Section 10  determiners (1): articles, demonstratives and possessives

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language notes

Completely correct article use is difficult to achieve, even at advanced level, especially for students whose languages don’t have an equivalent. Typical mistakes:

*What is programme today?
*We need the new plan.

Speakers of Western European languages, which have article systems, have less difficulty, but there are some differences which can cause such students to get things wrong in English – for example when they are saying what jobs people do, or when they are generalising:

*My sister is engineer.
*The life is hard.

The rules revised and taught in this Section will help learners to be more correct, but not all uses of articles fit into simple patterns; the correct use in some common expressions has to be learnt on a case by case basis. (Compare on the radio – on TV.) It’s important not to be perfectionist in this area: if students end up getting most of their articles right most of the time, they will communicate successfully, and too much correction can destroy confidence. (In fact, there are relatively few article mistakes that cause serious comprehension problems.)

Articles are unstressed, and may be difficult for some students to perceive. The ‘Pronunciation for grammar’ exercises will help with this.

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possible further activities

‘The’ in a text  Ask students to look at a news report of a few hundred words. Can they see the reasons for all or most of the uses of the?

Extending Exercise 4  If students would like to learn even more new vocabulary, get them to find the English names of five or more other professions, using their bilingual dictionaries.

Personalisation  Get students to write five or more sentences about the jobs of relatives or friends of theirs, on the following pattern:

My … is a …

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possible further activities

Generalising with ‘a’  Get students to write a few sentences about what particular animals can and can’t do, on the following pattern:

A … can …
A … can’t …

Generalising: expressions with adjectives  Students write as many sentences as they can on the following pattern:

I love / like / don’t like / hate (national adjective) (noun)

For example:

I like Belgian chocolate.

An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use.
I love Scottish folk music.
I don't like English breakfasts.

How many different countries can they bring in?
Help with the adjectives for countries and regions as necessary.

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**language notes**

Older grammars may use the term ‘demonstrative adjectives’ for *this*, *that* etc. In fact, they are determiners, not adjectives. However, the terminology is not very important.

Note that the English two-part division into words for ‘near’ (*this*, *here*) and ‘distant’ (*that*, *there*) is not necessarily found in students’ mother tongues. They may have a three-part system, with words equivalent to *this*, *that*, and *more distant*, *or here*, *there*, and *way over there*. Or one of the words for *this* and *that* may be much more common than the other, and used informally for both meanings:

*I'm not happy in that country.*
*I didn't like that film yesterday.*

*This*/*these* and *that*/*those* are used in English to indicate not only closeness or distance in space, but also temporal and emotional closeness or distance. Compare:

*Listen to this. That was interesting.*
*I do like this music. Switch off that bloody noise!*

For more about the use of demonstratives in text, see page 253.

**possible further activities**

*‘Those who …’* Quite a number of sayings, proverbs and quotations begin ‘Those who …’. Can students find a few on the internet? A quotations website (with a search facility) is a good place to look.

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Terminology relating to possessives is generally unclear and confusing. Often *my*, *your* etc are called ‘possessive adjectives’, and *mine*, *yours* etc are called ‘possessive pronouns.’ In fact, the *my*-series function as determiners, not adjectives, in noun phrases (like articles and demonstratives). And both *my* etc and *mine* etc are pronouns. *My* stands for the noun phrase ‘the speaker’s’; and *mine* stands for ‘the speaker’s possession’ (so it is in fact a kind of double pronoun). None of this is of any practical importance for teaching purposes.

Students often put apostrophes in *yours*, *ours* and *theirs*, and confuse *whose* and *who’s* or *its* and *it’s*. (Understandably, because possessive nouns have apostrophes.) Many native speakers make similar mistakes:

*‘Who’s election manifesto is the most convincing?’*
*‘It’s not at all clear who will win.’*

**possible further activities**

*Personalisation: ‘a … of mine’* Ask students to complete the following sentences:

A friend of mine …
Two friends of mine …
Three friends of mine …
Four friends of mine …

Can they go any further?

An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use.