



THE MISSING PIECE OF THE PUZZLE REVISITED: ARTICLES IN SECONDARY SCHOOL EFL TEXTBOOKS**

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ABSTRACT

Building on previous research (Gaskell & Cobb, 2004; Trenkić, 2008; Veličković, 2021) and taking into consideration the general lack of data pertaining to the teaching of articles in the later stages of EFL acquisition, this study aims to investigate how articles are presented and practiced in secondary school EFL textbooks by focusing on five courses: the immensely popular *Headway* series, the Serbian *Improving English*, but also the *On Screen*, *Traveller*, and *Solutions* series. These textbooks have recently been approved for use in secondary education by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. The corpus comprised 20 textbooks to be used across grades 1–4 (i.e. the pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced level). The results showed which features of article use (cf. Huddleston & Pullum, 2002) were represented in the select EFL textbooks, which types of examples (contextualized vs stand-alone) were included, whether article-oriented exercises and explanations differed across grades and the selected textbooks, but also what conclusions could be drawn about the practices of article

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instruction at the primary (Veličković, 2021) and secondary level of education. In line with the obtained results, we discussed the pedagogical implications and proposed possible teaching interventions.

Key words

articles, EFL textbooks, secondary education, teaching materials.

– *Johnny, do you know where **the** Pyramids are?*

– *No, Miss. They must be lost. There was **a** teacher here yesterday asking **the** same question.*

Introduction

The most frequently used word in English is none other than the definite article (Master, 1990; Nation, 2001).¹ As many an English teacher knows, misuse of the definite article is also one of the most frequently occurring language errors in EFL acquisition that persists to the highest levels of language proficiency (cf. Akakura, 2012; Cowan, 2008; Ellis, 2006; Gaskell & Cobb, 2004; Lee, 1999; Mueller & Tsushima, 2021; Snape, 2008; Umeda, Snape, Wiltshier, Yusa, 2017; Žugić, 2017), as it can be either overused, underused, or completely omitted.²

Similar observations have been made about the indefinite article, which ranks 7th in terms of frequency on the New General Service List (Browne, 2013).

Article omission and substitution appear to be equally problematic for EFL learners regardless of their L1. In other words, EFL learners tend to experience difficulties in article acquisition even when their L1s do have articles (Yoo, 2009) but there is an even more prominent tendency when their L1s are articleless, as is the case with the Slavic languages, Mandarin, and Korean, inter alia.

As you can see in Table 1, typical intralingual errors pertaining to the use of articles were long ago aptly summarized by Richards (1971: 187). Although more than fifty years have passed since Richards made these insightful comments, our pedagogical experience attests to their relevance in this day and age.

¹ This does not negate the frequency of occurrence of the indefinite and zero article, as outlined in Master (2002).

² At this point we will not be discussing the distinctions between article omission and the use of the zero article, as it is a topic that requires considerable attention and falls outside the scope of this paper.

*Table 1. Typical intralingual errors pertaining to the use of articles
 (Richards, 1971: 187)*

Intralingual errors	Examples
<p>1. Omission of <i>the</i></p> <p>a) before unique nouns</p> <p>b) before nouns of nationality</p> <p>c) before nouns made particular in context</p> <p>d) before a noun modified by a participle</p> <p>e) before superlatives</p> <p>f) before a noun modified by an ‘of phrase’</p>	<p><i>Sun is very hot</i></p> <p><i>Himalayas are ...</i></p> <p><i>Spaniards and Arabs</i></p> <p><i>at the conclusion of article</i></p> <p><i>She goes to bazaar every day</i></p> <p><i>She is mother of that boy</i></p> <p><i>solution given in this article</i></p> <p><i>richest person</i></p> <p><i>Institute of Nuclear Physics</i></p>
<p>2. <i>The</i> used instead of \emptyset</p> <p>a) before proper names</p> <p>b) before abstract nouns</p> <p>c) before nouns behaving like abstract nouns</p> <p>d) before plural nouns</p> <p>e) before some</p>	<p><i>the Shakespeare, the Sunday</i></p> <p><i>the friendship, the nature, the science</i></p> <p><i>after the school, after the breakfast</i></p> <p><i>The complex structures are still</i></p> <p><i>developing</i></p> <p><i>the some knowledge</i></p>
<p>3. <i>A</i> used instead of <i>the</i></p> <p>a) before superlatives</p> <p>b) before unique nouns</p>	<p><i>a worst, a best boy in the class</i></p> <p><i>a sun becomes red</i></p>
<p>4. <i>A</i> instead of \emptyset</p> <p>a) before a plural noun qualified by an adjective</p> <p>b) before uncountables</p> <p>c) before an adjective</p>	<p><i>a holy places, a bad news</i></p> <p><i>a gold, a work</i></p> <p><i>...taken as a definite</i></p>
<p>5. Omission of <i>a</i></p> <p>before class nouns defined by adjectives</p>	<p><i>he was good boy, he was brave</i></p> <p><i>man</i></p>

What has contributed to the multifaceted problematicity of article acquisition in the EFL teaching and learning context is that:

- there is a lack of consensus among researchers on how to define (in)definiteness;
- no clear distinction is made in teaching between specificity and definiteness;

- EFL instructors focus on the various uses of articles based on learner proficiency, their own FL proficiency or what the textbooks instruct them to teach;
- the explanations provided in textbooks are often vague, so much is left to the student to conclude on his own, resulting in potential misconceptions and increased teacher dependence;
- the nature of articles may be perceived as complex by both teachers and learners in that one article might at times, in addition to definiteness and specificity, also encode number and gender, and even the genericity of a noun (Lopez & Sabir, 2017).

In order to be able to elaborate on article use in the classroom, an EFL teacher must possess explicit knowledge of article functions and their associated meanings.

However, grammar books and instruction manuals differ in this regard as can be seen in Table 2, illustrating Eastwood’s (2005) and Yule’s (2009) accounts of definite article use.³

Table 2. Eastwood’s and Yule’s accounts of definite article use

	Eastwood (2005)	Yule (2009)	Examples (Yule, 2009)
	more specific meaning	distinguishing	<i>I’ve seen the dog, but not the cat.</i>
	second mention	reintroducing	<i>Meanwhile, back in the village...</i>
Accounts of definite article use	shared knowledge	objects in shared experience	<i>the bank, the bus, the newspaper</i>
	uniqueness	the only member	<i>the luckiest guy, the President</i>
	noun + phrase or clause	post-modifying phrase	<i>the person who made this mess</i>

³ For a more detailed comparison, see also Huddleston & Pullum (2002), Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik (1985) and Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999).

Inspired by the general lack of data pertaining to article instruction and acquisition at higher levels of EFL proficiency, we decided to investigate how articles are presented and practiced in secondary school EFL textbooks used in Serbia. Our research aims to show how much attention is paid to article instruction at the secondary level of education and how much textbooks differ in this regard. In line with the obtained results, we will discuss possible teaching interventions designed to enhance article acquisition.

Research background

Referential relations in Serbian and English: a brief overview. A considerable body of work pertaining to article acquisition by L1 speakers of articleless languages has been provided by Trenkić (2002, 2004, 2007, 2008, inter alia). She set the stage for numerous researchers to follow by outlining some of the key differences regarding how the Serbian and English language actually convey referential relations by specific linguistic means. For instance, one of the outlined differences is that the Serbian language, as an articleless language, relies on a variety of parts of speech and even word order to convey what is in other languages expressed by means of articles, such as the aspect of adjectives, as in *mudar čovek* vs *mudri čovek*. Such differences have a direct impact on article acquisition.

Yet another difference lies in the fact that Serbian codes specificity, while English codes definiteness. The difference between these two features revolves around the issue of identifiability (when both the speaker and listener are able to establish mental contact with the referent of a given noun phrase). Identifiability usually results in the use of a definite noun phrase in English. However, Ko et al. (Ko, Perovic, Ionin, Wexler, 2008) have stated that both the definite and indefinite article can be used with both [+specific] and [-specific] noun phrases. To use their example (Ko et al., 2008: 120), in the sentence *I would like to meet the author of that painting – unfortunately, I have no idea who it is, since the painting is not signed!* the noun phrase *the author of that painting* is labelled [-specific, +definite], still requiring the definite article. The distinction goes unnoticed and unstudied by numerous practitioners, but equating these two features leads to confusion and article misuse.

The dominant theoretical framework. Much of the research done on the topic of article instruction/production is based on what we may refer to as the ‘traditional’ or ‘standard’ approach, a very formal approach that focuses predominantly on the morphological and syntactic features of language. To quote: “Modern pedagogical grammars and materials still follow closely the accounts developed in the traditional grammars, when it comes to articles: their uses are still presented as a long list of rules, followed by an even longer list of exceptions, or ‘special uses’ (cf. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 1985). At no point is a unifying principle (or meaning) offered, which could systematically account for all the uses (and absences) of articles” (Trenkić, 2002: 53–54).

The main notions related to article use (the definite article in particular) as part of this approach initially included uniqueness (referring to the existence of a single referent in a bounded context), to which familiarity (associated with previous mention of the referent in question) and the aforementioned identifiability were later added.⁴ All three features are said to require the use of a definite noun phrase in the English language. Yet another staple of the ‘traditional’ approach is its focus on class membership, specifically the distinction between countable singular and countable plural/uncountable nouns, at the expense of context. This results in the underuse of *the* with countable plural and uncountable nouns. A case in point would be *But since there are exceptions to this rule due to the differences in pronunciation...*, an example illustrating a countable plural noun with a modifier (in the form of a prepositional phrase), which in the English language requires the definite article.

Previous research. Existing analyses of textbook material have confirmed Ionin, Ko, and Wexler’s findings (2004) that EFL textbooks do not treat articles uniformly and consistently, sometimes to the extent of not discussing them at all. For instance, in an analysis of 21 ESL/EFL grammar books, Yoo (2009) concluded that 3 of the 21 analyzed books did not make any direct or indirect reference to definite article use. White’s (2010) analysis included two ESL grammar books and one article workbook used to teach Asian learners. He noted that the absence of explicit explanations of article use and excessive reliance on lists of exceptions both result in unmeaningful memorization among the student population. This was also backed by the fact that the provided explanations did not account for all the examples of article use found in naturally occurring language, which was another considerable drawback for the analyzed textbook material. Lopez and Sabir (2017) carried out a study of three editions each of *New English File*, *Cutting Edge*, *Language Leader*, *Global*, and *New Headway*. They found issues that pertain to terminology, i.e. the conflation of definiteness and specificity, and no changes in the instructions provided on article use based on the targeted level of proficiency. In sum, they ascribed some of the difficulty in article suppliance to issues with the pedagogical material used in class, namely very little instruction on article use and few opportunities to explore the different uses of articles in general in the analyzed textbooks (Lopez & Sabir, 2017: 11).

To date, and to our knowledge, only one study has focused specifically on the EFL textbooks used in the Serbian linguistic environment, that of Veličković (2021). In her study, the author analyzed 20 elementary school EFL textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education for grades 5–8, including *Messages*, *English Plus*, *To the Top*, *Project*, and *Discover English*. The research questions outlined in the study revolved around which features of articles use were (under)represented, which types of examples predominated (contextualized vs stand-alone), and whether exercises which targeted article use varied across grades and textbooks. The author concluded the following: (a) that article suppliance was notably underrepresented in the studied

⁴ For a more detailed theoretical overview, see Trenkić (2002).

material (on average, the topic of article use was the focus of study once per textbook); (b) that there was a pervasive lack of any reference to zero article use in the material; (c) that the books included a limited number of article suppliance rules, but also (d) that the examples of article suppliance were accompanied by cursory explanations with no gradually increasing dosing of information. Furthermore, the examples provided as part of the instructions were mostly decontextualized stand-alone sentences and the exercises selected for this particular topic were predominantly of the fill-in-the-blank variety.

Methodology

To gain a deeper understanding of the role of EFL textbooks in article acquisition at higher levels of English proficiency, we decided to qualitatively analyze 20 EFL textbooks which have recently been approved for use in secondary education by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

The corpus comprised five textbook series (*Headway*, *Traveller*, *On Screen*, *Solutions* and *Improving English*), designed to be used across grades 1–4 (i.e. the pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced level of English proficiency). Of the aforementioned series, *Improving English* is the only regionally produced one, written by Katarina Kovačević and Gordana Marković.

In line with Veličković's (2021) research, we formulated the following re-se-arch questions:

1. Do explanations vary across the grades and select textbooks?
2. Which features of article use are represented in secondary school EFL textbooks?
3. Which types of examples are included?
4. Do exercises vary across the grades and select textbooks?
5. What differences can be observed between elementary and secondary school textbooks article-wise?

These questions will provide insight into how articles are presented and practiced in EFL classrooms, enabling us to compare the teaching practices at two different levels of education: the primary and secondary.

Before we elaborate on the results, it is worth noting that we analyzed explanations relating to the form, meaning and use of articles in the target textbooks. In other words, we searched for instances of explicit focus on forms (cf. Brown & Lee, 2015; Harmer, 2015), which can be realized by means of either the deductive or inductive approach. The former embodies the presentation of rules, followed by their

application, while the latter involves the presentation of examples, followed by the formulation of rules and practice (Brown, 2007).

Of these two, the deductive approach is said to have been over-emphatically used in traditional methods of language teaching.

Results and discussion

Although one might expect articles to feature prominently in secondary school EFL textbooks, since learning materials typically enable students to revise and steadily expand their knowledge of grammatical issues, as well as determiners, our corpus analysis revealed this is not the case: 9 out of the 20 textbooks contained no specific explanations relating to article use across the units.⁵

More surprisingly, three of these textbooks made no mention of articles whatsoever while the *On Screen* series offered no specific explanations although it did contain exercises addressing the use of articles. Hence, we can conclude that this particular textbook was designed to implicitly develop article knowledge in EFL learners.

On the other hand, of the 11 textbooks which did provide article-oriented instruction, six contained a single explanation whereas five included two or three explanations. In other words, merely a quarter of the selected textbooks elaborated on the use of articles, none of which did so at the advanced level of EFL learning. It is precisely at this level of language proficiency that learning is expected to become more challenging, enabling learners to use English flexibly and effectively (cf. CEFR level descriptors).

Such findings therefore underscore the marginal treatment of articles in secondary school textbooks and clearly indicate the need for supplementary instruction and teaching materials, which would progressively link the old information with the new. In particular, in light of the fact that for articles, as non-salient features (Ellis, 2006), merely being exposed to them in this manner will facilitate neither the learners' perception nor improve their production.

Moving on to research question two, i.e. which features of article use are represented in secondary school EFL textbooks, we identified the following:

- set (fixed) expressions,
- first mention,
- uniqueness,

⁵ We analyzed the contents of the selected textbooks article-wise by focusing on the units, i.e. the specific explanations and exercises accompanying them, not the grammatical references typically incorporated at the very end of the textbooks because these do not offer the possibility of practice.

- second mention,
- morpho-syntactic features,
- superlatives,
- generic meaning.

These are the most frequently occurring features of article use, presented in descending order. The list of features further extends to include complementation, identifiability, specificity, the use of articles with bodies of water, proper nouns/names, and the role/value distinction. The most frequently occurring features are found in almost all the analyzed series.

When it comes to set (fixed) expressions, the problem of relying so heavily on them as a means of instruction ties back into what was previously indicated as a drawback: lists of ‘exceptions’ requiring rote memorization. Although providing such examples was motivated by the desire to improve the communication skills of the learners, it is safe to say that it outgrows its usefulness at later stages of proficiency. The underlying issue is that of comprehension: which feature of article use was in fact referred to in each expression, and how can it be extended to other expressions and/or articles. Accounts of features outside of the ones provided as part of this cursory list could, at higher levels of proficiency, lead to an overall improvement in article production, or at least in article use comprehension. Therefore, this is an issue that requires some commitment and consideration, and the inclusion of set (fixed) expressions must not be treated as an escape hatch which would contain examples of article use that fall outside the scope of the aforementioned ‘traditional’ approach.

Although first and second mention do not appear with the same frequency in any of the series (albeit the frequency is certainly high for both), it would behoove us to consider them as mutually related features of article use. The ‘traditional’ approach is based on a simple premise: once you introduce a referent for the first time, you do so using the indefinite article. When you refer to it again, you do so using the definite article. This explanation ties in with the aforementioned feature of identifiability outlined in the research background section. However apt this guideline may be, it does not take into consideration a myriad of situations wherein a referent is introduced for the first time by means of the definite article not solely due to identifiability, but pre-existing familiarity. For instance, noun phrases such as *the sun*, *the moon* should not be subsumed under the heading of fixed expressions, nor under the heading of first/second mention, but should be accounted for by relying not just on the discourse context, but on the broader context of the world we live in and interact with. And while the indefinite article may be an indicator of existential presupposition, we could make the case that the definite article incorporates both an existential presupposition and an implied familiarity or identifiability, based on the context. Thus, in the case of the sentence *The sun was blazing*, which we take to be the first sentence of a longer piece of text, our interpretation would be based on pre-existing familiarity, but in the sentence, also to be taken as the initial sentence of a longer piece of writing, *The desert*

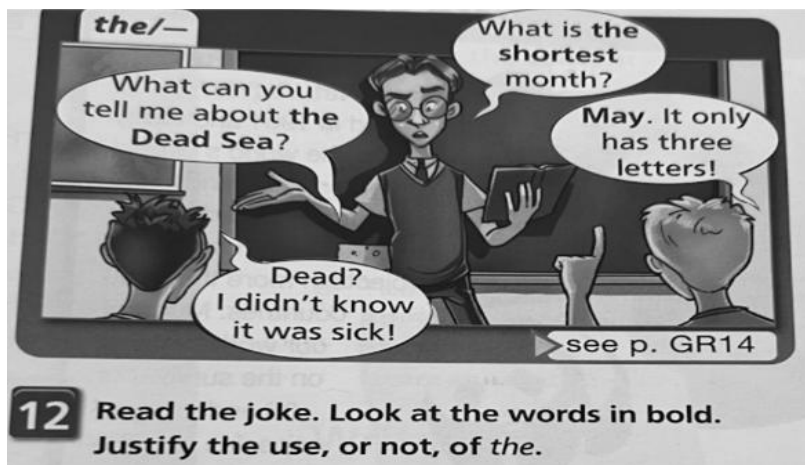
spread before us, our interpretation is to be based on implied identifiability and our ability to contextualize.

Once we determine that without referring to context we cannot account for all the naturally occurring uses of articles (cf. Epstein, 2001), then relying on uniqueness as a key feature of article use also becomes easier to understand, which can be linked to both the morpho-syntactic features of nouns and to superlatives. When it comes to uniqueness, it is difficult to merely state that ‘there is one of a kind’ of something without clearly delineating the scope of reference: in the case of *the Pyramids*, the scope is the world we live in, but in instances such as *Grab me the red jacket, will you?* the scope is the current discourse situation or the current shared physical surroundings of the interlocutors. This in turn emphasizes the importance of including context in any account pertaining to article instruction.

When it comes to the morpho-syntactic features of nouns, the series analyzed in this paper did not provide explanations as to why the distribution of certain articles with certain types of nouns seems to occur in an identifiable pattern. For example, EFL learners are taught that the zero article is not used with countable singular nouns. In such cases, they are instructed to refer to the first/second mention rule to account for possible article distribution. They are, however, taught that the zero article is frequently used with abstract and uncountable nouns. In all instances, no in-depth explanation was provided. The lack of explanations can lead to severe article overuse or underuse, depending on the situation. For example, how would, simply based on the morpho-syntactic features of the noun *love*, a teacher explain to their L2 learners the distribution of different articles with the same noun, as in *Love is a redeeming quality of mankind* and *The love they feel for each other grows stronger by the day*, or yet *A love like that comes along once in a lifetime*. Furthermore, explanations were also not provided for the use of the definite article with superlatives, other than listing it as a rule to be memorized, without, for instance, any indication that it could be used with a comparative as well, as in *He was the weaker of the two boys*. A solution for these listed shortcomings could be the introduction of contextualization into the discussion. In the case of the noun *love*, article suppliance would be based on whether the context involves the world at large, or a community, or two people, while in the case of the superlative, the suppliance of the definite article would be conditioned by the existence of a context consisting of a group of referents sharing a particular feature.

In relation to research question three, i.e. the types of examples included in the secondary school EFL textbooks, we can conclude that the vast majority took the form of stand-alone sentences, sentence fragments, and lists of rules/exceptions. These findings imply that rote memorization is still a favored learning technique even though it offers little in terms of improving comprehension or motivating higher-level thinking. Out of all the series, short paragraphs and dialogues, as examples of naturally occurring language, were occasionally included in the *Traveller* and the *On Screen* series. We also noticed that the provided examples were representative of both

teaching approaches, the deductive and the inductive one, as can be seen in the pictures below.



Picture 1. An example of the inductive approach to teaching articles in the *On Screen pre-intermediate textbook* (Evans and Dooley, 2019: 123)

RECYCLE! Articles

- a** We use *a / an* when we mention something for the first time, but *the* when we mention it again.
- b** We use *a / an* to mean 'per' or 'in each', e.g. *once a day*.
- c** We use *the* i) when it is clear what we are talking about, ii) with superlatives and iii) in certain phrases, e.g. *go to the cinema*.
- d** We do not use an article i) when we make generalisations, or ii) in certain phrases after prepositions, e.g. *at home, by bus, at university*.

Picture 2. An example of the deductive approach to teaching articles in the *Solutions intermediate textbook* (Falla and Davies, 2017: 75)

Regarding research question four, i.e. whether the types of exercises vary across grades in the select textbooks, the analysis indicated that a comparison was not

possible among all the textbooks, as some (*Headway advanced*, *Traveller pre-intermediate*, *Traveller upper-intermediate*) do not offer any exercises pertaining to article suppliance. As far as the remaining volumes are concerned, the type and number of exercises vary significantly from textbook to textbook.

The most frequently occurring type of exercise across all series was the fill-in-the-blanks exercise, which seems to be the staple. It was usually found in combination with exercises which included stand-alone sentences, at the expense of contextualized activities. The exception to this was the *Traveller* series.

However, as indicated previously, this series opted not to include article-related exercises for two proficiency levels. However, in the *On Screen* series, a progression of sorts in terms of the stand-alone exercises and contextualized activities was noted.

Specifically, the lower levels of proficiency begin with stand-alone exercises only, while an increase in proficiency brings with it the addition of contextualized activities, which might lead us to conclude that this is linked to the expected advances in the learner's knowledge.

Of all the series, *Solutions* most frequently incorporated contextualized exercises, beginning with the early stages of proficiency.

In summary, even though the majority of the analyzed textbooks provide both stand-alone examples and contextualized activities, the types of exercises do not become progressively more challenging or varied despite the assumption that the learners' level of proficiency has increased.

7 Why is *the* used in these sentences?

- A My grandmother once met the man who wrote the James Bond stories, Ian Fleming.
- B Really! That's funny, because my niece trained Daniel Craig, the actor.
- A What, you mean *the* Daniel Craig?!
- B Yes, the one and only!



Picture 3. An example of a contextualized exercise in the Headway upper-intermediate textbook (Soars, Soars, Hancock, 2019: 123)

PRACTICE

Complete the sentences with *a* or *the* where necessary.

1. For my family _____ Sunday lunch is _____ favourite meal.
2. Some people eat _____ bread with _____ potatoes.
3. The instructions were given in _____ French.
4. His main interest in life is _____ music.
5. _____ weather is fine. Shall we go for _____ picnic?
6. Put _____ butter on the shopping list.
7. 'How much did you pay for _____ cherries?' – 'Two pounds _____ kilo.'
8. 'What is Peter studying this year?' '_____ Geography I think.'
9. Do you know how to prepare _____ pasta?
10. _____ milk in the fridge tastes bad.

Picture 4. An example of a decontextualized fill-in-the-blanks exercise in the Improving English intermediate textbook (Kovačević & Marković, 2020: 67)

Finally, to answer research question five, we need to determine whether any differences can be observed between elementary and secondary school textbooks in terms of article suppliance instruction and exercises.

For that purpose, the data from this study will be compared to that of Veličković (2021).

Table 3. A comparison of conclusions relating to article use in the EFL textbooks intended to be used at the primary and secondary level of education

	Veličković (2021): primary level EFL textbooks	Current study: secondary level EFL textbooks
Explanations	the rules more or less uniform in their narrow scope, no graded content	the explanations vary from no mention at all to three mentions per textbook, no graded content

	Veličković (2021): primary level EFL textbooks	Current study: secondary level EFL textbooks
Features of article use	a relatively small number of features: countability and superlatives	a variety of features: countability, uniqueness, generic meaning, fixed expressions, first and second mention
Types of examples	mostly decontextualized single sentences	mostly decontextualized single sentences, contextualized examples rare
Types of exercises	predominantly fill-in-the-blanks exercises	predominantly fill-in-the-blanks exercises, other types scarce (correct the mistakes, find examples in the text, discuss the difference in meaning, match sentences, draw a conclusion)

As we can see from Table 3, when it comes to explicit explanations related to the meaning and use of articles, there appears to be a lack of graded content in the EFL textbooks designed to be used across both the primary and secondary level of education.

At lower levels of L2 proficiency the explanations are typically narrow in scope while at higher levels, at which one might expect the aspects of L2 grammar to become increasingly more complex, they vary significantly in terms of descriptions. On the other hand, features of article use can be said to progressively extend in scope, encompassing countability, superlatives, uniqueness, generic meaning, first/second mention, and fixed expressions. Another similarity between the primary- and secondary-level EFL textbooks can be observed in the types of examples included.

Although the use of authentic language in textbooks has become the norm since the 1980s, the analyzed examples mostly represent decontextualized single sentences whose meaning is often hard to explain without a broader context. Lastly, the dominant type of exercises designed to help learners master articles at both educational levels is the fill-in-the-blanks exercise.

Nevertheless, secondary level EFL textbooks also featured cognitively more challenging exercises (e.g. correct the mistakes, discuss the difference in meaning, draw a conclusion). These exercises could easily be adapted for any level of EFL proficiency, offering learners a variety of engaging tasks that could improve their understanding of article use.

Conclusions and implications

The aim of this paper was to outline how articles are presented and practiced in a selection of 20 secondary school EFL textbooks, and compare them to existing analyses of elementary school EFL textbooks used in the Serbian teaching and learning context. Based on our findings, nine of the analyzed textbooks provided no article-oriented instruction, six textbooks provided single instances of explanations, whereas five of the textbooks included two or three explanations of article use. The included explanations are commonly followed by exercises which are predominantly of the fill-in-the-blanks kind, and more rarely of the contextualized type, or of any other type of exercise.

The explanations and exercises, in all the analyzed series, unfortunately do not become more extensive as the level of L2 proficiency increases. Compared to the findings of Veličković (2021), no progressive cognitive challenges were noted. Ranging from the level of elementary school textbooks on, we found a persistent narrow scope of content, of types of examples, and of types of exercises (depending on the series). Very little reference to naturally occurring language was noted, along with limited contextualized content. Lastly, there was a continued emphasis on rote memorization that persisted across all series.

In terms of the possible implications, all the relevant characteristics of the Serbian language have obviously not been explored in sufficient detail. Nor have they been incorporated into the textbooks aimed at this particular population. Therefore, we firmly believe that a holistic approach is required for optimal results. As is, the textbooks make no reference to the specific nature of the two linguistic systems (Serbian and English), which had undoubtedly shaped and continues to shape the article suppliance of this population of L2 learners. In view of the persisting omission and substitution errors, this issue requires special attention from teachers and material designers alike, for whom the information provided in this paper could be of relevance. For ease of EFL textbook evaluation, we compiled a tentative list of features that teachers and material designers can rely on (see Appendix).

Article presentation and article instruction, as found in the select textbooks, are likely to determine not only how EFL teachers will respond to or use the provided material, but also how the students will be affected by it. If we refer back to the fact that article omission and article substitution persist to higher levels of proficiency, we find ourselves in a situation where the learners are able to communicate with a considerable level of success in their chosen L2, wherein any deviant structures will not result in a communication breakdown. Hence, the L2 learners are unlikely to notice them unless there is overt reference to their use. This applies to article production as well.

Furthermore, there is also the question of the sufficiency of exposure to naturally occurring article use in the analyzed textbooks. This is especially relevant

for article production since narrow-scope instruction will not bring about the desired L2 production. It goes without saying that articles are present in the textbook material, across all grades, as part of reading-, listening- or speaking-oriented tasks, but their inclusion appears to lack sufficient salience. This in particular refers to the type of activities included in the textbooks, all of which need to link these skills with article instruction, in an attempt to render any activity suitable as the basis for further work on article meaning and use.

Evidently, more activities are needed which will make articles stand out in the text (e.g. by means of italics or bold face) or make it overtly clear that articles are inextricably linked with other linguistic elements. In other words, the introduction of more contextualized examples and exercises would be particularly beneficial for article acquisition.

Emphasized article use in phrases, collocations, expressions, jokes, etc. could enhance learners' awareness of their importance and function, within the context of a theoretical framework that accounts for such examples of article use.

Additionally, we believe that brief periods of focal attention might be part of the solution as well (cf. Long, 1998). While learners are engaged in communicative activities at any educational level, when production problems arise, their attention could be drawn to article omission or misuse. Such temporary shifts could improve learners' metalinguistic awareness, making them aware of their errors and prompting them to reflect upon their language use in the future.

Our own pedagogical experience with MA students has repeatedly shown us that only after we had evaluated their MA theses did the students realize that they struggled with article use. Another possibility, closely linked to these observations, concerns the use of the L2 itself. If we provide our learners with more and more challenging opportunities, so they can try using the language items themselves (in the form of writing and speaking tasks), we can provide individual feedback and correction (cf. Scrivener, 2005).

Moreover, with the advent of modern technology, new AI-powered writing assistants have emerged, such as various software packages that can identify and correct spelling and grammar mistakes. Their use might also help learners realize where their strengths and weaknesses lie.

Last but not least, future studies might explore the effectiveness of new approaches to article instruction, such as the cognitive linguistic or corpus linguistic approach (cf. Veličković & Danilović Jeremić, 2022, 2023, 2024). These could potentially improve article production if used independently, or combined with the existing 'traditional' approach.

Corpus

Improving English (Katarina Kovačević, Gordana Marković)

Headway (Liz & John Soars, Paul Hancock)

On Screen (Virginia Evans, Jenny Dooley)

Traveller (H. Q. Mitchell, M. Malkogianni)

Solutions (Tim Falla, John Davies)

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Appendix

A preliminary list of features that the article instruction system in the Serbian linguistic environment needs to be evaluated against (cf. Veličković & Danilović Jeremić, 2022, 2023, 2024) :

- is there over-reliance on features such as uniqueness, identifiability, and familiarity, all of which lie at the core of the standard approach?
- is there over-reliance on anaphora to the almost complete exclusion of cataphora?
- do the textbooks provide (sufficient) contextualization and/or explaining how context can affect the use of articles, including the immediate discourse situation?
- do the textbooks incorporate the effect that the use of synonyms can have on definite article suppliance and therefore the associative context which impacts article suppliance even when no explicit mention has been made to a referent?
- do the textbooks exclude naturally occurring language in favor of artificially constructed examples, which predominantly take the form of single sentences?
- do we find repetition of the same and, at the same time, limited scope of article use in the textbooks?
- do the textbooks only explain ‘how’ articles are used or do they also take into consideration ‘why’ these particular articles were used in a particular context and do the coursebooks rely on any approach other than the standard one (e.g. a corpus linguistic or cognitive linguistic one)?
- do the article suppliance instructions change depending on the students’ level of proficiency?
- are the textbooks suited to the features of the learners’ L1 or the current state of their interlanguage?