

Why do my students make these mistakes?

- a. It's on the Brighton Avenue.
- b. I watched Super Bowl.
- c. The life must go on.
- d. The restaurant has the good Korean food.
- d. I have booked my friend on 7:30 flight to Peru.

The is a word that learners encounter in their very first English class. In fact, being the most frequent word in English, it is a word that students see and hear thousands of times. Therefore, when my advanced students make mistakes such as those in the box, my gut reaction is to wonder how they could still be making such “basic” errors after all their years of language study.

But then I remind myself that understanding when to use--and when not to use--the definite article is anything but basic. On the contrary, it is among the most difficult aspects of English grammar to get right. Here are four reasons students struggle with the word *the*:

1. The rules are numerous. Which names, for example, are preceded by *the* (*the Super Bowl*)? Which are not? (*Brighton Avenue*)
2. The concepts behind some rules are hard to grasp. Understanding the use of the definite article for second mention of nouns is not hard to understand (*There's a car parked in front of the house. Does the car belong to you?*). Other concepts, e.g., generic reference (*good Korean food*) and abstraction (*Life must go on.*), are difficult to grasp. Students have to have an understanding of the concepts in their own language before they can apply them to their understanding of English grammar.
3. Some languages use definite articles where English does not, and vice versa. For example, for the Chinese-speaking student who said “The life must go on”, she was merely translating from Chinese, which uses the definite article before abstract nouns.
4. Some languages do not use articles to express concept such as definiteness and indefiniteness; other forms are used to express those functions. Speakers of these languages can be completely mystified about the function of indefinite and definite articles in English and often omit them completely. Thus, it was no surprise when the Russian-speaking student who wrote “on 7:30 flight to Peru” confessed to me that he was utterly confused about when to use *the* in English; Russian does not have articles.

The simple word **the** presents learners with numerous challenges. Getting students to accept that a word that they have been uttering since their very first English lesson is so complex is the first step in helping them to overcome the hurdle. And reminding myself not to be surprised by my students' mistakes keeps me focused on the fact that it's the simple things in life—and English grammar—that can be the most complex.