

# Countable or Uncountable? A Learning Difficulty for EFL Students

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## 1. Distinguishing between Countable and Uncountable Nouns

### 1.1. The Challenge in Teaching Countable and Uncountable Nouns

In the process of English teaching and learning, we will often encounter such two grammatical terms - countable nouns and uncountable nouns. The countability of a noun determines whether it is countable or uncountable in English. Generally speaking, individual nouns and most collective nouns are countable, while proper nouns, material nouns, abstract nouns, and a small number of collective nouns are usually uncountable.

However, this distinction can only be used to make general judgments instead of absolute truth, not to mention the fact that some nouns in English can even be both countable and uncountable (e.g., a fish, fish). And with modifiers, some uncountable nouns can immediately be countable (fruit, tropical fruits). Those non-native speakers of L2 English who haven't come across the concept of countability in their L1 may find all of these confusing.

In Chinese, for example, there is no such thing as uncountable nouns, and most things can be 'counted' with proper quantifiers. As a result, when teachers tell their students to check the countability of the nouns by checking if they can be counted in real-life situations, it always seems like an impossible task for most (see Liu & Zhou, 2017, p. 1176). And it always ends up with students grinding away at memorising 'the list of uncountable nouns'. Without a fine line between countable and uncountable, all they can do is to memorise the words mechanically.

### 1.2. The Importance of Identifying the Uncountable Nouns

As a result of language usage, grammars evolve (Carter & McCarthy, 2017) when people sort out the logic generated by the way people understand and use language - every language is based on the logical order of people's understanding of things. As a result, all languages are likely

to have similar concept formation processes. In this sense, mechanical recitation could be completely avoidable since there must be rules to follow.

The countability of the nouns is closely related to the grammatical correctness concerned with articles, quantifiers, subject-verb agreement etc. The indefinite article is only used with countable nouns while the definite article can sometimes be used with uncountable nouns. Some quantifiers are used with only countable nouns (many, few, a few, fewer, several) while other quantifiers can be used with only uncountable nouns (much, little, a little bit of, some). A countable noun can take either a singular or plural verb, whereas an uncountable noun can only take a singular verb. As Bandar and Gorjian said, it is impossible to teach a language without considering its grammatical structure (2017, p. 89), and the concept of countability plays a big role in this.

Furthermore, determining a better way to interpret the differences between countable and uncountable nouns for L2 English learners can be very meaningful to L2 English teaching and learning, and it will help non-native speakers to perceive things from a native speaker's point of view.

## 2. Theories that Indicate the Learning Difficulty Concerning Noun Countability

### 2.1. Focus-on-form

Focus-on-form is often viewed as an approach to language teaching where students' attention to linguistic code features focused on meaning or communication is overtly drawn (Long, 1991, pp. 45-46.) and a compromise of both Focus on Forms and Focus on Meaning (Saeidi, Zaferanieh & Shatery, 2012, p.72), and later it was interpreted in Ellis (2016, p. 19) as a set of procedures for attracting attention to form while learners are engaged in meaning-making instead of merely an 'approach'.

As Ellis had said (2015, p.3) in his article that Focus-on-form allows for the slow and gradual process involved in the learning of L2 linguistic features, and it was described as inappropriate to use Focus-on-form when learners need to use the knowledge for immediate purposes (2016, p. 19). All these claims are reflecting how

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time-consuming and cumbersome Focus-on-form is when trying to cover all the potential dimensions of problems that L2 learners might encounter.

However, if these problems are not noticed and corrected in time, and at the same time the rules behind them are not demonstrated, such problems may become habitual. Some problems may have been found and corrected in time, but their underlying rules may not have been presented. That is, if a learner knows that the word information cannot be counted when receiving corrective feedback, but does not understand why it is interconnected with countability (like acknowledging the sense of inseparable in English), they may make the same mistake once again when using another word. Thus, when conducting Focus-on-form teaching procedures, teachers should be careful not to rely too much on meaning-based approaches, but also to directly present discrete items of grammar.

**2.2. Linguistic Relativity**

The linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, proposes that language could affect how we think, or even determine our thoughts. The ‘weaker’ version which modern linguists generally accept claims that the effect between languages and thought is not a one-way road. As it’s accepted by both Boroditsky (2010) and Liberman (2010) in their debates, that is, the language we speak shapes our thoughts to a certain extent. On the other hand, our thoughts contribute to the language we speak.

With the view of linguistic relativity, the problem concerning countability might be a result of non-native learners’ mother tongue. As Li, Ogura, Barner, Yang and Carey suggested, although the ability to express relations between sets is exhibited in all languages, they vary in the way they do so whether through nouns, numerals, quantifiers, or specialised morphology (2009, p. 1644). It might be the lack of singular-plural morpho-syntax in their L1 that prevents these learners from perceiving things in terms of countable and uncountable (the language shapes the thoughts).

And naturally, what would happen is such learners may use uncountable nouns in countable forms (e.g. The informations are not correct) without corresponding grammar in their own language (the thoughts contribute to the way we speak). Meanwhile, Chinese learners of L2 English find it easier to identify proper nouns and material

nouns as uncountable. Recognising abstract nouns (e.g. advice, experience, money) and collective nouns as something uncountable, however, can be torturous because they are already moulded by learners in their L1 as something that can be counted (Liu & Zhou, 2017, p. 1178). Therefore, it is very important to prioritise learning how to perceive things in English and to do some perception-based exercises (see Tanaka, 2018, p. 4).

**3. Examining Whether Learners have Acquired the Concept of Countability**

**3.1. An Unsuitable Task**

water	→	__	(a glass of water, a litre of water, a molecule of water)
advice	→	__	(a piece of advice, a word of advice)
education	→	__	(a lengthy education)
life	→	__	(a difficult life)
time	→	__	(a good time)
...			

Changing nouns from their uncountable to their countable forms (Master, 1988, 209) is a good way to instil the concept of countability in L2 English learners. When figuring out in what ways the nouns could be changed, learners’ abilities towards recognising and illustrating certain types of countable objects (in containers, packages etc.) could be displayed.

However, the task was limited in some ways when implemented in examining whether the ability to distinguish the uncountable from countable nouns was acquired by learners. First, it may fail to examine the capacity of identifying uncountable from countable nouns while all the nouns waiting to be changed are uncountable ones. Setting traps to increase the challenge and better mask the task by putting countable nouns among uncountable ones may be a good choice for this purpose. Second, it’s not much of an all-inclusive task that can test all aspects concerning the countability by only examining the use of numeral phrases and modifiers, which means it should be complemented by other tasks if aims to achieve an all-around test.

**3.2. A Task to Test Whether Learners Succeed in Identifying the Countability**

awareness	mechanism	discomfort	discipline	result	population
onset	prospect	development	wastage	refusal	unemployment
misconduct	memory	leadership	efficiency	responsibility	approach
skill	legislation	decision	controversy	ability	communication

Countable	Uncountable	Both

Another example comes from an online quiz. The purpose of this task is to assess learners' understanding of the concept of countability by asking them to categorise the nouns as countable, uncountable, or both. Generally, the ability to identify countable and uncountable nouns is tested in a very direct and simple manner. As opposed to the unsuitable task described in 3.1., this task requires more the ability to distinguish between uncountable and countable nouns and has greater power to achieve an all-around test by reviewing more words. Also, this task has considered the situation that some nouns could be uncountable nouns as well as countable nouns, which is a significant problem for non-native speakers of L2 English (Liu & Zhou, 2017, p. 1178).

Even so, there could be some potential flaws. For example, some students may categorise some words successfully by coincidence since the word list is already there. Such an issue could be avoided by taking out the word list and just providing a topic for task-takers to improvise instead. And since the task is context-free, we cannot see the communicative competence from the test result - the task can also be well done by rote learning. Nevertheless, this won't hinder the original purpose to assess whether learners succeed in identifying the countability.

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