DETERMINERS, BARE SINGULARS, PLURALS: A PORTABLE TUTOR FOR SENTENCE GRAMMAR

Sorin Popovici[i]
Assumption University,
ABAC, Hua Mak Campus,
Queen Tower, Q-4404,
Thailand

Abstract:

This paper is based on the assumption that a portable tutor, as a practice-based tool, can offer students ample opportunities to improve their sentence grammar. By focusing on one specific grammar issue at a time, it presents certain sentence patterns that, through repeated practice, can eventually correct that particular grammar issue, in this case, that of determiners, bare singulars, and plurals. Significantly, this study has specific implications for Assumption University students and for Thai students in general, in that it explains why people who grow up speaking a language where nouns do not have determiners will have difficulty when learning a language that has them, for instance English. The paper begins by presenting a classification of determiners followed by a detailed description of one specific type of determiner: the bare singular count noun. The study continues with the proposed research methodology consisting of the Portable Tutor development, and the Experiment's three main components, pre-testing, "treatment" and post-testing of the participating group of students. The paper concludes with data collection and analysis, and conclusions.

Keywords: determiners, bare singulars, count nouns, functors

1. Introduction, Taxonomy and Literature Review

As mentioned at the end of Sentence Fragments: A Portable Tutor for Sentence Grammar, (S. Popovici 2013) this researcher has already envisioned an expanded portable tutor to include other areas of difficulty for students, one such example being determiners in English. With two research papers already presented at two international conferences, The e-Grammar Clinic, and Sentence Fragments, plus this one to be published soon, this author can clearly see the future possibility of turning this portable tutor idea into an application to be used by students on their mobile devices.

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[i] Correspondence: email smvici@yahoo.co.uk, drsorinp@gmail.com

The objective of this paper is to address the issue of determiner use - rather the lack of it - as a major source of errors that students from Thailand (and from other mostly Asian countries) make, and to offer clear and simple solutions in the form of a portable tutor to improve their production of correct sentences.

The problem with determiners is that, during a regular semester, students do not seem to show learning gains in their ability to use them correctly in spite of consistent writing practice with repeated corrective feedback. It is this researcher's conclusion after about twenty-five years of teaching English as a second language in both Thailand and Japan that the absence of a determiner, or plural when required, remains a constant source of grammatical errors throughout the semester, hence the need for a tutor to provide remedial action focused on this specific problem.

Another issue regarding determiners is that their absence, when needed, affects other major sentence grammar functors, namely singulars/plurals. A good example of this is a well-known and popular Japanese program on Animal Planet channel called "I Love Dog". Clearly, the title was incorrect, and obviously the program creators meant "I Love Dogs".

This example is extremely important as it underlines the core of this grammar problem, that is, the relationship between determiners, singulars, and plurals. In the incorrect sentence I love dog, the "singular" noun dog in not singular, it is wrong, and to make it a correct singular noun, a determiner is required:

"I love a/the dog.";

"I love this dog.";

"I love your dog.";

"I love every dog."

Or,

"I love dogs."

In other words, the solution to this determiner-usage/absence issue is simple:
- with most singular count nouns (exceptions will be discussed later), a determiner is absolutely necessary. And,
- in the absence of a determiner, the plural form of the noun is absolutely required.

It may look and sound simple and yet this is one of the most frequent mistakes students make: they omit the determiner, and they also omit the plural marker "s", resulting in constructions of the type:

"I like car / We protect animal, etc."

1.1 What is a determiner?

Simply put, in English, a <u>determiner</u> is a word that introduces a noun. It always comes before the noun, not after, and it also comes before any other adjectives used to describe the noun. However, it is well known that many second language learners have trouble using determiners (mostly articles) "properly", and the primary causes of their difficulties will be dealt with in this paper.

Determiners are required before a singular noun but are optional when it comes to introducing plural nouns. For example, consider the placement and usage of the common determiner *the* in the sentences below:

> "*The dog went home.*" (determiner required before singular count noun)

> "*I ate the leftover cake.*" (determiner + adjective + noun)

> "*Bottles are reusable, but the bottles that are damaged are not.*" (determiner not required with plural bottles, but required with a specific plural the bottles that …)

There are four different types of determiners in English:

a. Articles

<u>Articles,</u> *a, an*, and *the*, both definite and indefinite, are the most common group of determiners:

> "*A dog is always a best friend.*"

> "*An elephant can be dangerous.*"

> "*I saw the dog that bit me last year.*"

b. Demonstratives

<u>Demonstrative pronouns</u> are also used as determiners in English. There are four of them: *this, that, these* and *those*. Ex.:

> "*Those books are not mine.*"

c. Quantifiers

Quantifiers are determiners that indicate how much or how little of the noun is being discussed. They include words such as *all, few* and *many*. For example: *All/many children like sweets, but few like vegetables.*

d. Possessives

When referring to a noun that belongs to someone or something, <u>possessive pronouns</u> can be used to show ownership*: my, your, his, her, its, our*, and *their*., ex. *Which one is his car?*

> "*As always, the determiner comes before the noun or any modifying adjectives.*"

1.2 Why this problem with determiners?

To answer this question, we need to look into one type of language classification that distinguishes between languages that require determiners, and those which do not. More specifically, languages can be divided into those that require nouns to appear with an overt definite or indefinite article, and those that allow bare nouns to appear without the help of an article (N. Piriyawiboon 2010). The former group can be called determiner languages and the latter, determiner-less languages. The following definitions will be used in this paper:

- Determiner languages require nouns to be introduced by a determiner.
- Determiner-less languages allow nouns to appear bare.

Thai nouns are allowed to appear without overt determiners. Unlike English singular count nouns, which do require a determiner, they behave like English plurals, and mass or abstract nouns. But, unlike English bare nouns, the Thai counterparts may also have a definite interpretation, and this is, again, because Thai language lacks an overt definite determiner.

Examples of determiner languages are Romance languages such as French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian. Examples of determiner-less languages are Thai, Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Russian.

However, there is another group of languages that may opt for one of these options or they can be of a mixed type, namely, certain nouns can appear without a determiner and certain others must occur with one. English is an example of the mixed type whereby mass/abstract and plural nouns can appear bare while singular nouns cannot:

> "*I like the car my friend has.*" (singular count noun – determiner necessary).

> "*Man cannot live without water.*" (bare mass singular noun – no determiner).

> "*I like cars more than motorcycles.*" (plural nouns – no determiner).

In English, only plural and mass nouns can appear bare. Typically, when a count noun appears bare, it can only have a mass interpretation, as shown in the sentence below:

> "*There is apple in this drink.*"

Here, the single count noun apple can only have a mass interpretation.

Unlike plural nouns which can appear without (or with) a determiner, singular nouns must co-occur with an indefinite or definite determiner (article) in all positions.

"Wolves are common in Transylvania."

"The wolves from Transylvania are big."

"He is a teacher."

"He is teacher." (incorrect)

"The teacher is my friend."

"Teacher is my friend." (incorrect)

Before we move on, let's clarify the common basic situations where a determiner in English:
- is required: with singular count nouns, e.g. *the car;*
- is not required: with mass/abstract nouns, e.g. *in space/in health;*
- is not required/optional: with plural count nouns, e.g. *dogs* (but also, *the dogs*).

For the purpose of this paper, we're going to focus on the first group, singular count nouns that do require a determiner. The main complication here is that there's another group of singular count nouns in English that do not require a determiner, the bare singulars.

1.3 Bare Singulars

Bare noun forms have been previously discussed (e.g. Carlson 1977; Longobardi 2003; Zamparelli 2002), but such works typically focus on plural and mass nouns. The bare singular, that is, a null determiner with a singular count noun, however, has been mostly unnoticed. Nevertheless, some works have pointed out the sharply limited occurrence of bare count nouns in English (Stvan 1998; Carlson 1977). Indeed, in traditional grammars, the zero form of the article was thought to occur only with plurals, abstract or mass nouns, proper nouns, but not with singular count nouns (Biber 1999):

"Nobody can live in space." (mass)

"Forever, in sickness and in health." (abstract)

"We put curtains on windows." (plural count)

"The drone landed on John." (proper noun)

In fact, it is clear from the examples above that this class of determiner-less singular nouns is quite large and, secondly, all nouns are prepositional noun phrases, that is, nouns preceded by a preposition. These count nouns regularly appear in singular forms, yet without any other determiner (article). Moreover, this class of bare singulars is common in certain domains, for example in:

- recording expressions: *on record/video/film/tape;*
- framing expressions: *on camera, out of focus, on stage;*
- temporal interruptions: *on vacation, at lunch, out of station;*
- social and geographic places: *in town/church/class/jail, at home/work/school, on holiday/record* (this is the largest group).

As mentioned earlier, English bare singulars, although commonly noted in descriptive grammars, have received limited attention in the theoretical literature (Kallulli 1999). However, one major work that devotes itself to the subject of English bare singulars is that of Stvan, 1998. The class that he is interested in is the same class of determiner-less singular noun phrases as shown before, and further exemplified in the following sentence:

"They found him in jail/at home/on board/etc."

However, Stvan 1998, noticed another interesting feature of these bare singulars which, although related more to semantics, is nevertheless relevant to our study and that is, following the article-less singular with an indefinite article, semantic enrichment can be added:

"Being in college is not just being in a college, but ..."

"Being in class is not just being in a class, but, ..."

For example, *being in class/college* isn't just a locative statement but it implies that the student is there to benefit from many factors.

2. A Portable Tutor for Sentence Grammar

As stated from the beginning, his study is based on the assumption that: a portable tutor for sentence grammar is a practical and effective way to help students improve their production of correct sentences. For this purpose, students can print out or upload the tutor on their mobile devices, and carry it with them and access it anytime, anywhere.

Another assumption is that frequent (three times a week) but short (ten minutes) practice of just one sentence pattern will show significant learning gains of the group of students who are offered the tutor as opposed to the regular classroom group.

However, an important issue needs to be addressed at this point. As Assumption University is an international university comprising students of many nationalities, the researcher will have to make certain that this study will accommodate students of

different first language backgrounds. This issue opens a highly meaningful question (Popovici, 2011):

"Do all students make basically the same grammatical errors, and consequently require the same treatment?"

To answer this question, we need to take a brief look at the native languages/first languages of the students involved in this study. Out of all the students normally registered for a semester at Assumption University, about 90% are Thais. As for the remaining 10%, the vast majority is made up of Chinese, about 6%, followed by other Asians, mainly Koreans.

Now, the answer to the question is: Yes, they basically make the same mistakes and, consequently, they require the same treatment. And, for the same reason: Unlike English, all these Asian languages mentioned above, share a number of grammatical functors that set them in contrast to English.

For the purpose of this study, two such functors are relevant:
- the absence of determiners;
- the absence of singulars/plurals

Not surprisingly, it is precisely the absence of these two grammar functors from the native languages of Thai, Chinese, Korean students that cause them to have difficulties in acquiring the correct use of determiners and plurals in English. For this reason, an intelligently designed program, created around a tutor with simple, clear examples and practice exercises, is the answer to designing a portable tutor for sentence grammar. Precisely such a tutor is now being developed at Assumption University by this researcher, and it is called A Portable Tutor for Sentence Grammar.

3. Research Objective, Question, Hypothesis

This research was conducted to assess the effectiveness of a portable tutor for sentence grammar practice. The objective of the research was to determine whether a portable tutor for sentence grammar can significantly improve the students' correct use of determiners. Then, the research question was:

- Can a portable tutor for sentence grammar significantly improve the students' correct use of determiners?

The research was based on the assumption that a portable tutor for sentence grammar can significantly improve the students' correct use of determiners.

In other words, the hypotheses are:

Ho: A portable tutor cannot significantly improve the students' production of correct determiner usage.

Ha: A portable tutor can significantly improve the students' production of correct determiner usage.

4. Research Methodology

Participating students in this longitudinal study were 80 Assumption University English IV students. It is important at this point to observe that the English IV course at Assumption University is basically a writing course; an advanced course and the last English course before graduation. Consequently, the teaching and practice of specific grammar difficulties is not the focus of the course, and students are supposed to improve from the grammatical corrective feedback given by the teacher.

However, the problem with determiners is that, during a regular semester, students do not seem to show learning gains in their ability to use them correctly in spite of regular writing practice with repeated corrective feedback. As mentioned earlier, it is this researcher's conclusion after about twenty-five years of teaching English as a second language in both Thailand and Japan that the absence of a determiner, or plural when required, remains a constant source of grammatical errors throughout the semester, hence the need for a tutor to provide remedial action focused on this specific problem. The 80 participating students were pre-tested at the beginning of the semester to assess their level of mastery of determiners, and post-tested at the end, to assess their improvement. During the semester, the group was offered the Portable Tutor in the following manner:

At the end of each class, in the remaining 10 minutes, the students were given one type of incorrect determiner-less sentence where the determiner was required, followed by the possible correction(s). Example:

"I like car."

Correction:

"I like my/this/every car."

Or

"I like cars."

The proposed research methodology consisted of two main parts:
- The Portable Tutor development, and
- The Experiment.

A. The Portable Tutor development
There were three steps in the development of the portable tutor:
- The development of the pre-test,
- The development of the determiner sentence patterns and activities, or the "Treatment",

- The development of the post-test

The Pre-test consisted of 10 sentences. Students were asked to fill-in-the-determiner sentences:

- Four sentences where the singular count noun requires a determiner;
- Two bare singular sentences where no determiner is required;
- Two sentences consisting of mass/abstract nouns where no determiner is required;
- Two plural noun sentences where a determiner is not required or it is optional.

Each sentence written correctly was scored 10 points. So, the total score for the pre-test was 100.

The design of the Treatment was undoubtedly the most challenging aspect of the Portable Tutor development. It consisted of 45 short sessions (the average number of classes in one semester). The short sessions (about 10 minutes) dealt with specific types of determiner-related issues. Since most of the errors students make are of the determiner-omission type, and/or plural-omission type, most of the sessions dealt with singular count nouns where a determiner is required, or with required plurals when a determiner for singular is absent.

Each short session consisted of two parts:

- Determiner Sentence Pattern (the study part)
- Session Activity (the practice part)

Here is an example of a typical short sentence pattern and activity that was given to students at the end of their class:

a. Determiner sentence pattern

"I like teacher."

In this sentence, the singular count noun teacher requires a determiner: this/your/every/no teacher. Without the determiner, the noun must be plural: *I like teachers.*

These are the only 2 possibilities:

- determiner + teacher, or
- no determiner > teachers

In fact, there is a 3rd possibility where the plural teachers can have an article:

"*I like the teachers who have experience*."

b. Session Activity

Instructions: Write sentences where a determiner is needed, sentences where no determiner is needed, and sentences where the determiner is optional:

- write a sentence with a singular count noun (determiner required)
- write a sentence with a bare singular count noun (determiner not required)
- write a sentence with a mass/abstract noun (no determiner)
- write a sentence with a plural count noun (determiner optional)

B. The Experiment

At the beginning of this research study all participating students were given the Pre-test. As mentioned earlier, the Pre-test consisted of ten questions, each one carrying 10 points, so the total score for the pre-test was 100.

During the semester, at the end of each class, the students were given the Portable Tutor, one of the 45 short sessions prepared during the portable tutor's development stage. Each short session (about 10 minutes) dealt with one specific type of determiner. Since most of the determiner-related errors students make are of the singular count noun/plural type, most of the sessions dealt with this particular issue, but also with determiner-less situations.

The Post-test concluded the data collection process. Similar to the pre-test, but administered at the end of the semester, the post-test also consisted of the same ten sentences, each one 10 points.

5. Data Collection and Analysis

Both test scores results were analyzed using SPSS. The Paired Samples T-Test was used to measure the progress, improvement/learning gains within the participating group of students.

The Paired Samples T-test was carried out in order to assess the improvement of the participating group during the interval between the Pre-test and the Post-test.

The results of the Paired Samples T-test show a mean of 35.89 (Pre-test) and 68.73 (Post-test), and a Paired T-test Sig. (2-tailed) value of 0.003 (significant). This value is less than 0.05. Because of this, the researcher can conclude that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean score of the Pre-test and the mean score of the Post-test, with the mean score of the Post-test being greater than the mean score of the Pre-test. Not surprisingly, the Paired Samples T-test results show significant learning gains for the participating group of students underlining the obvious conclusion that the Portable Tutor was effective in helping students significantly improve their sentence grammar, thus validating this researcher's hypothesis.

At the end of the experiment, all participants were given a questionnaire in order to measure their attitudes towards this portable tutor experience. For this questionnaire, the researcher has selected four Likert-type questions with the aim of measuring how the group of participating students felt about their experiment. They were asked a set of questions related to the Portable Tutor:
- The content of session activities was clear;
- The content of the determiner sentence patterns was clear;
- I believe the Portable Tutor helped me improve my sentence grammar;
- I think the Portable Tutor should be offered to all English IV students.

Each question was a 5-point Likert-type item, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The Cronbach Alpha Reliability Test was run on a sample size of 20 students. The Cronbach Alpha Reliability Test for the Portable Tutor showed an Alpha coefficient of 0.7931 (high). Considering that Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient ranges between 0

and 1, and that the closer the coefficient is to 1, the greater the internal consistency of the items in the scale, this researcher is happy to report an alpha coefficient that is almost 0.8, thus concluding that the Questionnaire given to the participating group of students at the end of the Experiment was reliable.

6. Conclusion

The Portable Tutor is a practice-based tool designed to offer Assumption University English IV students the chance to improve their sentence grammar; it presents certain sentence patterns to be studied, followed by related activities to be practiced repeatedly. The eighty students participating in this experiment have shown a high degree of enthusiasm from the beginning of the study. The results of the experiment, the difference between the Pre-test and the Post-test, show moderate, yet significant learning gains of the participating group of students. The Paired Samples T-test results underline the obvious conclusion that the Portable Tutor was effective in helping students significantly improve their sentence grammar, thus validating this researcher's hypothesis. These results are consistent with the researcher's assumption that extra, additional sentence grammar practice of certain grammar problems, in this case determiners, has a positive effect in improving the students' production of correct sentences.

The Questionnaire given at the very end of the Experiment shows a generally positive attitude participating students have towards the Portable Tutor. More than 75% agree that the short sessions of fragment sentence patterns and activities were useful and have helped them improve their sentence grammar.

As mentioned at the end of my previous papers (S. Popovici 2011, 2013), the implications of this research go beyond Assumption University English IV students, and beyond AU students: students from other universities, as well as all those interested in improving their sentence grammar can benefit from this research. This study was done with all these students in mind.

Clearly, this project needs to be replicated, improved and expanded in the future. There are many other sentence grammar problems to be addressed, in fact, the possibilities are infinite. This researcher already envisions a Portable Tutor expanded to include another area of difficulties. For those who have the vision to see the potential of the Portable Tutor as a practical and effective tool for sentence grammar practice, there are no limits.

Conflict of Interest Statement
There were no conflicts of interest in doing this research and writing this paper.

About the Author
Dr. Sorin is currently Senior Lecturer, Asst. Prof. of English with the Institute for English Language Education, Assumption University, Thailand. He started teaching English in Europe (Romania), then continued in the Americas (Brazil) and for the past 30 years, in

Asia (Japan and Thailand). He wrote a number of research papers on sentence grammar-related issues presented at international conferences.

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