

## The Importance of Markedness in Teaching Grammar

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### Introduction

Languages are means of communication, and there are roughly 6,500 languages spoken in the world. Among this diversity, 12 languages are mostly spoken, and English is on the top of the list. English is the most used language for various reasons and purposes. 1.5 billion people worldwide speak English; however, the English language is widely regarded as one of the most difficult to master. There are many reasons why people find it hard to learn English, and the markedness of the English language could be the primary explanation.

Markedness is noted, “In SLA it has been used to denote to most complex and most rare, or marked set of possibilities within a linguistic system” (Lourdes O., 2009, p. 37). It could be different from language to language, and it is up to how much the L1 is close to the L2 language. For example, it would be easier to learn English if L1 is similar to Dutch or German. The Japanese would have difficulties since there is little in common with Romance or Germanic languages. The principle of markedness is important to language teachers because it can help them understand some of the difficulties learners face with certain sounds (or structures) during L2 learning.

The Uzbek language is a member of the Turkic language family. It has more in common with Japanese and Korean than it does with English. So the Uzbek learners could face much markedness in the process of learning the English language. Markedness of Uzbek and English can have negative consequences in learning language productively. In this case study, I will try to describe some examples of markedness, why it transfers with difficulty, and give some solutions to the problems formulated with markedness.

### Literature review

First, I came across the article "Cognitive Theory of Markedness and Native Language Transfer" written by Liang Deng. The article includes relevant studies abroad and at home that are similar to my case study objectives. The cognitive theory of Markedness attempts to provide a plausible explanation of the transferability of the local language. As the author notes, "cognitive theory of markedness, or rather, prototypicality has proven to be effective and powerful in predicting the transferability of native language" (2015, p. 86).

Markedness was first applied in understanding phonological differences in learning languages and recently also applied to other linguistic fields such as semantics, pragmatics, and linguistics. However, Yasmen Y. and Yesim O. note "despite the spread of markedness, it has not been used as an analytical tool to explain vocabulary learning in specific" in *The role of Markedness in vocabulary learning* (2009). Their study was a first attempt in filling this research gap. I wonder that Markedness remains to be used profoundly within the linguistic theory, but its direct contribution to pedagogy remains insignificant.

Among research works, I have encountered an article under the title "Against markedness" by Martin H. (2006), who ignores to use of the notion "markedness" in SLA. It is said that Markedness should be abandoned by linguists or replaced with the appropriate term. He believes that Markedness was used in a multiplicity of diverging senses and linguists often use not being aware

of it. In the article, twelve different senses of the term "markedness" were illustrated from Trubetzkoyan's Markedness to the Markedness of multidimensional correlation. Twelve senses of Markedness were grouped into four large classes: Markedness as complexity, difficulty, abnormality, and as a multidimensional correlation. The author learns every sense of Markedness in detail and replaces the term with a more precise notion. Now I can understand that Markedness is also controversial term to use and not welcoming conception by some linguists. They are right that "marked/unmarked" is not distinguishable from the sense of everyday words like *uncommon/common*, *abnormal/normal*, *unusual/usual*, *unexpected/expected*. And Martin H. (2006) concludes "But we do not need a technical linguistic term for abnormality, uncommonness, unusualness, and unexpectedness. Everyday concepts should be expressed by simple everyday words" (p. 32).

### Participant profile

My participant is Yunusova Nilufar. She studies at school number 21 in the Fergana region in the 8th form. She is her teenage, 14 years old. She is pretty different from her peers: she behaves and thinks like an adult. She is well-behaved, intelligent, and hard-working. Because of her extroverted temperament, she can behave herself in any environment she rarely feels embarrassed. Reading and drawing are her favorite pastimes. Playing the piano is her additional subject, and she takes courses in Musical school.

Her L1 is Uzbek but has never been in the Uzbek language environment except for her family: she went to the Russian kindergarten and the Russian school. She can speak Russian fluently and knows the basic grammar rules of her mother tongue too. Both Uzbek and Russian are like her native language. I guess she is multilingual; she knows Arabic but little: she can write and read but cannot communicate. English is L3 for her, and she started to learn it in elementary school. English lessons were taught two or three times a week and in the classical method. From the 5th grade, she took tutorial lessons that were in form-focused instructions. And sometimes, they had an audiolingual method. She is not a fluent speaker but can express her ideas in English.

### Research design

In my research topic, I mainly focused on markedness in learning English grammar for Uzbek learners. I collected test questions from different well-known grammar books: "English Grammar in Use" by Murphy, Round-Up, and Grammarway series of books. I omitted phonetic markedness because the participant has been making enough efforts to speak like native speakers by singing English songs. In making the test, I also considered her grade and avoided the grammar rules that have not been taught in the school program yet. That is why I had to rely on the subject book of Teen's English 7 by S. Xan, L. Kamalova, and L. Jo'rayev, which they finished last year.

First, I wanted to identify markedness according to the test result that I would know what is difficult for my participant in English. But then I changed my mind that the errors would not always happen because of the markedness. Other aspects related to her background knowledge, skills, and personality can be a reason for grammar mistakes or misunderstandings.

So I chose some markedness of English Grammar myself, for there are a lot of marked rules in English Grammar, it is impossible to cover all of them. Using *articles* correctly among learners is a long-lasting process that remains a notable feature of the language. Even learners of professional level often avoid using articles, and in most cases, they would become fossilized errors. We do not have *articles* that Uzbek learners often misunderstand and overuse or underuse in the Uzbek language. My test covered the basic rules of using definite and indefinite articles. I included some elementary-level questions in the test because I did not want my participant to lose her self-confidence. My learner also did not like my idea of checking her knowledge about articles. It is true

that easy questions facilitate self-assurance and encourage the learner to step further. The sample of the test is given in the Appendix part.

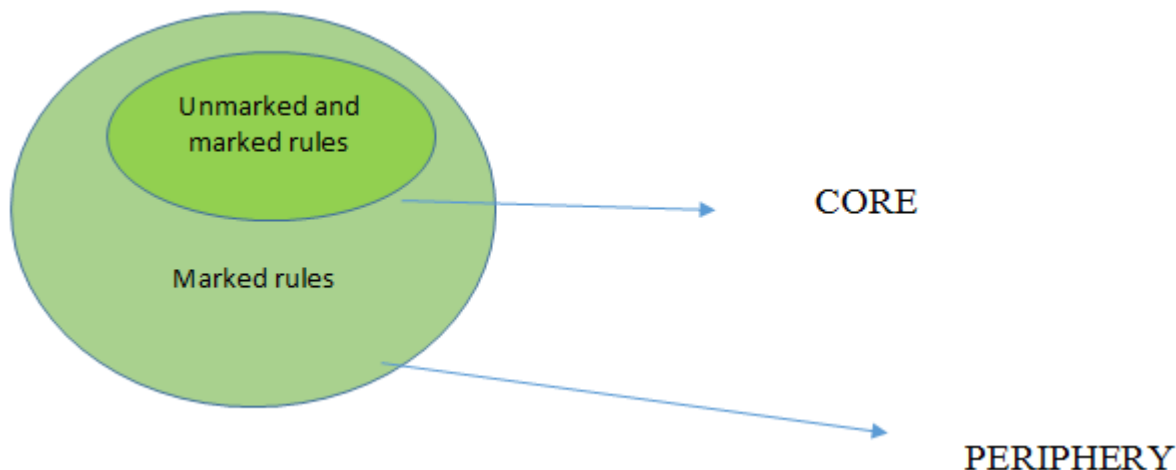
After identifying the problems of my participant first, I relied on the Grammar Translation Method to realize how this method could help transfer markedness. As Christina et al. (2011, p. 18) note, “the GTM withstood attempt at the turn of the twentieth century to “reform” language-teaching methodology, and to this day it is practiced in too many educational contexts.” I explained the rules of using the indefinite and definite articles and gave her a list of rules to learn by heart. Our main activity was doing exercises related to the grammar rules.

Later I decided to include cognitive activities, and we did some quizzes. By thinking and analyzing marked rules, I hoped my learner would be able to deal with the markedness without too much effort. There were ten questions about geographical facts; I let her use the internet to find correct answers, and when she tried to explain why some proper names take “the” and some not.

I also include an activity of constructivism as Slavin (2003, pp. 257-258) believes “Learners must individually discover and transform complex information if they are to make it their own, a more active role for students in their learning than is typical in many classrooms.” It was a writing activity: we decided to make a social interaction in written form. In this task, she has to write a letter to an English pen-friend describing her summer holiday: visited places, bought souvenirs, and about national cuisine. She wrote about Turkey as once she was there with her mother. This activity was crucial to reflect how well she could use the markedness of *articles* in her writing. And identify if it is possible to transfer markedness completely after using several methods.

#### Data collection and findings:

The pre-test results showed that the markedness could have unmarked rules that the learner can acquire easily. It happened as Chomsky describes that core rules are unmarked and “following the general tendencies of language and peripheral rules are marked, exceptional in some ways” (Liang D., 2015, p. 89).



The usage of the article in English is markedness. However, the indefinite articles "a/an" are unmarked that my participant could do this for 100%, except phonetic sounds of letters at the beginning of the noun (a uniform ['ju:nɪfɔ:m] or an hourglass ['aʊəglɑ:s]). The structure of "a/an + adj + noun, "articles and nouns, and using or missing "the" marked rules that later I tried to concentrate on them in implying activities. Initially, I have chosen pre-test to ensure that *articles* are the marked rules for my learner and clarify among markedness the unmarked ones that are easy to complete. We did several activities together to be familiar with the market rules,

and post-test proved that some of them became unmarked-easy to use. Still, some of them remain to be strictly marked. The reason could be that there is no explanation about some rules of using The Definite article like *the sea, the ocean* but *×lake* or *play the piano* but *play ×football*.

**Pre-test results:**

The number of questions	The results
<i>The is used or omitted</i>	
12	6 / 6
Articles and nouns	
12	6 / 6
Correct the mistakes <i>a</i> or <i>an</i>	
10	8 / 2
Fill in the gap with <i>a</i> or <i>an</i>	
10	0 / 10

**Post-test results:**

The number of questions	The results
<i>The is used or omitted</i>	
12	6 / 6
Articles and nouns	
12	6 / 6
Correct the mistakes <i>a</i> or <i>an</i>	
10	8 / 2
Fill in the gap with <i>a</i> or <i>an</i>	
10	0 / 10

In collecting activities, I supposed that “structural, cognitive, and constructivist – must be seen as important in creating a balanced description of second language acquisition” (*Language, Learning and Teaching*, p. 14). GTM activity could help my participant recollect her background knowledge, and by learning the rules by heart, she was aware that they are uncommon and should be transformed carefully. By doing exercises, she practiced the transferability of markedness. I think it helped her understand that not all of the rules are easy to learn and need some more practice to learn. My participant agreed that the activity was easy, and continuum practice was needed not to forget the rules.

My interaction as a teacher was restricted, she worked as a researcher, and she enjoyed her findings. The next activity based on self-study it was like Silent Way, she worked on the internet herself, and it was interesting for her to gain information about the places. The activity released the tension of following the rules, and she felt as though she had invented the rules herself. The sense of difficulty in markedness seemed to lose its meaning, and it was accepted as unmarked. As an audiolingual and visual learner, Niliufar was satisfied with the task. She said that the instrumental approach to the exercise helped her imagine why *the* was used, and successful findings interested her.

The last activity was quite tricky, and there were more mistakes than in other activities, but it was beneficial to change the attitude of my learner toward grammar rules. As I mentioned in her profile section, she usually believes in CLT in her studies, and markedness is always avoided. She thinks that the native speakers themselves ignore using uncommon, unusual, and abnormal grammar rules in their speech. However, writing a piece of work using *articles* made her realize that she would have accurate writing by transferring markedness. My participant likes expressing her ideas in any oral or written form. She was glad to write about her ideas and share her point of view.

**Conclusion:**

According to the test results taken at the beginning (54%) and at the end (88,6%) of the case study, I can conclude that my participant could input information about the *articles*. Before, she knew

about *articles* in scattered form, which is why she could not have a good result in the pre-test. After several activities and grammar-related exercises, which helped her discipline the information in her mind, she could get a higher score in the post-test.

On the other hand, my participant could not implement all the marked rules of *articles* in her writing, proving that markedness would be challenging to transfer, for it does not occur in her mother tongue. To transfer markedness successfully, I think we need more practice in context and out of context. Even she failed to use *articles* completely; she was not sad; she worked on her mistakes. It was what I accepted from my learner: not to panic and never give up. At the beginning of my research, I explained that some rules are easy and some are not, and it often happens with any learner.

The GTM activities were efficient as the learner made few mistakes. She had a list of the rules that she often used, and the given exercises were structured on them. (It was like Teaching and Testing (TT)). The cognitive exercise also demonstrated satisfactory results that my participant was more active than in the previous one. However, the constructivist task was a failure; my participant did the writing as though there was no need for *articles*. She mainly concentrated on her ideas and forgot about rules. I did not expect an immediate improvement from my learner because I am well aware that learning marked rules of English grammar is a long-lasting process.

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