

Teaching the Countability of Abstract Nouns: A Practical Approach

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Abstract

Japanese EFL learners can have great difficulty learning the appropriate use of English articles, and one of the main reasons for this is their inability to judge the countability of English abstract nouns. The present study examined various approaches to teaching the countability of abstract nouns, based on previous research. The study discussed problems with the countable/uncountable dichotomy as well as the demarcation problems with the concept of boundedness. As a practical approach, the present study suggested that the countability of fully uncountable nouns be taught as a lexical property. It also recommended teaching separately nouns which are frequently used as uncountable nouns but are also sometimes used with a unit denominator such as *a(n)*. Since there is a strong relationship between the semantic meaning and countability of abstract nouns, it seems that a practical method of learning is to check the meaning of each word and its relationship with noun countability. In order to prevent Japanese learners from assuming that all English abstract nouns are uncountable, it would be effective to compare both countable and uncountable forms of the same abstract nouns.

1. Introduction

Japanese EFL learners often have great difficulty learning the appropriate use of English articles. Previous research indicates that

one of the main difficulties is their inability to judge the countability of English nouns (especially abstract nouns). For example, using an editing task, Hiki (1990) found that Japanese EFL learners made the greatest number of errors in countability judgment on abstract nouns (e.g. *Education* and *height* were both used as countable nouns, instead of uncountable nouns). Furthermore, in Ogawa's (2008, p. 146) study, Japanese EFL learners failed to perceive the appropriate countability of abstract nouns according to their contexts.

Since Japanese EFL learners have difficulties judging English noun countability, the effect of instruction on English articles is limited. Although Takahashi (2008) found a significant effect of instruction on the use of English articles in the countable noun condition, he did not find a significant effect of instruction in the uncountable noun condition. This result indicates that one of the toughest obstacles Japanese EFL learners face when learning English articles is the countable/uncountable distinction (especially in the case of abstract nouns).

A review of previous research has identified a number of factors which can explain Japanese learners' inability to judge English noun countability (see Takahashi, 2013 for details). Butler (2002, p. 471), for example, explains that Japanese learners seem to have difficulty making countability judgments on abstract nouns because abstract nouns refer to 'indivisible entities' that are neither 'bounded' nor 'individuated'. Similarly, Kobayashi (2008), who analysed the error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus data of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), found that Japanese EFL learners tend to have a fixed notion of abstract nouns as uncountable.

In the following sections of this paper, I will discuss how to teach the countability of English abstract nouns while taking into consideration the various factors which may contribute to Japanese learners' difficulty in judging their countability.

2. Various approaches to teaching the countability of abstract nouns

2.1 The distinction between object and substance is not a useful

criterion in the case of abstract nouns

English noun countability has often been viewed as a dichotomy of countable and uncountable. This view is very intuitive and easy to follow as far as concrete objects are concerned: countable nouns are objects, whereas uncountable nouns are substances.

However, as Serwatka and Healy (1998, p. 115) point out, in the case of abstract nouns, ‘the distinction between object and substance cannot serve as an objective criterion’. For example, some abstract nouns are countable (e.g. *joy, truth, love, honour, pleasure, effort, interest, charm, glory*), whereas others are not (e.g. *knowledge, information, advice, pride, happiness, confidence, shame, anger*).

Moreover, there are many abstract nouns which are almost always used as countable nouns (e.g. *situation, remark*). This cannot be explained by the difference between objects and substances.

2.2 The criterion of ‘boundedness’ is difficult to apply in the case of abstract nouns

It is often said that the count/uncount distinction reflects how we perceive the world outside. For example, if we perceive entities as ‘individuated’ or ‘bounded’, we regard them as countable. On the other hand, if we perceive entities as ‘unindividuated’ or ‘unbounded’, we regard them as uncountable (cf. Langacker, 2008; see also Hewson, 1972; Igarashi, 2003; Ishida, 2002; Lakoff, 1987; Langacker, 1987; Lock, 1996; Oda, 1982; Shinohara, 1993; Wierzbicka, 1988).

The criterion of ‘boundedness’ is quite useful in the case of countable nouns. For example, concrete objects have clear boundaries, and Japanese EFL learners make relatively accurate decisions about English noun countability when the noun is concrete.

Furthermore, with the development of cognitive linguistics in recent years, the criterion of boundedness has been increasingly incorporated in pedagogical applications. For example, Kishimoto (2007, p. 55) proposes an exercise in which students draw stereotypical images of four English words (*apple, car, music* and *breakfast*) and then compare their images with those drawn by their classmates. Through this

exercise, the students are expected to find strong similarities between the hand-drawn images of bounded entities (i.e. *apple* and *car*) but not between those of unbounded entities (i.e. *music* and *breakfast*).

Although Kishimoto's exercise may be effective and intuitively interesting, it may not work for abstract nouns which do not refer to physically concrete entities, since it would be very difficult for learners to draw an outline of such entities.

In fact, many Japanese speakers have great difficulty "drawing boundaries around certain conceptual items" (Butler, 2002, p. 471).

From learners' point of view, the issue of demarcation (i.e. what exactly separates one from the other) (cf. Swan, 1994, pp. 47-48) is very important. For example, if students do not know where to draw a line between bounded and unbounded abstract nouns, they will not be able to make appropriate countability judgements.

2.3 The need to consider countability preferences

Some linguists suggest that one can pragmatically attribute countable or uncountable status to any noun (including those which are typically used as countable nouns) as far as the referent is interpreted as an individuated entity.

For example, even the word *cat*, which refers to a discrete entity and is typically used as a countable noun, can become an uncountable noun when the referent has no clear boundary [e.g. *After the accident, there was cat all over the window.* (Lock, 1996, p. 24)].

Even if this contextual view is valid, how easily can a noun be classified or reclassified as countable or uncountable depending on the context? It seems that there is a clear limitation to the contextual view.

As Allan (1980) points out, a noun (including an abstract noun) behaves differently from the others in terms of how likely it is to be perceived as countable. Each noun has what Allan calls 'countability preferences' ranging from the most countable to the least countable (Allan, 1980, p. 562) such as *car*, *oak*, *cattle*, *scissors*, *mankind*, *admiration*, *equipment*. For example, *car* is most likely to be used as a countable noun and *equipment* as an uncountable noun.

There are degrees of difference in their countability preferences. Although it is possible for *admiration* to co-occur with a unit denominator such as *an* (e.g. *This site is an admiration of one of England's finest novelists and poets.*), it is not possible to go with fuzzy denominators such as *several* (**several admirations*). On the other hand, *equipment* does not occur with any of these denominators; hence, it is regarded as 'fully uncountable' (**an equipment, *several equipments*). Thus, it is likely that each noun (including abstract nouns) differs from the others in terms of its likelihood of being used as countable.

NOUN								
ENVIRONMENT	<i>car</i>	<i>oak</i>	<i>cattle</i>	<i>Himalayas</i>	<i>scissors</i>	<i>mankind</i>	<i>admiration</i>	<i>equipment</i>
EX-PL	+	+	+	+	+	+		
A+N	+	+		+		+	+	
All+N	+		+	+	+			
F+Ns	+	+	+		?			
O-DEN	+	+						

FIGURE 2.

(+indicates that the given NP environment defines the head noun as countable.)

⁸ In the *All+N* Test, it is FAILURE that gets a plus, not success.

(Allan, 1980, p. 562)

Therefore, when teaching the countability of English nouns (including abstract nouns), it seems necessary to consider how likely certain groups of words are to be used as countable or uncountable nouns. It seems safe to say that certain groups of words like *advice*, *information*, *evidence*, *progress* and *furniture* are always used as uncountable nouns. These words are different from other types of words which are often used as uncountable nouns but can sometimes be used as countable nouns (e.g. *experience* can be used as a countable noun when it refers an individual instance, and *wine* becomes countable when it refers to a type of wine). In the case of words like *advice* or *information*, learners do not need to depend on the context to determine if they can be used as uncountable nouns or not.

2.4 The rule-based-approach or the rote learning and analogy-based approach

While much focus has been placed on the acquisition of rule-based competence through which learners can generate new utterances, there is an increasing recognition that formulaic chunks play an important role in second language acquisition. Myles et al. (1998), for example, suggest that second language learners keep unanalysed chunks as a whole and use part of them productively when they generate new utterances (see also Ellis, 2005; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992). Thus, a lexical approach rather than a syntactic one to the teaching of the countable/uncountable distinction seems to be appropriate (cf. Master, 1997).

Based on the results of three experiments, Serwatka and Healy (1998) suggest that adult learners of English acquire the countable/uncountable distinction by using a rote learning and analogy-based approach, rather than a rule-based approach.

Just like Allan (1980), Lock (1996, p. 24) points out that since most nouns belong clearly to either count or mass category in the contexts in which they are most frequently used, it would be beneficial, from learners' point of view, to learn the countability status of a noun as a lexical property of the noun and remember it with the meaning and context most likely to be encountered. This should be true when teaching the countability of abstract nouns.

2.5 Nouns frequently used as uncountable nouns and other types of nouns

In the above section, I discussed the need to consider countability preferences and teach a certain group of words (i.e. words which are always used as countable nouns) as having the lexical property of countability, since this would be the easiest for most learners. Yet, apart from those 'fully uncountable' (Allan, 1980) abstract nouns, is it necessary to categorise the remaining abstract nouns even further? The answer to this question seems to be yes.

Downing and Locke (1992) divide abstract nouns into three types

(note: Other three types of nouns in their research are not related to abstract nouns, and therefore, they are not discussed here) : (1) nouns like *luck, economics, sincerity, information*, etc., which are almost always used as uncountable (except in cases where the noun indicates ‘a kind of’, as in *You don’t meet a courage like hers every day*), (2) nouns like *knowledge, education*, etc., which are in most cases used as uncountable nouns (except, again, in such cases where the noun indicates ‘a kind of’, as in *You’ll need a good knowledge of English for that job*) and (3) nouns like *friendship, failure, hope*, etc., which refer to actions, relationships, states, emotions, concepts, materials or individual manifestations / individual instances.

Based on Downing and Locke’s classification (1992), it seems that certain types of abstract nouns (such as aforementioned types (1) and (2)) are ‘basically uncountable’, and other types (such as aforementioned type (3)) vary depending on the situation (please note that although Downing and Locke categorised ‘information’ in the first group, the word is a ‘fully uncountable’ noun which does not take any unit denumerators; ‘fully uncountable’ nouns should be taught separately from ‘basically uncountable’ nouns (i.e. aforementioned types (1) and (2) above).

It seems possible to divide abstract nouns into two types: The first is a group of abstract nouns which are frequently used as uncountable nouns but do not allow the unit denominator *a(n)* except for such cases where the noun indicates ‘a kind of’ (e.g. *a great knowledge* cf. **many knowledges*). The second group consists of all the other nouns, which allow not only the unit denominator *a(n)* but also other types of denumerators (e.g. *several*).

In EFL classrooms in Japan, it is not common to separate these two types of nouns. However, there is a significant difference between the two types, and it would be beneficial for learners to learn them separately. For example, although both *silence* and *education* are abstract nouns, only the former (which belongs to the second type of abstract nouns in Downing and Locke’s classification) allows a fuzzy denominator like *many + -s* (cf. *There have been too many awkward*

silences lately). (Please note that it is always possible to pragmatically attribute countable or uncountable status to any noun, as I discussed earlier. Although it may be possible to find an extremely unusual example of the latter used with a fuzzy denominator, this does not constitute negative evidence, as the likelihood of the latter being used with a fuzzy denominator is far less than the former.)

2.6 Abstract nouns which can be both countable and uncountable

Apart from the fully uncountable and basically uncountable abstract nouns which I discussed in section 2.5 (a group of words which are usually uncountable but may allow a unit denominator under certain conditions), most abstract nouns are easily classified as either countable or uncountable nouns.

As Leech and Svartvik (2002, p. 44) observe, abstract nouns ‘can more easily be both “count” and “mass” than concrete nouns’ (here, ‘mass’ means the same as uncountable).

However, Japanese EFL learners are not fully aware of this. Instead, they tend to have a fixed notion of abstract nouns as uncountable (Kobayashi, 2008). According to Kobayashi (2008), who analysed the error-tagged Japanese sub-corpus data of the ICLE, Japanese EFL learners tend to regard nouns such as *activity*, *culture*, *effort*, *feeling*, *image*, *language*, *opportunity*, *possibility*, *reason*, *situation* and *skill* as uncountable abstract nouns.

It is possible to teach students that abstract nouns are not always used as uncountable nouns. However, just this knowledge is not really helpful for students. They need to understand when abstract nouns can be used as uncountable and make appropriate noun countability judgments according to a certain criterion.

2.7 Types of abstract nouns based on different conditions

As discussed in section 2.7, it is important to identify conditions where abstract nouns can be used as countable nouns. With respect to these conditions, Quirk et al. (1985, p. 247) cites examples like (a) *discussion* / *two discussions* and (b) *invention* / *inventions* (abstract

concept and the actual results). Similarly, Huddleston and Pullum (2002, pp. 336-337) cite examples like (c) *Two fundamental injustices were revealed during the enquiry / Two discussions of the land questions took place* (event instantiations) and (d) *Edison was honoured for three separate inventions* (results).

Ando and Higuchi (1991, p. 8) list five types of conditions which allow the count use of abstract nouns: (1) a kind of: *Patience is a virtue*, (2) example: *The party was a success*, (3) act: *He has done me a kindness*, (4) work: *I am writing a composition now* and (5) concrete instantiation: *'What a beauty!' he cried*. However, it is not certain how many types of conditions exist and which abstract nouns belong to which type. Therefore, it is difficult to apply these types of categorisation in pedagogical practice.

Furthermore, there are cases where these conditions do not fit well with the actual use of abstract nouns. As example (c) above (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002) indicates, abstract nouns may become countable when they denote an instantiated concept. However, this does not necessarily hold for some abstract nouns such as *harm* or *permission*. Whereas the noun *injustice* can be pluralised (*Two fundamental injustices were revealed during the enquiry*), the noun *harm* cannot (**Two serious harms were done to the project's prospects*). Similarly, whereas the noun *discussion* can be used in the plural form (*Two discussions of the land questions took place*), the noun *permission* cannot (**Two separate permissions are required*) [the four example sentences are taken from Huddleston & Pullum (2002, p. 337)]. Thus, due to the demarcation problem, these types of categorisation are difficult to apply in pedagogical practice.

2.8 Types of abstract nouns based on a cognitive linguistic framework

Based on the concept of boundedness, Ishida (2002) proposes types of conditions which allow the count use of abstract nouns, i.e. when they denote: (1) a bounded area of something (e.g. *a space*), (2) a bounded time period (e.g. *a long silence*), (3) an event/occasion of something (e.g.

a revolution), (4) an instance of something (e.g. *a foreign language*) and (5) a kind/type of something (e.g. *a simple dinner*) (note: Although Ishida (2002) proposes another type of condition, i.e. when denoting a unit of something, it is not included here because it is not applicable to abstract nouns).

Following a cognitive linguistic approach, Radden and Dirven (2007, pp. 80-83) suggest a link between two types of situations (i.e. episodic and steady) and English noun countability. According to them, abstract nouns denoting episodic situations (which are considered to be bounded in time) are likely to be used as countable. Abstract nouns that typically appear in episodic situations include those appearing in episodic events (e.g. *attack, protest, instruction*) and those denoting episodic states (e.g. *disease, idea, doubt*) (which continue for only a short time or have an end point and hence, are considered bounded). On the other hand, abstract nouns denoting steady situations (which are considered to last permanently) include those appearing in steady events (e.g. *information, help, advice*) and those denoting steady states (e.g. *knowledge, happiness, love*) (which are considered to describe permanent attributes or qualities).

Although the concept of boundedness is useful in explaining the difference between countable and uncountable abstract nouns, it has the demarcation problem, as I discussed earlier. There is some empirical evidence indicating that the categorisation of abstract nouns based on the concept of boundedness is insufficient.

Amuzie and Spinner (2012) investigated Korean ESL learners' article usage across four different categories of abstract nouns: (1) state nouns (e.g. *knowledge, safety, happiness, beauty*) (clearly unbounded nouns), (2) continuous action nouns (e.g. *education, description, preparation, experience, discussion*), (3) non-continuous actions (e.g. *jump, drop, explosion*) (clearly bounded) and (4) independent nouns / abstract nouns which do not belong to any other categories and are considered to be bounded in time or space (e.g. *sentence, game, idea, lesson*) (clearly bounded).

The results indicate that the accuracy rate was highest (88.5%) for

type 4 (bounded nouns) and lowest (54.18%) for type 3 (non-continuous action nouns, which are clearly bounded). The accuracy rate for type 1 (87.83%) is almost as high as for type 4.

Thus, the criterion of boundedness was not sufficient to predict the learners' accuracy of article usage.

2.9 Categorisation of abstract nouns based on the difference in meaning

Often, the meaning of abstract nouns changes depending on whether they are used as countable or uncountable nouns.

Baldwin and Bond (2003) explain that 'different senses of a word may have different countabilities'. For example, the word *interest* denoting a sense of concern with and curiosity about someone or something is generally countable. On the other hand, the same noun denoting fixed charge for borrowing money is uncountable (p. 464).

Given the correspondence between the sense of a word and its countability (cf. Wierzbicka, 1988), it seems possible to determine the countability status of each noun according to its meaning (in this case, abstract nouns with different meanings are viewed as different lexical units).

According to Bond and Vatikiotis-Bateson (2002), who investigated to what degree the countability of English nouns is predictable from the meaning of their lexical meaning, about 78% of English nouns' countability can be predicted from their semantics, showing a strong correlation between semantic information and English noun countability (note: Bond and Vatikiotis-Bateson deal with the countability of English nouns in general, not focusing on English abstract nouns).

2.10 A general or specialised reference and the countability of abstract nouns

As discussed in Section 2.9, there is a strong relationship between the meaning of a word and its countability. In addition, it is important for learners to know that the countability of abstract nouns changes according to whether the noun refers to things in general or to specific

things. For example, the word *experience* has both a general sense and a specific sense. In the case of the former, the word refers to ‘knowledge or skill that you gain from doing a job or activity’ and is uncountable. In the case of the latter, it denotes ‘something that happens to you or something you do’ and is countable. Thus, there is a tendency for a word with a more general meaning to be used as uncountable and a word with a more specific meaning to be used as countable.

Using dual nouns (e.g. *Ø iron* versus *an iron*, *Ø football* versus *a football*), Master (1994) helped students understand that the uncountable form (e.g. *Ø stone*; a material) is invariably more general in concept than the countable one (e.g. *a stone*; an object). In the same way, using abstract nouns used in both countable and uncountable form (e.g. *experience*, *interest*), learners can be helped to understand that the countable form tends to have a more specific meaning and the uncountable form a more general meaning.

By comparing the countable and uncountable forms of abstract nouns, it would be easier for learners to realise that not all abstract nouns are uncountable (for Japanese EFL learners’ tendency to regard abstract nouns as uncountable, see Butler, 2002; Hiki, 1996; Master, 1994; Matsui, 2000).

As discussed above, most approaches to teaching the countability of abstract nouns have some impediments (especially the demarcation problem). At present, there are no reliable theories to predict the countability of abstract nouns. Therefore, it is always important to check noun countability by using a dictionary and learn it on an item by item basis, together with the corresponding meaning.

3. Conclusion

Except for extreme cases, certain groups of words (e.g. *information*) are almost always used as countable. Therefore, it will be easier for Japanese EFL learners to remember them as words with the lexical feature of countability. It is not common in Japan to distinguish between basically uncountable abstract nouns and those readily used as both

countable and uncountable nouns. However, there is a difference between them. For example, the uncountable noun *knowledge* can occur with the indefinite article (e.g. *a great knowledge*) but not with a fuzzy denominator (**many knowledges*). In contrast, the word *silence* can occur with *many* (e.g. *many awkward silences*). Therefore, it is important to teach basically uncountable nouns separately.

The present study examined how the concept of boundedness can be applicable when teaching the countability of abstract nouns. The examination of previous research (including an empirical study) indicates that it is a demarcation problem. Since previous research indicates a correlation between semantics and noun countability, it seems practical to teach students to judge countability by checking word meanings.

Finally, it should be noted that the present study does not deny the potential of the concept of boundedness. Although the concept of boundedness is not fully applicable at present, it can be useful in explaining observed tendencies (e.g. things bounded in time and space are likely to be perceived as countable).

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