Introduction

Being a second language learner of English, I have always struggled with the use of the English articles, namely *a*/*an*, *the*, and Ø. One of the major obstacles is related to the issue of noun countability. I used to believe that a clear dividing line could be drawn between countable and non-countable nouns in English. However, this assumption was proved to be wrong as I later realized that some words in the dictionary were indicated as being either countable or non-countable while others were not. This suggests that countability of certain nouns depends very much on contexts. Nevertheless, being a nonnative speaker (NNS) of English, I was unable to judge intuitively what articles should be used in what contexts. I suffered from being constantly corrected on my use of the English articles. This may be partly due to the fact that "Chinese language does not have functional equivalents of the English definite and indefinite article" (Robertson, 2000, p. 135). According to Chen (2004), "the definite and indefinite determiners in Chinese have not yet acquired the full status of specialized grammatical marker of definiteness and indefiniteness like the articles in English" (p. 1176). Therefore, it is challenging for Chinese learners of English to use the English articles properly.

Although a considerable amount of studies (e.g., Butler, 2002; Jarvis, 2002; Lee, 1999; Mizuno, 1999; Parrish, 1987; Takahashi, 1997; Yoon, 1993; Young, 1996) concerning the English article system have been conducted on various populations of second or foreign language learners of English, little attention has been paid to Chinese learners of English. Due to the scarcity of research on this population, the intent of the present study is to uncover acquisition order and common article errors made by low-intermediate and advanced level English as a second language (ESL) learners from a Mandarin-speaking linguistic background as they make choices of the English articles in written texts. This study will serve as a reference for current or prospective English as a second or foreign language (EFL) instructors and future researchers who seek to understand which English article(s) are most problematic for low-intermediate level ESL learners and advanced learners whose native languages do not have article systems parallel to the one in English. The study may also benefit professionals like writers of grammar textbooks because it will give them some ideas about what needs to be added or given more emphasis in the textbooks in order to assist nonnative speakers to master the English article system.

Literature Review

Frequency of Articles

According to Master (2002), the English article system consisting of the indefinite article *a/an*, the definite article *the*, and the zero/null article Ø is challenging for almost all ESL

learners to acquire regardless of their levels of English language proficiency. One of the reasons is because "the articles account for almost ten percent of most texts" (Yule, 1998, p. 24). In other words, articles occur more often than any other morphemes, "the smallest element in a language that carries meaning" (Hoff, 2001), or words in English (Lu, 2001; Master, 1997, 2002). Based on the Collins Birmingham University International Language Database (COBUILD) frequency count (Sinclair, 1991), the words *the*, *of*, *and*, *to*, *a*, *in*, *that*, *I*, *it*, and *was* are the most commonly used words in a 20-million-word corpus. Among these ten words, the definite article *the* constitutes 25.1% of 1,233,456 words. Followed by *the*, *of* (12.6%) ranks second, *and* (12.5%) ranks third, and *to* (11.1%) ranks fourth. The fifth most frequent word in English, again, belongs to the category of articles, which is the indefinite article *a* at 10.5%.

In 1993, Master (1997) conducted a study on the frequency of articles, *a(n)*, *the*, and Ø. Five genres including sixteen research journals, four issues of *Science News*, one issue of *Newsweek*, a novel named *The Tenth Man*, and two plays were investigated. The findings revealed that 48.0% of the English articles in the corpus containing a total of 197, 644 words belonged to the category of zero article Ø, which surpassed the 36.3% occurrence of the definite article *the* and 15.7% occurrence of the indefinite article *a/an* in the corpus. Therefore, Master (2002) claimed that the zero article Ø would rank first if it were included in the COBUILD list, and the English articles would still occur more often than any other words in English. Even though one may assume that learners are exposed to enormous amount of articles like Young (1996) believes, Master (2002) mentioned that "function words are normally unstressed and consequently very difficult if not impossible for a NNS to discern, thus affecting the availability of input in the spoken mode" (p. 332). As a result, learners may be puzzled when they are asked to perform the task of "making continuous conscious rule application…over an extended stretch of discourse" (p. 332).

Complexity of the English Article System

The other reason for difficulty in acquiring the articles stems from the complex nature of the English article system (Butler, 2002; Liu & Gleason, 2002; Lu, 2001; Master, 1997, 2002; Thomas, 1989; Young, 1996). While ESL learners may attempt to link one form to one function or one meaning (Butler, 2002; Master, 2002), this is not the way the articles work. Mastery of the articles depends on knowledge of syntax, semantics, and discourse (Young, 1996). According to Hoff (2001), syntax is "a system of rules for building phrases out of words…and for building sentences out of these constituent phrases" (p. 409). Semantics means "the meaning of words and sentences" (Gass & Selinker, 2001, p. 458), and discourse means "the use of language in units larger than a sentence" (Hoff, 2001, p. 260). To be more specific, syntax in this study refers to whether an NP is countable or non-countable, and whether it is singular or plural. Semantics refers to whether an NP is specific or non-specific, and discourse refers to whether a speaker and a hearer share the same background knowledge