

ISSN 1883-7409 (print)  
ISSN 1884-0183 (on-line)



# *Outside the Box: A Multi-Lingual Forum*

Volume 7, Issue 1

Spring, 2015

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*Special Section:  
Lessons from OkiJALT*



# A Communicative Way to Teach Article Use

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It's a truism that Japanese students of English have difficulty using articles, since there is no direct equivalent in their own language. This activity is designed to get students thinking about the purpose of articles – why and when we use them. The first part of this consciousness-raising exercise is a classic information gap focusing on meaning. The second part focuses more on form. In traditional language classes, grammar points are usually presented first, then practiced before students are asked to produce them in some kind of freer activity (the so-called PPP approach). By inverting that process and getting students to first produce, (and making mistakes in the process,) they will hopefully be more likely to appreciate the need for the grammar point in question, when it is introduced later in the class.

## Quick Guide

- Keywords: collaborative storytelling, negotiating meaning, articles
- Learner English level: Pre-intermediate to upper intermediate
- Learner maturity: High school and above
- Preparation time: 10 minutes
- Activity time: 25 to 40 minutes
- Materials: A copy of the suggested comic strip and a whiteboard (or blackboard)

## Part 1: Preparation

Step 1: I use a short comic strip which is printed on Page 57 of the recommended *Pairwork 2* book (and copied below). I use the comic strip in a different way from that suggested in the text.

Step 2: There are seven pictures in the comic strip. I cut the strip into individual pictures, arrange the students into groups of

Bradley, M. (2015). A communicative way to teach article use. *OTB Forum*, 7(1), 63-65.

seven and give each student one picture.

Step 3: If the number of students in the class is not divisible by 7 – I will either make some groups bigger (which will mean giving two or more students the same picture,) or if there are not enough students, I will give some students two pictures.

## Part 2: Procedure

Step 1: I tell the students to reconstruct the story without showing their pictures to their partners, and without speaking Japanese. The activity is not as straightforward as it sounds because it has a twist.

Step 2: If the students are having difficulty getting started, I will invite them to describe their pictures in turn. (If their level is low, I will pre-teach some vocabulary, e.g., tie, untie, fence, etc.)

Step 3: During the activity, I will circulate between the various groups, making sure there are no major misunderstandings. If necessary, I will ask leading questions, such as, “How many people are in this story?” or “Who is the young man with the black hair?” or, “Who owns the dog?”

Step 4: If after 15 minutes or so the students still can't work out the story, I will allow them to lay the pictures out on a desk so they can all see them and figure out what's happening.

## Part 3: Performance

Step 1: I ask the students to tell me the completed story. As they are doing so, I write it on the board. While writing, I correct any grammatical errors EXCEPT for those relating to the use of articles, which I will faithfully include.

Step 2: Once I have written the entire story on the board (for an example see below), I will underline all the nouns in a bright color and ask the students to identify any mistakes with article use. The students discuss this in pairs.

Step 3: I go through the story again, and the students tell me where to insert/delete/change articles.

Step 4: Once we have agreed on a corrected form of the story, I ask the students, in pairs or groups, to come up with a rule for article use. Hopefully, they will arrive at something like, “We use ‘a’ for the first reference to single countable nouns, and ‘the’ for subsequent references”.

Step 5: I erase the story on the board, give each pair of students a copy of the complete comic strip and ask them to retell the story, paying particular attention to the use of articles.

### Conclusion

Even on its own, the first part of this activity ticks a lot of boxes for language educators. It is a genuine communicative activity where students have to negotiate meaning with their classmates to complete the task. Lightbown and Spada (2006) define the negotiation of meaning as an opportunity for learners to, “express and clarify their intentions, thoughts, opinions etc, in a way that permits them to arrive at mutual understanding” (p. 150). There is “mounting evidence” concerning how such negotiation of meaning “can promote second language learning” (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2013, p. 161). Advocates of the benefits of interaction have argued that learners will notice new language features “including articles” during negotiations of meaning (p. 161). However other researchers, including Michael Long, now believe that interaction by itself is not sufficient for learners to acquire grammatical items: “Corrective feedback has been identified as one feature that is believed to play a crucial role in helping learners make connections between form and meaning” (Lightbown & Spada, 2003, p. 151). Thus, it is no longer unusual for otherwise communicative activities to incorporate an element of formal grammar instruction. Applied linguists have realized that “second language learners cannot achieve levels of grammatical competence from entirely meaningful-centered instruction” and this has led them to “propose that learners can benefit

from form-focused instruction” (Laufer, 2006, p. 4)

In my case, I thought the story reconstruction exercise provided an excellent opportunity to focus on the usage of articles. As Scott Thornbury (2010) observed, “[T]he definite article can only be taught, explained, and practiced in contexts that are normally larger than a sentence” (¶3). Of course, I realize that the grammar rule that I introduce – “a” for the first time, “the” for subsequent references – is neither comprehensive nor absolute. Raymond Murphy’s intermediate *Grammar In Use* (1989), seen by many language instructors as the Gold Standard in grammar teaching, devotes eight units to the various rules governing article use. Likewise, Michael Swan gives them ten pages in his reference book, *Practical English Usage* (1980). Swan goes on to say, “[T]he correct use of articles is one of the most difficult points in English grammar” (p. 54). Notwithstanding their complexity, and acknowledging that the rule – “a” for the first time, “the” for subsequent references – does not always apply, I felt that if my pre-intermediate students were able to grasp that articles are often used in this way, it would go a long way to eradicating many of their mistakes with this tricky piece of grammar.

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### Appendix

This is the story which one of my intermediate classes produced: One day, fat bald man tied his dog to gate. Then fat man smashed car's window because he wanted to steal computer from car. Car owner saw this and shouted, "Hey you, what are you doing?" Fat man ran away without his dog. Car owner called police. Policeman came and untied fat man's dog. Dog went back home and policeman followed. Finally policeman arrested fat man in his house.

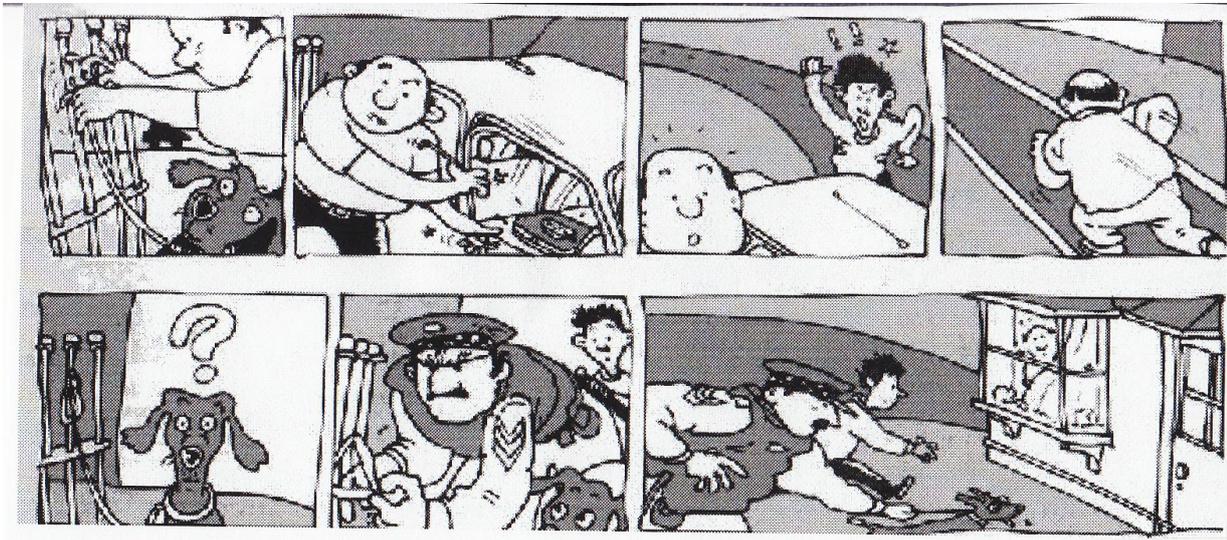


Figure 1. Comic strips (Watchyn-Jones, 2002)