

# Teaching and Learning of English Count/Mass Nouns by Mandarin Chinese Speakers

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One of the toughest challenges with learning English for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners is its distinction between countable and uncountable nouns. This challenge is even more pronounced for learners whose first languages are Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, or Vietnamese, which all encode countability very differently. A pilot study was therefore designed to explore this issue by examining how learners in a tertiary environment in Taiwan, whose proficiency levels ranged between pre-intermediate to intermediate, learned the concepts of countability in English. The research questions included: 1) what aids are used in order to learn countability in English: translations, dictionaries, or grammar books? 2) What kind of nouns do they find most difficult to comprehend and use: count, mass or abstract nouns? And finally, 3) will the explicit instructions enriched with the cognitive clues that emphasize the construal aspects of countability, enhance the awareness of the use of articles (a/an, and the)? A group of 19 college students of intermediate level English in Northern Taiwan completed the exploratory study, which adopted a mixed methods research design (Brown, 2014) with both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analyses. For the first two questions, a set of qualitative data were generated from interviews, and learners' self-reports on their learning and understanding of English count/mass and concrete/abstract nouns. The data was complemented by quantitative data elicited by a pre- and post-test of a countability judgement test (Tsang, 2017) along with a recognition test that consisted of a 750 words essay written by a student of similar proficiency background who did not participate in the study. Results demonstrate that the majority of the participants had not learned countability systematically before the treatment. They would use on-line dictionaries and some grammar checking websites to check the use of plurality when they wrote essays. They also had not learned about the fact that mass nouns could also be countable, depending on the 'boundedness' or 'atomicity' of an object or concept. Some of these concepts are language specific such as *luggage* and *furniture*, while some others are 'semantic universals' (Choi, Ionin & Zhu, 2018), such as *sand*, *air*, and *oil*. The participants understood these variations after treatment, as shown by the statistically analysis on the countability judgement test whereby a significant progress was detected at the post-test ( $p < .001$ ). However, the scores on the recognition test did not improve significantly, suggesting that although participants had a heightened awareness of the use of plurality without any article which is linked to generality, they still had difficulties with the use of 'the' for specific situations. Following these findings, a main study has been conducted, with a control group added to compare the said approach with a traditional approach consisting of grammar translation and implicit teaching.

## References

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