Section 11 articles: *a/an* and *the*

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language notes

The correct use of articles is one of the most difficult points of English grammar, especially for students whose languages don’t have an equivalent. Typical mistakes:

*Where is station?*

*I need the new raincoat.*

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 given 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.)

The ‘Pronunciation for grammar’ exercises will help students who find it difficult to perceive articles in fast speech.

possible further activities

It’s best if students just read the quotations for interest as an introduction to the topic, without thinking hard about the grammar at this stage. After they have worked through the following pages, you might like to come back to the quotations again and get students to think about the reasons for the different uses.

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language notes

In languages that have articles, the indefinite article may be identical with the word for ‘one’. Even at intermediate level, occasional mistakes are possible.

*Could I have one drink of water?*

possible further activities

‘*A* or *an*’ If students need more practice on this, you could do Exercise 1 again orally. (They close their books; you say the words and phrases; they repeat them with appropriate articles.)

**Numbers** Write up numbers between 100 and 199; students say them aloud, beginning ‘a hundred’.

An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use.
language notes
In languages with articles, it is common for articles not to be used when a person’s role or job is given. Look out for mistakes like:

*My sister is hairdresser.

possible further activities

*Mime: jobs* Teach the names of a few more jobs if students are ready for some extra vocabulary. Then get them to take turns miming a job; the rest of the class decide what it is and say ‘You’re a …’. You may like to give out cards with the names of the jobs (so that they all have different ones).

*Students’ descriptions* Get students to write descriptions of themselves. Depending on the class, you might also be able to get students to write (reasonably polite) descriptions of each other; they read them out and the others have to guess who is being described.

*Celebrities* More advanced students might write short notes about well-known people (for example entertainers or fashion models), saying what they do and describing their appearance.

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possible further activities

*Vocabulary expansion* You could explore another vocabulary area, with students telling you what the various things do. For example household appliances:

- washing machine, dishwasher, fridge, freezer, microwave, mixer, extractor, timer, radiator, air conditioner, remote control

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language notes
This lesson is most likely to be useful to speakers of languages which do not have article systems; some such students may still be confused about the difference between *a/an* and *the* and their basic uses. The lesson will have little value for speakers of Western European languages.

possible further activities

*Beginning stories* Get students to change some or all of the italicised words in the following story-opening in as many ways as possible, while keeping everything else the same. Help with vocabulary.

Once there was a *beautiful princess* who lived in a *big palace*. *She* had a *big horse* and a *very small dog*. The *horse* was called ‘*Angel*’, and the *dog* was called ‘*Button*’. The *princess* was unhappy, because *her big sisters were very unkind to her*. ➔

Section 11 continues
language notes

In languages with articles, it is common for the definite article to be used with a noun that refers to a whole category. Look out for mistakes like:

*The life is hard.
*I love the nature.
*The books are expensive.

possible further activities

Men and women  Can students think of common generalisations about men and women? For example: ‘Men are better drivers than women’; ‘Women understand men; men don’t understand women’; ‘Men never ask the way’; ‘Women always lie about their age’. Do they think there is any truth in them?

Endangered species  The following creatures (among many others) are in danger of extinction. Ask students to check the names in their dictionaries, and to decide which three they would save, if they could.

- the Siberian tiger  the Asiatic lion  the giant panda
- the American bison  the Californian condor  the sea otter
- the cheetah  the blue whale  the African wild dog
- the Indian wolf  the hyena  the armadillo

What are the majority choices in the class?

Musical instruments  If students could learn a (new) musical instrument, which one would they choose? Which is the most popular choice in the class?

language notes

In languages with articles, the definite article may be used with place names in some cases where English has no article. Look out for mistakes like:

*The Lake Geneva.
*The Mount Everest.
*The Birmingham Airport.

possible further activities

Personalisation  Get students to write the names of four different kinds of place (e.g. a city, a lake, a mountain, a famous building) that a visitor to their country should visit or see, and four places that they would not recommend.

Geographical knowledge  Say or write up the names of various well-known buildings, rivers, lakes, mountains etc. Students write or say sentences about where they are. Help with vocabulary. (‘The Parthenon is in Greece.’ ‘Lake Superior is between the US and Canada.’)
possible further activities

**Personalisation**  Get students to write as many sentences as possible about themselves in ten minutes, using expressions from the lesson (e.g. *at school, in hospital, by train, without a dictionary, the same, as a guide, a hundred, watch TV*).

**Where are we?**  Students (individually or in groups) act little scenes illustrating expressions from the lesson (*in hospital, on holiday* etc). They can speak, but mustn’t use the key words. The other students decide where they are. (‘You’re in prison.’)