

Back to basics: Cracking a nut in using English indefinite articles

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Why teachers and learners of English should pay more attention to *a* and *an*

Introduction

This paper is focused on basic English language knowledge and skills by looking at the circumstances in which English indefinite article, either 'a' or 'an', is selectively used with authentic examples cited from a few widely read Australian newspapers. Three fundamental elements of a language consist of its pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar in language teaching terms (phonetics, lexicology and syntax are respectively used in linguistic terms). These terms are used in this discussion which is oriented to general ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) users. The fact is that most of them tend to pay less attention to pronunciation than to vocabulary or grammar, and approach these fundamental language elements in isolation rather than reflect on their connections. To address this issue, the author shows that pronunciation and grammar are connected and that it is important to get back to basics in language learning through investigating distinctions between two indefinite articles. There are four reasons for this investigation. First, examination of their distinctions in context crosses over the knowledge boundary between pronunciation and grammar. Making connection and association between the two language elements helps ESL/EFL learners develop analytical skills and enables reflective learning experience (Brockbank & McGill, 2007).

Second, language researchers and education practitioners have been reflecting and working on more practical and efficient language teaching methods, for example, using one's first language (L1) to facilitate ESL/EFL teaching and learning (Hall & Cook, 2012), teaching grammar in a communicative and learner-centred setting (Farrell, 1999) and re-igniting interest in instructing fundamental grammatical concepts (Bralich, 2006). The

holistic (or whole language) teaching and learning approach has been dominant in English-speaking countries in the past 40 years owing to the benefits from language functions and meaningful communication being emphasized (Rigg, 1991; Crandall, 1992). For example, since the late 1970s, competency-based education (CBE) has played a crucial role in developing learners' functional use of ESL in everyday interaction (Parrish, 2004). However, it is worth noting that such an approach leads to ESL learners' poor reading and writing skills due to lack of or insufficient exposure to grammar instructions in the classroom (Savage *et al.*, 2010). Language educators are less aware of gaps in the whole language approach than traditional skill-based instruction. In this case, there is a need to recognize the individual differences and



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diverse learning styles of the language learners (Sadler-Smith, 1996). Furthermore, ‘because both whole language and traditional skill-based instruction have strengths, educators should use a combined approach’ (Heymsfeld, 1989: 65). Each approach has its own pros and cons, and an integrative and flexible use of different approaches with reference to the learner groups, task types and learning environments makes more sense to get ESL/EFL learners back to basics.

Third, the indefinite articles are so commonly seen in English texts (e.g. newspapers, reading materials) that few ESL/EFL learners (that might be the case with some ESL/EFL teachers as well) would care to give much thought of why ‘an’ is used instead of ‘a’. Though the two indefinite articles are covered in many English grammar books, the explanation is mostly limited to their general usage and may not cover every case. Nor are the contents updated soon enough to include recent and local expressions used in Australian newspapers.

Finally, the author does not intend to promote traditional skill-based instructions at the expense of the CBE approach, but to call on ESL/EFL learners to become aware of the language building blocks and lay a solid foundation in language learning, which is meaningful for the development of their ESL literacy and effective written communication. Voices from a variety of language educators and teaching professionals are loud and clear about having fundamental knowledge of basic English literacy skills (spelling, grammar, etc.) (Ferrari, 2006a, b) and a facilitating focus on form (grammatical, pragmatic etc.) in the context of task-based language teaching (TBLT) adds to meaning-oriented communicative language learning (Long, 2000). The issues in foundation English literacy have also plagued many Australian students and can be seen in Australia’s Federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne’s calls for the return of phonics. Talking about ‘whole language’ learning, he said ‘while it might have been pursued with all the goodwill in the world, there’s no doubt that literacy standards for Australian students have declined measurably’ (Maiden, 2013). It is a similar case with some international students studying at Australian universities (Alexander, 2007). They have been struggling with basic English indefinite articles, which have no equivalent part of speech in many Asian languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai or Vietnamese (Han *et al.*, 2006). As this issue is more likely to be the Achilles’ heel of many ESL/EFL learners, it is essential that they pay due attention to the use of English indefinite articles in context.

In the next six sections, the author will look at the basic issues about the use of two indefinite articles, review the English vowel system, examine the use of ‘a’ and ‘an’ in context, discuss their applications in Australian newspapers, analyse some linguistic variations and draw a conclusion.

The issue with English indefinite articles

We first start with two examples with which most ESL/EFL learners feel familiar.

Example 1: Infrastructure NSW has suggested a system of distance-based tolling with a cap of about \$7 on the WestConnex, as is the case with the M7. (‘Goodbye Parramatta Road ...’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October, 2012, 1)

Example 2: At 11 am (AEST) today the debate will begin and Americans will have an hour and a half to consider the two candidates side by side for the first time. (‘Lecterns at 10 paces: The great debate begins’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October, 2012, 9)

While the use of indefinite articles ‘a’ before a consonant sound [s] in example 1 and ‘an’ before a triphthong [auə] in example 2 is straightforward, the use of ‘a’ in the example 3 is daunting even to advanced ESL/EFL learners who may not have an opportunity to hear it spoken in everyday English TV shows or radio broadcasts.

Example 3: Of course, a AA⁺ rating *would* mean taxpayers had to pay a higher interest rate on the Government’s borrowings. (‘A parlous state hunts for culprits’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 September, 2008, 11)

The reason why an indefinite article ‘a’ rather than ‘an’ is used before ‘AA⁺ rating’ in example 3 will be left unexplained for the moment, but will be discussed later in under the heading ‘Understanding the use of ‘a’ and ‘an’ in Australian newspapers’. Less proficient ESL/EFL learners may also be trapped due to lack of basic phonetics knowledge and mix-up about English vowel sounds and letters (see Table 1). They may choose to use ‘a’, instead of ‘an’ before ‘M4’ extension, claiming that ‘M’ is a consonant letter (see example 4).

Example 4: But it has also recommended cheaper construction methods than previously

Table 1: The English vowel system.

Vowel letters	Vowel sounds																	
	Monophthongs				Diphthongs				Triphthongs									
a, e, i (y), o, u	[i:]	[i]	[e]	[æ]	[u:]	[u]	[ə:]	[ə]	[ɔ:]	[ɔ]	[ɑ]	[ʌ]	[ai]	[ei]	[uə]	[əu]	[eiə]	[ɔiə]
													[iə]	[au]	[eə]	[ɔi]	[aʊə]	[aiə]
																	[əʊə]	

proposed for an M4 extension for the inner west. ('Goodbye Parramatta Road ...', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October, 2012, 1)

Examples 3 and 4 have been used to test many students doing their BA and MA coursework in TESOL at an Australian university and the results show that most of them failed to demonstrate fundamental knowledge and basic skills surrounding the distinction between English indefinite articles 'a' and 'an'. It is assumed that this may be a common issue to many ESL/EFL learners around the world, thus making it necessary to sort out such a fundamental but sometimes confusing puzzle. As this grammatical issue is interlocking with knowledge about pronunciation, we will next have a brief look at the role English vowels play in their distinction.

The English vowels

To examine the issue in example 4, which is less problematic compared with example 3 for some ESL/EFL learners, we need to have a look at the English vowels, including vowel letters and vowel sounds. Table 1 lists the English vowel system rather than that of consonants because the use of 'an' has a lot to do with the vowel sounds, including monophthongs, diphthongs (MacMahon, 2006) and triphthongs (Jones *et al.*, 2011).

As indicated in Table 1, there are twelve monophthongs, eight diphthongs and five triphthongs. The indefinite article 'an' is always present before any one single and countable noun with its first letter being one of the twenty-five vowel sounds. It is also necessary to distinguish between vowel letters and vowel sounds with the latter being relevant to the following discussion of using 'a' or 'an' in a specific context.

Using 'a' and 'an' in context

The importance for ESL/EFL learners to distinguish vowel letters from vowel sounds, including

monophthongs, diphthongs and triphthongs presented above, lies in that a single and countable noun beginning with a vowel letter shown in Table 1 does not necessarily mean that it is entitled to vowel sounds. This is evidenced in example 5.

Example 5: A unanimous report by the all-party public accounts and audit committee, headed by the Newcastle Labor MP Sharon Grierson, found that the across-the-board 3.25 per cent efficiency dividend demanded by the Government's razor gang would lead to false savings and reduced services. ('Culture on the chopping block', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 December, 2008, 5)

The indefinite article 'a' is used since 'u' in 'unanimous' is pronounced as [ju:]. In another word, 'u' is a vowel letter but not a vowel sound. Other similar cases include 'unique' and 'university'. However, 'u' in 'utterance' is both a vowel letter and a vowel sound, hence 'an utterance'. It is the same case the other way round, and means 'an' is to be used because 'N' in 'NRMA' begins with a monophthong [e] even if it is a consonant letter (see example 6).

Example 6: Learner drivers are over-confident and less skilled than they think they are, says an NRMA survey of more than 700 learners to be released today. ('Learner drivers not as good as they think they are', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 July 2009, 4)

This is challenging to ESL/EFL learners as it is often the case. Even academic researchers and article proofreaders may fail to detect the inappropriate use of indefinite articles or the grammatical error. For example, such errors are found in at least two academic journals where the indefinite article 'a' is used incorrectly. Consider examples 7 and 8 below.

Example 7: Bowles, Melissa A. (2008). Task type and reactivity of verbal reports in SLA: A first look at a L2 task other than reading. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 30(3), 359–387.

Example 8: (A) ‘Surely learning a FL implies learning its culture.’ (p. 59)

(B) ‘Large numbers of graduates go and work abroad without having majored (or joint-majored) in a FL.’ (p. 61)

(C) ‘Acquisition of certain intercultural skills may well be retarded by simultaneous learning of a FL (Mughan, 1997).’ (p. 63)

[(A), (B) and (C) in example 8 come from Mughan (1999)]

In example 7, ‘L’ in ‘a L2 task’ is pronounced as [eɪ] and the monothong [e] anticipates ‘an’ rather than ‘a’. Similarly, in example 8, ‘F’ in ‘a FL’ is a consonant letter but has the monothong [e], hence ‘an FL’ instead of ‘a FL’. In the same vein, its proper use can be seen in example 9 where ‘LH2’ is preceded by ‘an’.

Example 9: Polls show most French people are shrugging off the question. His approval rating jumped two points to 26 per cent, according to an LH2 poll for *Le Nouvel Observateur* magazine published on Tuesday. Seventy-seven per cent of the population considers the affair a private matter, according to a separate IFOP survey. (‘Hollande ‘outraged’ by affair expose’, *Australian Financial Review*, 16 January, 2014, 11)

Understanding the use of ‘a’ and ‘an’ in Australian newspapers

As mentioned earlier, example 3 poses more challenges to ESL/EFL learners, particularly those who rarely have a chance to hear real and functional English spoken in talk-in-interaction, English TV talk shows and radio broadcasts in Australia. This is the key point where the words have to be virtually uttered to give the clues and writing itself can’t help much on this occasion. Let’s observe two examples first before they are discussed in detail.

Example 10: Australia is one of a few nations with a ‘AAA credit’ rating and a positive

interest rate on its bonds. If this fifth rate cut in a year is not enough to bring the dollar down significantly, the bank still has enough scope for further cuts. (‘A growth pause while China puts its house in order’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 October 2012, 10)

Example 11: Ahead of the release of *The Cup*, co-starring Daniel MacPherson, and 25, the Sydney-based actress is about to show she’s got what it takes to be an A-lister. (‘Jodi’s revamp is breath-taking’, *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 June, 2011, 9)

Having observed examples 10 and 11, we see that ‘a’ goes with ‘AAA credit rating’ in the former while ‘an’ goes before ‘A-lister’ in the latter. One may wonder why this happens since both ‘a’ and ‘an’ are used before the same vowel letter ‘A’. In example 10, ‘AAA’ in ‘AAA credit rating’ is virtually pronounced as ‘triple A’, in which ‘triple’ has a consonant sound [t] and makes ‘a AAA credit rating’ legitimate. Similarly, the same answer can be used to explain example 3 in which ‘a’ rather than ‘an’ is used before ‘AA+ rating’ because ‘AA+’ is read as ‘double A’. In example 11, however, ‘A’ in ‘A-lister’ is pronounced as [ei], a diphthong, hence ‘an A-lister’ is grammatically correct.

But when we turn to the acronyms in the next three examples (examples 12–14), we find that example 12 is a different case from those in examples 13 and 14.

Example 12: ‘I think there was a bit of concern that it would come out as a 1980s health and safety video,’ an ACCC spokesman said. ‘But this is actually something that we actually might go to the cinema and see.’ (‘ACCC’s new flick is a real thriller’, *Sydney Morning Herald, Business Day*, 30 August, 2012, 2)

In the above example, the acronym ‘ACCC’, standing for Australia Competition and Consumer Commission, is usually read as ‘A [ei] triple C’, hence ‘an ACCC’. However, it is a different case with the acronyms in examples 13 and 14.

Example 13: A NAB spokeswoman said it was an ‘unusual step’ to order the staff to appear before a New York court when the matter would be tried in the Victorian Supreme Court. (‘NAB staff told to face US court’,

In the above example, the acronym 'NAB' stands for 'National Australia Bank' and is read as such. Since 'National' starts with a consonant sound [n], 'a NAB spokeswoman' is correct. Similarly, in example 14, the acronym 'NSW' represents 'New South Wales' and is verbally pronounced as such. Hence the indefinite article 'a' is used. Apparently this is a different case from example 6 discussed earlier.

Example 14: A NSW parliamentary inquiry into nanotechnology last year called for safety testing of nanotechnology products and mandatory sunscreen labelling. ('No nano labelling despite concerns', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 July, 2009, 5)

Discussion of examples 12–14 shows whether 'a' or 'an' is used depends on specifically how an acronym is voiced or pronounced. The former is used before a voiceless consonant sound while the latter is used before a voiced vowel sound.

Linguistic variation

Despite linguistic regularities, we need to bear in mind all languages change with times and regions, and treat linguistic irregularities with an open mind and see all changes and variations as normal and adaptable. Linguistic variation (in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar) is commonly seen in some dialects of a mainstream language, for example, Welsh English (Thomas, 1984) and come/came alternation in Northern England dialects (Tagliamonte, 2001). It is worth noting that a living language is dynamically evolving and adapting to social changes and needs. However, not all linguistic variations are readily explained. Examples 15 and 16 are such a case in point.

Example 15: What Treasury sees a historic opportunity and challenge, others fear because of its impact on particular sections of the economy. ('Embracing Asian reality', *Australian Financial Review*, 12 May, 2011, 78)

Example 16: In an historic address to the US Congress made early this morning to mark the 60th anniversary of the AZNUS treaty, Ms Gillard said the rise of India and China would concentrate global strategic and economic weight in the region. ('US must be at centre of new world

The variation between 'a' and 'an' before 'historic' (similar words including historical and history) is not unique in Australian newspapers and academic texts. It is also commonly seen in the public media and scholarly publications in the American and British contexts. Based on the Linguistic Innovators Corpus and the Corpus of London Teenage Language, Gabrielatos *et al.* (2010) first review a-and-an alternation in modern British English and then report their quantitative analysis of the a + vowel pattern with reference to language users' 'age', 'sex', 'ethnicity', 'place of residence', 'effects of the extralinguistic variables' and 'friendship network'. However, 'a' and 'an' alternation in examples 13 and 14 has not been dealt with in their research project and it could be a matter of regional variation, personal preference or speech style. Speakers in one region may take the [h] in 'historic' as a silent sound and choose to use 'an historic address' whereas those in another do not think so and prefer to use 'a historic opportunity'. It is acknowledged that little definite explanation can be offered about some linguistic phenomena until further investigation (Thomas, 1984). Apparently empirical data need to be collected and analysed to look at this linguistic variation, which is beyond the focus of this paper.

Conclusion

Drawing on selected examples from a few major English newspapers published in Australia and two academic research journals, the author has shown how to distinguish the use of English indefinite articles 'a' and 'an' in various contexts. This effort is made in an attempt to bring home the fact that it is crucial for ESL/EFL learners to understand how getting back to basics can help them build a strong house only after a solid foundation is laid. Fundamental knowledge and literacy skills such as those discussed above are part of the 'building blocks provided by phonics, the system of sounding our letters and syllables' (Norrie, 2005b: 1) necessary for ESL/EFL learners. It seems that this also applies to primary, high school and university students who are native speaker of English because many of them find themselves in need of basic spelling skills and grammar knowledge and they have not been provided with sufficient and relevant grammar or spelling instructions (Norrie, 2005a, b: 11).

At the same time, however, we should avoid going to the other extreme or focusing on language form at the expense of meaningful communication of the whole language (Clarke & Commins, 1993; Onukaogu, 1997). It is logical to argue that back-to-basic strategies, a lesson many Australian educators have learnt from their years of teaching experience and drawn from various evidence-based research projects, are the building blocks for improving Australia's national language literacy results. ■

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