

# NEWS

## Summer Institute Bibliography

Shareen Grogan and Rebecca Day Babcock are compiling a bibliography of published works that can trace their genesis back to one of the Summer Institutes. These do not need to be papers about the summer institute, but rather works that were somehow generated from the SI experience, for instance, the idea for the article was sparked at the SI, collaborators met at the SI, the paper was one of the writing projects from your SI writing group, etc. In addition, we would like the story behind the article and how the SI contributed to its existence. Send your citations and stories to [babcock\\_r@utpb.edu](mailto:babcock_r@utpb.edu) and [sgrogan@nu.edu](mailto:sgrogan@nu.edu).

## (THE) ENGLISH ARTICLE AND ELL STUDENTS

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English Language Learner (ELL) students make up a significant portion of the students in the United States. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, a language other than English is spoken in 17.9% of American homes (State), and the number of ELL speakers is projected to continue rising. In a climate of increasing diversity, it is important for writing centers at universities to be sensitive to the needs of these students, who often frequent writing centers to better their English writing ability. As the CCC's "Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers" urges, universities need "to recognize the regular presence of second-language writers in writing classes . . . and to develop instructional and administrative practices that are sensitive to their linguistic and cultural needs" (670).

Research indicates that "university professors and employers find ESL errors distracting and stigmatizing" (Ferris 9). Because of these biases, these students' identity as ELLs can become more than a demographic demarcation; it may become a social and economic handicap. These students are highly intelligent and motivated, but their difficulty in mastering English is often used to mark them as different, to belittle, and even to mock them. To help these students succeed in their goals, we as tutors may need to provide them with extra, focused assistance. There are many aspects of English that challenge ELL students; however, one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome is mastery of the English article. Although the English language contains only two articles: "a/n" and "the," their usage is defined more by exceptions than by regular rules, so they are challenging to master, especially for students whose native language does not contain articles. For the ELL students who speak languages such as Japanese, Mandarin, Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, and even Cherokee, mastery of the English article is more than an inconvenience; it is a daunting intellectual challenge (Dryer 156). When an ELL student has progressed in his/her studies, there will come a time when s/he needs assistance with the finer points of grammar, such as the usage of the article. The purpose of this paper is to seek pragmatic solutions to helping ELL students gain mastery over the English article and to provide tutors with some of the skills and knowledge they will need to provide that kind of assistance. Many writing tutors rely on their innate understanding of English, which comes from speaking it for many years, rather than a technical understanding of the grammatical rules and linguistic structures. Unfortunately, as many tutors (I among them) have found, our innate understanding of the language is not always sufficient to assist ELL students. Before tutors can begin to help an ELL student with the article, it is important that tutors first understand the article for themselves.

### THE ARTICLE

The article is only one aspect of the grammatical structure that challenges ELL students. ELL students often encounter confusion with the larger class that articles belong to: the class of language known as the identifier. Identifiers function as their title suggests; they provide additional identifying information about the noun they modify. In English they usually communicate information like quantity (such as "many ducks") and specificity (such as "her bag" or "that paper"). Fortunately, most identifiers are physical and visual in nature, so they are easily explained across cultural and language barriers. Articles can be explained in similar ways, but their usage is often more complex (and more difficult to represent visually) than most other identifiers.

The two English articles, "a/n" and "the," can be thought of in general terms thus:

a/n = indefinite (non-specific) article

*Do you have **a** book?*

the = definite (specific) article

*Do you have **the** book?*



**CALL FOR PROPOSALS**  
**MidAtlantic Writing Centers**  
**Association Conference**

**York, PA**

**March 27-28, 2009**

**Conference Theme: "A Firm League  
of Friendship": Declaring the  
Interdependence of Writing  
Programs and Writing Centers**

**Keynote speaker: Muriel Harris**

The 20<sup>th</sup> Annual MAWCA Conference will be held in York, PA, where in 1777 the Articles of Confederation were signed. Just as the founders sought shared and productive roles for the states and the federal government, writing centers and writing programs have also sought to maintain, to borrow from Article 3, a "a firm league of friendship with each other." The 2009 MAWCA Conference invites proposals from all stakeholders in the work of writing instruction: peer tutors, professional tutors, writing instructors, writing center and writing program directors.

Though we invite presentations on all facets of writing center work, we especially seek proposals that speak to the rich interdependence of writing programs and writing centers. And, in the democratic spirit of fellowship and conversation, we also encourage presentations that are meant to spur collaboration and discussion rather than reading of formal papers. We also welcome multiple modes of presentation that make use of available technologies—audio, video, posters, visuals, and interactive workshops.

For the detailed Call for Proposals, and more information on the conference, accommodations, etc., please visit the conference Web site at <[www.ycp.edu/lrc/mawca2009](http://www.ycp.edu/lrc/mawca2009)> or e-mail conference coordinators: Cynthia Crimmins ([ccrimmin@ycp.edu](mailto:ccrimmin@ycp.edu)) or Dominic Delli Carpini ([dcarpini@ycp.edu](mailto:dcarpini@ycp.edu)).

In the first case, the article "a" is indefinite, referring generally to any book, whereas the second case is definite, referring to some specific book. This basic function of the article can be represented as a part of the continuum of identifiers:

*The article as a marker of specificity.*

No article is used when the noun refers to a concept	dog
"A" is used when the noun is unfamiliar	a dog
"The" is used when the noun is more familiar	the dog
"Your," "her," etc. A determiner is used when the noun is familiar and owned.	your dog

This specificity is strongly tied to the other major function of the article, which is to act as a discursive marker of novelty. In their function as a marker of novelty, articles indicate whether the noun is familiar (known/old) or unfamiliar (novel/new). Unfamiliar nouns are indicated using "a" and familiar nouns are indicated using "the." The status of a noun as either familiar or unfamiliar may change in the course of an exchange.

For example: Please give me *an* apple.  
Thank you, *the* apple was good.

The apple is a new thing when it is introduced in the first sentence, so it takes the indefinite article "a/n." In the next sentence, the reader knows of the apple's existence, so the apple becomes a familiar noun, and takes the familiar article "the." This example conforms nicely to the grammatical rules; however, articles in the real world rarely work out in such nice forms. They often fall into gray areas of cultural context, where the reasons for the article's usage may not be clear to an ELL student. For example: *A horse walks into a bar and the bartender says, "Why the long face?"* The bar in question is a new thing when it is first introduced at the beginning of the sentence, so it takes the indefinite article "a." During the course of the sentence, the reader or listener implies the existence of a bartender based on the existence of the bar. Based on this assumption, an assumption specific to the cultural context, the bartender becomes a familiar noun, and takes the familiar article "the." The two other articles in this sentence function on similar cultural assumptions. "A horse" is introduced at the beginning of the sentence, and "the long face" which is seen later in the sentence refers to the shape of the horse's face. Both sets of articles in this example function as both markers of specificity and markers of novelty. This is because, in the application of speech in a cultural context, these functions of specificity and novelty are strongly related, yet frustratingly separate. Even to a native English speaker, the article's usage is complex enough to be elusive. The function of an article as a discursive marker of novelty can be seen below. Note that, even in this example, the functions of specificity and novelty are nearly inseparable.

*The article as a marker of novelty*

"A"	Jack ordered a sarsaparilla because he was very thirsty.
"The"	John drank the entire beverage.

Finally, in addition to these basic functions of the article, there are a number of exceptions to these general rules, such as proper place nouns, common knowledge nouns, noun phrases, etc.

For example: *the* Pacific Ocean

But not: *the* Lake Ontario

For more specific instances of exceptions in article usage, consult handbooks on grammar, such as Ascher's book and also Lane and Lange's book.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Writing Center Director University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

This is a full-time, non-tenure track position in an innovative, busy center that offers both onsite and online service <<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb>>.

The Director of the Writing Center is the principal administrator with responsibility of the overall day-to-day operation of the Center. The primary responsibilities include: administration, management, and supervision of the Center's programs, budget, and personnel. The director also represents the Writing Center services and interests to the University community and serves on committees related to the Center's mission. The director guides the Center's strategic planning and envisions and develops new initiatives.

Qualifications and Experience: PhD preferred, master's degree required in a related field, with at least three to five years of writing center administrative experience, preferably in a research-based college or university setting.

Salary: Commensurate with experience  
Closing Date: Open until filled  
Applicants must submit a cover letter and CV electronically via <<http://hr.unc.edu/jobseekers>> and submit three letters of reference to Shade Little, Chair, Writing Center Director Search Committee, Campus Box 3106, UNC-CH, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3106. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is an equal opportunity employer, and is strongly committed to the diversity of our faculty and staff. Women and minorities are encouraged to apply.

### HELPING ELL STUDENTS WITH THE ARTICLE

After examining some of the aspects of the article, we can see that the article is more complex than even an experienced tutor well versed in grammar might have thought. It is hardly surprising that students, especially students whose first language does not include the article, might come to the writing center seeking help. In the 1970s, a process-oriented form of composition instruction began to develop in response to the rigid grammarianism which had been the previous vogue. Consequently, the writing center that emerged from that school of thought leaned toward tutoring with a *laissez faire* approach to the writer's mechanics, choosing to focus instead on the writer's ideas. Unfortunately for ELL students, an approach that merely overlooks their struggle with mechanics does not actually help them improve their grasp of those mechanics. As Ferris says, these students require "feedback or error correction that is tailored to their linguistic knowledge and experience . . . and instruction that is sensitive to their unique linguistic deficits and needs for strategy training" (5). Ferris adds her voice to the growing chorus of those calling for writing centers to take a more active part in tutoring ELL students by bringing more focus onto mechanics.

The ELL students who come to our writing centers do suffer from a deficit, but that deficit is not the deficit model of stupidity forwarded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Pinker says, language acquisition "is guaranteed for children up to the age of six, is steadily compromised from then until shortly after puberty, and is rare thereafter" (298). There is a critical window of time for learning a language with the mastery of a native speaker, and if that window is missed, it is nearly impossible to gain complete competence in that language. "The development of language, then, involves two people negotiating . . . If there is a Language Acquisition Device, the input to it is not a shower of spoken language but a highly interactive affair" (Bruner 39). As writing tutors, we need to provide ELL students with that interaction. We need to assist them in the difficult task of learning a language after their brains are no longer biologically oriented for that learning.

The pragmatic solution is assisting students who have arrived at some stage of mastery in their English speaking/writing ability, but still have many specific grammatical problems due to their incomplete knowledge. Following the other research in this field, I propose that we, the tutors, need to provide this knowledge through what I term "experiential assistance." Experiential assistance may mean that the tutor will need to go through a student's work line by line, helping him/her pick out the mistakes that s/he has made. Though this kind of assistance might at first look like simple error correction, it is much more. As a number of studies, ranging from the late 1980s to 2001, indicate, "student writers have generally been successful in producing more accurate revisions in response to error feedback" (Ferris 15). If the tutor is merely editing, then the tutor is doing the student a disservice. What tutors should be doing is helping students build their toolkits of knowledge by helping them learn the grammatical use of articles in English. This suggestion follows the research of Cynthia Linville and others, which indicates that "[ELL] students can and do learn to become proficient editors of their own texts when given the necessary instruction" (84).

What I suggest is called "scaffolding," a concept introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross, over thirty years ago. It is a process of tutoring in which the tutor provides support to the student, "until the learner is capable of performing independently after the support is removed" (Puntambekar and Hubscher 2). Essentially, the tutor walks the student through a three-step process, first, teaching by showing, or "doing it for the student"; second, having the student do it with the tutor's assistance; and finally, allowing the student to do it alone, with only minimal guidance as needed. Traditionally in the tutoring of writing, this scaffolding has been seen as a short-term process, spanning a session or two. Experiential assistance is different from the traditional writing center's view of scaffolding. It acknowledges that ELL students may need help in the longer term, so experiential assistance involves helping these students over an extended number of sessions, which may vary from a few sessions to a few dozen sessions.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Director of Writing Center and Writing Assessment Drexel University

Drexel University is seeking a full-time, non-tenure-track teaching faculty member to direct the University Writing Center and conduct university-wide writing and learning assessments. This individual will guide the Writing Center as it provides quality service to students from all backgrounds and majors and will take the lead in expanding the Center's offerings: developing best practices to create a community of tutors, using integrated technology to enhance tutoring services, increasing writing across the curriculum practices, advising an interdisciplinary writing assessment task force, and organizing faculty development opportunities. The Director will also use writing-studies expertise to assess writing effectiveness in majors and disciplines on campus.

The Director will have a quarter-time teaching load with a primary appointment in the Department of English & Philosophy and a secondary appointment in the Pennoni Honors College. Candidates will have a Ph.D. in composition and rhetoric, preferably with an emphasis on writing center administration, and will have experience with teaching. Qualified applicants should also have experience with

- The use of outcomes to assess the effectiveness of writing and writing programs
- The day-to-day management of a writing center, including hiring and training student tutors and working with faculty to encourage and develop superior quality writing.

Please send letter of application, c.v., & current references to:

Scott Warnock, PhD  
Director of the Freshman Writing Program  
Drexel University  
3141 Chestnut Streets  
Philadelphia, PA, 19104

The core of this idea is what Wood and Wood call "fading," which is providing as much help as the student needs, and slowly fading that assistance out as it becomes unnecessary (7). The first session might involve the tutor actually making most of the corrections for the student, and the second session might consist mostly of the student being guided to make corrections by the tutor. As the student masters the grammar, the tutor will become less of a guide and more of a resource, only offering help as needed.

It is essential to keep the goal in mind; at this stage, tutoring is about helping students learn and master complex grammatical constructs in a language that is foreign to them. Before jumping in with both feet, it's important for the tutor to determine what the student most needs help with. A good rule of thumb is to focus the tutoring session on whatever seems to detract most from the student's meaning. The thing that most detracts from the student's meaning should be the highest order concern. If that means that the entire session is focused on a grammatical point like the article, then tutors are doing what they ought to do, just as much as if they spent the entire session focused on a more traditional higher order concern like organization. Regardless of what kind of focus the session takes, extended scaffolding can be used for any concern in the student's writing, grammatical or otherwise.

Supposing that the basic scaffolding model is followed, tutors can easily determine when students have mastered the topic. As students master the topic, they will begin to catch and correct their own errors. If a student happens to skip over an article error, I call attention to the sentence to see if the student can find the error. If the student is still not able to find the error, I point it out and, if necessary, try to explain why the usage is different from other usages that the student has encountered. Either way, the essential ingredients are flexibility and patience; as tutors, we simply need to recognize when a student is struggling and be willing to provide help when it is needed.

In my experience at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Writing Center, I have had the opportunity to put this idea into practice. After working over an eight-week period with T\_\_\_\_\_, a female student from Japan, I recently noted in my tutoring journal that "she [now] tends to correct most of her plurals, many of her articles, and a decent number of her compound verbs." In my work with T\_\_\_\_\_, I applied the idea of experiential assistance, beginning with the broad grammatical ideas and narrowing to particular examples of usage in her papers. Although we continued to work together until the end of the semester, my assistance became less and less necessary, and by the end of the semester I would frequently only need to assist her with one or two corrections. As I found with T\_\_\_\_\_, the situation that confronts the tutor is not usually a situation of teaching, but of helping with the practical application of particulars in students' papers.

To communicate the basic idea of what the article is, I would strongly suggest using examples, both written and physical. This communication might begin with the article as a marker of specificity and novelty, potentially using a method similar to the examples above. Because of the language barrier, I have often found that visual and/or physical representations can be very helpful in communicating a concept. For example, when helping a student out this fall, I noticed that the UMKC writing center was decorated with small pumpkins, so I modeled specificity like so:

Give me *a* pumpkin.

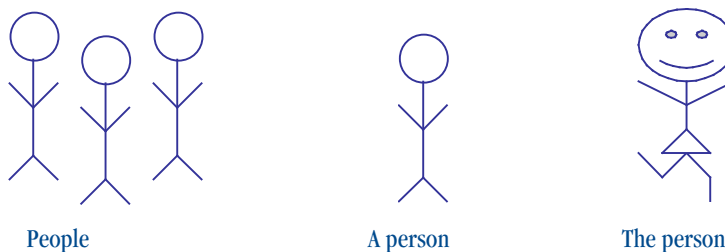
Give me *the* pumpkin.

I wrote the two phrases on a notepad in front of us and explained that *a* was general, referring to any of the pumpkins in front of us, and *the* was specific, referring only to one particular pumpkin. I was able to make my meaning clear to the student by pointing to the crowd of pumpkins and

requesting “give me *a* pumpkin,” and demonstrating that “a pumpkin” could be any pumpkin from the crowd. I next singled a particular pumpkin out, and having identified it, I asked the student to “give me *the* pumpkin.” This real-world illustration made the point better than twenty minutes of me talking, and the student nodded in understanding almost immediately.

In a similar way, illustrations can be used to communicate ideas. You don’t have to be an art major to construct a useful figure such as a simple stick figure. These can be very effective at communicating grammatical ideas. Visual examples are especially helpful for ELL students, because they overcome the language barrier without requiring the tutor to be a specialist in the student’s native language. Sometimes a picture is worth more than a thousand words.

*The article through art*



The acquisition of a new language is invariably a daunting and difficult task. The task often seems insurmountable to ELL students, but the knowledge that these students seek is innate to many writing tutors who are native English speakers. To provide the best assistance, writing tutors would benefit greatly from research outside the session to gain further linguistic and grammatical knowledge on the topics that trouble the students they are helping, including articles. Tutors without this specialized knowledge should not be discouraged, because they are still assisting the students they tutor. It is important for tutors to remember that their natural sense for the English language is imperfect; by studying the syntax of English they can be more effective tutors. ♦

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