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Impact of *Please ASK* on ESL Student Comprehension of the English Article System Before Proper Nouns: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

English as a Second Language literature provides no viable explanation for article grammar before proper nouns, beyond simple guesswork and memorization. This phenomenological study aimed to capture student participants' lived experiences while engaging with the *Please ASK* heuristic, as developed by the researcher, as students attempted to make sense of the English language proper noun article system. The study results suggested that *Please ASK* had at least some bearing on increased student article grammar comprehension before proper nouns. The study supports creative heuristic models and systems thinking/complexity theory as means to clarifying obscure grammar points in the language.

Aim

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the original, researcher-created heuristic—*Please ASK*—impacted English as a Second Language student comprehension involving the use of the definite and null articles before proper nouns.

Problem

At the time of this writing, there existed no known means to explain correct article usage before English proper nouns (Butler, 2012; Huebner, 1983; Leśniewska, 2016; Master, 2003). The reason for this is that English as a Second Language literature and research did not present a clearly mapped out system for proper noun article grammar (Butler, 2012). As a result, this lack of a clear explanation left learners with very limited recourse: guess or memorize.

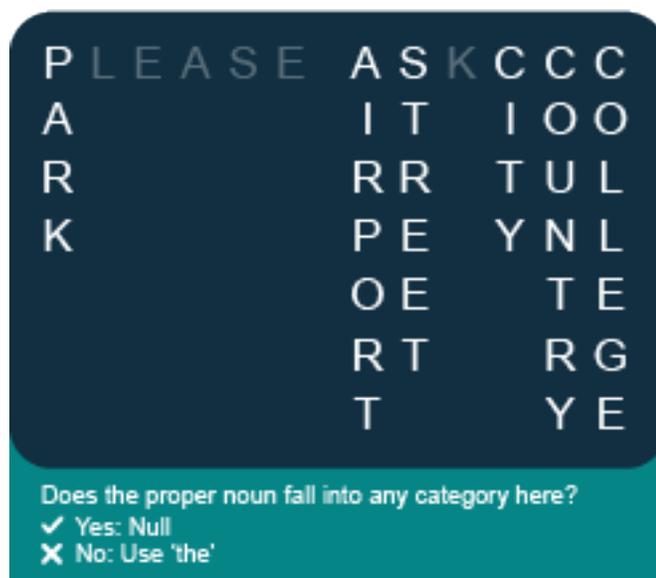


Figure 1. *Please ASK* heuristic categories.

In efforts to find a solution to this grammatical impasse, the researcher retreated from the traditional post-positivist approach to grammar pedagogy and instead used a creative approach that embodied a constructivist outlook on English as a system of instability. This systems-thinking point of

view enabled the bringing into fruition of *Please ASK*. *Please ASK* is a reflection of how native English speakers construct meanings of proper nouns in the world naturally.

Please ASK (Figure 1) is an acronym mnemonic in which letters signify categories of proper nouns that use the null article before. The categories of *Please ASK* are as follows. The letter *P* stands for *Parks*. The letter *A* stands for *Airports*. The letter *S* stands for *Streets*. The letter *K* can be rewritten as *CCC*, since both letters share the same pronunciation before hard vowels (i.e., a,o,u). The first *C* denotes *Cities*, the second *C* stands for *Countries*, and the third *C* stands for *Colleges*.

Methodology

The researcher's intent was to obtain a phenomenological understanding of the effects of the heuristic on student comprehension, which prompted the following central question and two subsequent sub-questions, respectively. What is the meaning of *Please ASK* for university English as a Second Language (ESL) student participants in this study? How do ESL student participants describe their comprehension of the proper noun article system via the creative *Please ASK* heuristic model? How do student participants perceive their understanding of the article system linked to proper nouns both before and after experiencing the creative *Please ASK* heuristic model?

Eleven adult (≥ 18 years old) English as a Second Language student participants composed the study. The researcher used students in an Advanced Grammar class at a university in the northeastern U.S. where the researcher instructed English as a Second Language. Regarding demographics, the study consisted of seven males and four female participants, representing the countries of Oman, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. The researcher selected participants according to purposeful sampling criteria. Purposeful sampling placed emphasis on the gleaning of "rich information" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96) from the data. In this qualitative research, purposeful sampling allowed for inclusion of participants who knew the most about the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Student participants' knowing the most about the *Please ASK* heuristic meant those students whom the researcher considered the most apt (in terms of English language ability and willingness to participate) to supply substantial data to the proposed study. These substantial data enabled the researcher to extract the essence of the lived experience as participants engaged with *Please ASK*. The researcher reserved discretion in choosing student participants deemed as willing to participate in the proposed study and give responses that could provide rich information on the *Please ASK* heuristic. Therefore, selection of participants was not solely based on student academic performance. Five face-to-face interviews, one focus group, and a researcher's journal were used to obtain the essence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) of the student participants' lived experience as they interacted with the *Please ASK* heuristic. The essence represented an emic description of *Please ASK* as experienced by the student participants.

This study's conceptual framework rested on three streams: (a) a diachronic history of English language pedagogy culminating in CLT (Communicative Language Teaching); (b) English article system semantic maps (heuristics); and (c) English language as a creative entity. These streams represented constructs, or "intellectual bins" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 21), whose interrelationships informed this research. In this regard, this three-streamed conceptual framework served a dual role—as a look into how this heuristic came into existence and as a lens through which this phenomenological study was supported.

Findings

From the coded data emerged three themes and six ensuing sub-themes (Figure 2). The theme *memorization* engendered the sub-themes *classroom pedagogy to get the answer to the proper noun article grammar* and *frustration with memorizing*. The theme *successful transfer of the grammar to students* included the sub-themes *shift in attitude toward learning English* and *higher comprehension of the proper noun article grammar*. The theme *impressions of Please ASK* induced the sub-themes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Memorization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom pedagogy to get the answer to the proper noun article grammar • Frustration with memorizing
Successful transfer of the grammar to students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shift in attitude toward learning English • Higher comprehension of the proper noun article grammar
Impressions of <i>Please ASK</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptions of <i>Please ASK</i> • <i>Please ASK</i> as a bridge to native speaker thinking

Figure 2. Ensuing themes and sub-themes in the study.

descriptions of Please ASK and *Please ASK as a bridge to native speaker thinking*. Collectively, these themes and sub-themes provided a phenomenological mosaic that reflected the student participant ontological and epistemological realities as they sought to make sense of the proper noun article system grammar in English.

Conclusions

This phenomenological study came to several conclusions. First, student participants viewed *Please ASK* as a fun, easy, and effective way to remember article placement before proper nouns. In this way, some students considered *Please ASK* a fun game. Second, students considered the heuristic a viable rule to understand article grammar and a way to increase self-confidence in English. Third, *Please ASK* seemed to influence student comprehension of the article grammar in a short time, in the three weeks that the study took place. Fourth, students considered *Please ASK* a way into the native English speaker psyche, something that the literature supported as difficult to transfer to students. These conclusions collectively substantiate *Please ASK* as having some influence on improving student comprehension of proper noun articles.

Research Implications

Several research implications inform this study. Future research could involve a mixed methods study on the impact of *Please ASK* on student comprehension. Mixed methods could provide further substantiation for the heuristic model than either qualitative or quantitative alone could provide. Future research could also involve conducting a quantitative study using a more substantial sample size, e.g., 55 students. The quantitative study could employ a one-tailed t-test, for example, to determine a change in comprehension after exposure to the independent variable, *Please ASK*. Yet another research avenue could entail delving deeper into the essence by conducting a longitudinal case study on one or a small grouping of students over a predetermined time period.

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Researcher's Bio

Renaldo A. Scott is a Drexel University Doctor of Education, having both successfully completed Creativity track coursework and defended his dissertation in August 2019 under the guidance of Dr. Joy Phillips. Dr. Scott has been an instructor of English as a Second/Foreign Language for 13 years. For six of those 13 years, he has been an Adjunct Lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania. His approach to pedagogy encompasses viewing the entire classroom experience through a constructivist lens. From this social constructivist perspective, he created an original heuristic model—*Please ASK*—that aims to clarify proper noun article use in English. His doctoral dissertation involved a phenomenological look at English language students' lived experiences as they engaged with this creative *Please ASK* heuristic to comprehend the article system before proper nouns.

Prior to his doctoral studies, Dr. Scott obtained a Master of Arts from New York University in TESOL/business and a BBA in finance and investments cum laude from Baruch College, C.U.N.Y. He is also a Distinguished Visiting Professor at Beijing Jiao Tong University in China. Lastly, Dr. Scott is multilingual and has deep overseas experience.