 %	26.89 %	73.11 %	34.37 %	65.63 %
The fourth-years	86.66 %	13.34 %	11.23 %	88.77 %	11.16 %	88.84 %

From Table 6, the percentage scores on the correct use of the indefinite articles with the first two kinds of nouns, singular counTable nouns and mass nouns, for the first-years were more than 70%. This indicates that they did not have serious problems in using the indefinite articles with these kinds of nouns. One reason may be that the nouns used on the test were all familiar ones. The words representing mass nouns are food, bread, water, beer, soup and wine, which are familiar words, so it might be an easy task for them to choose the zero article as determiners. From the personal communication, they have been taught how to recognize mass nouns since they were in high school. Also, nouns chosen for singular counTable nouns in this study were dog, bone, box, present, nurse, restaurant, tiger, lion, bear, whale and old car. Some of the subjects

mentioned that these nouns were basic English singular counTable nouns which were restricted to be used with the indefinite article 'a(n)'. Another reason is that the indefinite article 'a(n)' is less problematic than other kinds of articles for students who study English as a second language since its use is restricted to singular counTable nouns (Miller, 2005). Concerning the use of the correct article for plural counTable nouns 'ø', their percentage score was 65.63 %. This shows that most of the first-year students somewhat knew how to use the zero article with plural counTable nouns. However, some of them (34.37%) still chose 'a(n)' as a determiner for plural count nouns which were represented by such regular plural nouns as firecrackers, apples, pineapples, mangoes, products, babies, toys, creatures and worms. These errors were not consistently made by a few students, but sparsely made by a number of them. This was probably because they were careless when taking the test or did not take the test seriously.

For the fourth-year students, their accuracy percentage scores on the indefinite article use were more than 80% in all the three types of noun. Overall, their percentage scores were higher than the first-year students' scores. This may be because the fourth-year students could better detect noun countability through more experience in writing and reading during their four-year study at Ubon Ratchathani University. The first-year students, on the contrary, did not have much knowledge about using the English articles because they might not have been assigned to write a lot or read extensively.

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